



## On the Road Again: Using the Arts as a Vehicle for Students' Social Emotional Learning

Adrienne R. Hill, Principal Hedgepeth/Williams Middle School of Arts,  
Trenton Public Schools, Trenton, New Jersey



*"An arts education helps to **build academic skills and increase academic performance**, while also providing **alternative opportunities** to reward the skills of children who learn differently."*

- Gavin Newsom

### \* **Potholes or Other Driving Distractions**

As Principal of Hedgepeth/Williams Middle School of Arts, I anticipate that the driving of instruction this fall may prove to be the biggest pothole educators have encountered in modern times. Students have suffered tremendous losses over the last year and a half with no means of reinflating their educational or social tires. At every academic level, students have been damaged down to the rim. The amount of new stress and trauma experienced by children, adolescents and young adults has been potentially derailing for most and provided a jumpstart for a much smaller number. If deliberate and concerted efforts to get our students and schools

back up and running do not begin soon, educators will transform into a fleet of tow trucks and schools into salvage yards, forced to find ways to "restore" students. We know from research the negative impact that stress could have on students. Those possible outcomes include: a reduction in student motivation— "drive" (academic and personal), an increased risk of school dropout, high risk for depression and anxiety, poor decision making, and/or poor coping skills (Active Minds, 2020).

Until recently, the visual and performing arts have taken a back seat to other content areas. These other areas tend to be the ones that are nationally or locally tested and crucial to the students' meeting of promotion or graduation requirements. While students will likely benefit from their promotions, they may eventually be cheated of the opportunities that having a well-rounded education through the arts may offer.

Following a year of quarantining and the loss of not only precious academic hours, but also of physical losses, it has become increasingly necessary to integrate social and emotional learning

into students' regular instruction. Students (and staff) have been left to emotionally fend for themselves throughout the year of remote teaching and learning. In my role as a school leader and action researcher, school-specific use of student surveys, questions, and regular inquiries have revealed that students may heal from trauma caused by incidents like the pandemic. How might a school welcome an arts integrated approach to social and emotional healing? Such a shift in curriculum and instructional strategies requires out-of-the-box thinking and creativity. With this in mind and using the following analogy, let us use the arts as a vehicle to drive healing-centered engagement and stress management.

### \* **Shifting Gears**

According to Brian Kisida and Daniel H. Bowen (2019), the increase in standardized testing may be a contributing factor to the decreased opportunity for students to receive arts education. It would appear that educators and education decision-makers (not usually one in the same) place more emphasis on destination "grades and scores" as opposed



to the teaching and learning processes. This is evidenced by teachers' usage of phrases like, "I have to cover so much content" or "I'm not going to waste time teaching information that won't be assessed on the state tests". Some non-Arts educational professionals have forgotten about their purpose for teaching and have resorted to filling a prescription for regurgitation of information via filling in circles on answer sheets. We need to shift gears and reconnect core content areas with arts content and strategies.



## ✨ Intersections & Crosswalks

Arts Integration (AI) has been defined as an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both (The Kennedy Center). For example, at Hedgpepeth/Williams Middle School of the Arts in Trenton, New Jersey, students and staff engage in a monthly or bi-monthly "Genius Hour" session. The sessions are based upon Arts teachers' (Dance, Drama, Music, or Art) and other core content teachers' areas of expertise along with

students' interests. Together, the educators create dual standards-aligned projects. Even during the pandemic, the teachers engaged in virtual Genius Hour projects called Kaleidoscope, as evidenced in the photos seen below (last page).

There is a growing movement in education to revive arts instruction in school and to integrate it into daily practices not only for non-arts content, but also for use as a tool for addressing social and emotional learning (SEL). In recent years, there has been extensive research and efforts to define what arts integration truly is and how it might be used to support healing to school aged

children and adolescents. The findings in some cases are that most teachers utilize some sort of arts in their classes, but many do not have a clear grasp of what Arts Integration is or how to use it to promote students' deeper understanding of concepts. A reality is that the arts are able to bridge gaps between teaching and learning. The Kennedy Center has identified 3 basic categories to express the variations of arts in schools. They are Arts as Curriculum, Arts-Enhanced Curriculum and Arts-Integrated Curriculum.

- Arts as Curriculum: Students develop knowledge and skills in a particular art form.

## Imagine (or reimagine) that schools became places that...

- Hosted a performing arts show on the first day of school.
- Encouraged staff members to don costumes of the school's mascot.
- Offered proactive social and emotional guidance to students at the onset of each day. Students recite a pledge and/or affirmations to be and do their best.
- Acknowledges and celebrates student and staff birthdays.
- Promote that staff greets students with a smile and asks them how they were doing—at the door.
- Has Science classes which consist of digital theatrical set and lighting design.
- Social Studies students are not just wearing costumes. They are writing and performing historical scripts.
- Security or custodial staff noticed when students got a haircut, new shoes or glasses.
- Hugs and High-fives are exchanged between students and the cafeteria staff. (Pre-pandemic)
- Quality teaching and obvious caring inspires students to rush to class on time.

- **Arts-Enhanced Curriculum:** When the arts are used as a device or strategy to support other curriculum areas, but no objectives in the art form are explicit, then the approach is called Arts-Enhanced Curriculum.
- **Arts-Enhanced Curriculum** is often mistaken for Arts-Integrated Curriculum or a distinction is not made between the two.
- **Arts-Integrated Curriculum:** In Arts-Integrated Curriculum, the arts become the approach to teaching and the vehicle for learning. Students meet dual

learning objectives when they engage in the creative process to explore connections between an art form and another subject area to gain greater understanding in both.

SEL and the arts are a logical partnership as the arts traditionally involve cathartic elements and outlets for emotions or feelings. The Framework for Arts Education and Social Emotional Learning ([www.selarts.org](http://www.selarts.org)) identifies the crosswalk between other content and arts content areas as a marriage of essential skills:

- **The 4 Artistic Processes:** Creating, Performing, Responding and Connecting
- **The 5 Social-Emotional Learning Competencies:** Self-awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making, and Relationship Skills

Our school-based research suggests that with the arts at the center of learning, most other areas of growth and development may be achieved (i.e., ELA, Math, Social Studies, Science, Character Ed, STEAM, Design-Thinking, SEL, Problem-Solving and even Physical Education).



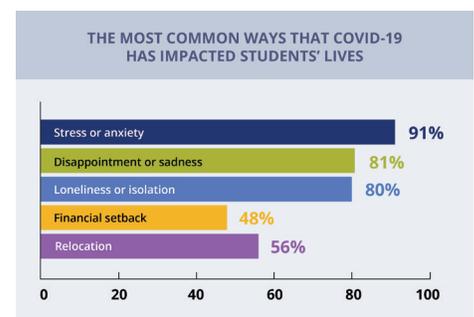
## ✿ Routes & Navigation

The key to addressing students' social emotional challenges using the arts requires a clear road map. The ultimate destination as outlined in the school's mission must be made clear so that everyone knows where the car is headed. An effective leader will ensure that everyone is gassed up for the trip.

Checkpoints and rest stops should be built into the implementation plan. Activities to occur at each stop should be identified and/or suggested. This map may include "streets" to avoid and road signs to look for as guidance. Addressing students' SEL teaching or successfully integrating the arts into daily instruction are no easy task alone so combining them both may present many challenges (and possibly fears). Pedestrian attitudes are not allowed on this journey. Safety belts (Counselors) must be worn throughout the entire ride because as students begin to connect with their most vulnerable selves, emotions will begin to leak from them disguised as songs, dances, music, theatre and visual art. Be sure to have a first aid kit handy that is equipped to treat the variety of trauma that may rise to the surface. According to a recent survey, 55% of all students surveyed did not know where to go for help for their mental health. One of the best steps to reopening schools that leaders could make is to provide mental health supports and resources for students (and staff) as they try to navigate paths to success and wellness through the arts.

## ✿ What Might Safe Driving Look Like?

- An educator using the arts processes to build students' emotional vocabulary
- Arts teachers collaborating with school counselors/social workers to design meaningful dual standards-based SEL lessons/activities.
- Students using creativity to express feelings, emotions and ideas (i.e. sketching, role-playing, songwriting, poetry...)
- Students using dance to express lines, angles, perspective(s) and relationships



## Call AAA (Arts Assistance Allies)

Shifting gears, avoiding potholes and navigating uncharted social emotional avenues via music, art, dance, and drama is a seemingly insurmountable challenge that should not be addressed in a silo. There are organizations like ArtsEdSEL and local arts institutions that are eager to help you along your SEL Arts trip. Arts and mental health partners like NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) may be the safest routes to addressing this SEL Arts approach. The reality is that students' cars have been parked at home for too long and quite frankly, they have forgotten how to drive. When faced with any potential barrier or an after-crash, many students have limited problem-solving (safety) gear, and they therefore yield to their emotions.

Looking in the rearview mirror of the 2020-2021 school year, leaders (educational, political, religious, community...) must put in place mental health safeguards and arts supports to insure and ensure students' well-being.



## Here are some tips for “first time Arts & SEL drivers”:

- Read and heed the signs of student (and staff) trauma.
- Create and follow a road map: avoid side streets. Stay focused on the mission.
- When extreme stress is detected, pump your breaks and tier the levels of arts and SEL supports offered.
- Do not speed through the processes of integrating SEL structures or Arts Integration strategies.
- Establish an in-house department of motor vehicles to help steer drivers towards the wellness end goal(s).
- Join a carpool by enlisting community partners with goals that are aligned to your school or district. Share the ride to the common destination.
- Tailgating is permitted and encouraged: Don't Reinvent the Wheel. Research already exists to help navigate across the highways and byways of integrated Arts and SEL programming.
- The newness of the arts vehicle may promote some staff defensive driving. Introduce new strategies and offer meaningful Drivers ArtsEd (PD). It may take longer for some to earn their learner's permits. Be patient. The goal is not to add stress but to alleviate it.
- Remember that school leaders and staff have been Driving Under the Influence (DUI) of state standardized testing for years.
- Be mindful of your emissions (emotions)—what you are putting out. Messaging about importance, urgency, value and support for Arts and SEL integration is key to getting on the road again.
- There may be detours ahead disguised as mandates and regulations, but belief in the impact of the Arts and SEL on students' success will help to go the distance.
- Stay the course. In the end, students and staff will benefit from the implementation of both SEL and Arts training, strategies, resources and support.

# Hedgepeth/Williams MS of the Arts Students Trenton, NJ

Pre-Pandemic

During Pandemic



Prior to the pandemic, Hedgepeth/Williams MS of the Arts students and staff were engaged in a variety of Arts Integration activities that promoted self-understanding and freedom of expression. During the pandemic, students were encouraged to explore and share their feelings through visual art.



Kayona T.  
Social Justice (Year 8)

Joshua A.  
Social Justice (Year 8)



Remote Arts Integration Project 20-21 SY—World Language (predominantly Spanish speaking) students were tasked with researching famous aspects of Latino culture and art. They selected famous works of art and celebrities from the Spanish-speaking world and recreated them as personal portraits using items from their homes.



# Mission Statement

The Center for Arts Education and Social Emotional Learning (ArtsEdSEL) is dedicated to illuminating the intersection between arts education and social emotional learning to facilitate the embedded, intentional, and sustained application of SEL-informed arts education.



## References

Bergonzi, L. & Smith, J. (1996). *Effects of arts education on participation in the arts*. Research Division Paper No. 36. National Endowment for the Arts.

Bruce, E.; Heffernan, M.; Hojreh, S.; Liscow, W.; Longo, S; Marigliano, M.; Nagel, E.; Reece, M.; Rizzuto, K.; Spicer, W; Sullivan, K.; & Ward, D. (2020). *New Jersey's arts integration think and do workbook: A practical guide to think about and implement arts integration* (2nd Ed).

CASEL. (2020). *Reunite, Renew, and Thrive: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Roadmap for Reopening School*. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

Active Minds. (2020). *Covid-19 impact on college student mental health mental health survey/* Retrieved from: <https://www.activeminds.org/studentsurvey/>

Active Minds (2020). *Covid-19 impact on college student mental health mental health survey. Infographic*. Retrieved from: <https://www.activeminds.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Student-Survey-Infographic.pdf>

President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (2011). *Reinvesting in Arts Education: Winning America's Future Through Creative Schools*. Retrieved from: <https://www.giarts.org/sites/default/files/Reinvesting-in-Arts-Education-Winning-Americas-Future-Through-Creative-Schools.pdf>

Kisida, B., & Bowen, D. H. (2019). *New evidence of the benefits of arts education*. Brown Center Chalkboard. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2019/02/12/new-evidence-of-the-benefits-of-arts-education/>

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (n.d.). *What is arts integration? Explore the Kennedy Center's comprehensive definition*. Retrieved from: <https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/articles-and-how-tos/articles/collections/arts-integration-resources/what-is-arts-integration/>

Winner, E., Goldstein, T. R., & Vincent-Lancrin, S. (2013). *Educational research and innovation art for art's sake? The impact of arts education*. OECD Publishing.



ArtsEd**SEL**

The Center for Arts Education  
and Social Emotional Learning