The importance of social-emotional learning (SEL) is indisputable—and in recent years the recognition of that fact has grown exponentially.

SEL has rightfully emerged as an educational priority, as school leaders confront the ever-increasing signs of stress and trauma our students are experiencing. The alarming rise in suicides (which are now appearing in our middle schools and high schools), social media shaming, ghosting, peer pressure, and school shootings have all contributed to what is clearly a mental health crisis in our schools. All of this was occurring pre-COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these issues due to the anxiety and loss some students are sustaining, the social isolation that comes with stay-at-home orders, the milestones students have missed (graduations, concerts, proms, trips, sports activities, travel), and even questions regarding career aspirations and students’ finding a successful pathway to their passion in life.

The confluence of student mental health and well-being issues and the COVID-19 pandemic has thrust the need for SEL front and center.

Social-Emotional Learning Let’s take a step back for a second and consider the recent ascendance of SEL. These competencies are nothing new. They have always been with us, and their purpose is to help us meet the tests of life.

These tests begin for children when they wake up in the morning. Some wake to chaos, hecticness, and/or disorganization. These tests are exacerbated in context of poverty, or pandemic. Maybe they have to take care of siblings, or leave early because their parents have to get out to work. Maybe they walk to school in a dangerous neighborhood. Or maybe their school is not safe—a concept that now evokes concerns about health in addition to physical or emotional safety. Maybe they come home to an empty house, or go to an after-school center, or have to pick up siblings and take care of them after school. Maybe their parents—or one parent, or guardian—has a physical or mental health or substance abuse issue—or is dealing with COVID or grief from a COVID loss.

When young people—or any people—experience these tests of life, their ability to complete important tasks—like schoolwork, homework, workplace responsibilities, and even child care—is affected. We don’t have the concentration we need, the focus, the emotional control, or the perspective. Teachers don’t teach effectively and students don’t retain and use much of what they have been taught. When which are we are able to adapt to the tests of life—which, amazingly, is more often than not—it’s because we are able to put a set of skills we are born with—SEL skills—to productive use. But just like our inborn ability to learn language or mathematics, these skills need to be guided and developed if they are going to be robust enough to handle challenges today—and the unknowns we surely will face tomorrow.

What is SEL exactly? It’s the process of acquiring the skills to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others, make responsible decisions, establish positive relationships, and handle challenging situations effectively. The skills we are talking about, often called the “CASEL 5” because they were named by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (www.casel.org) are these:

Self-Awareness
- **Identifying emotions**: Identifying and labeling one’s feelings
- **Recognizing strengths**: Identifying and cultivating one’s strengths and positive qualities

Social Awareness
- **Perspective-taking and empathy**: Identifying and understanding the thoughts and feelings of others
- **Appreciating diversity**: Understanding that individual and group differences complement each other and make the world more interesting

Self-Management
- **Managing emotions**: Monitoring and regulating feelings so they aid rather than impede the handling of situations
- **Goal setting**: Establishing and working toward the achievement of short- and long-term pro-social goals

Responsible Decision Making
- **Analyzing situations**: Accurately perceiving situations in which a decision is to be made and assessing factors that might influence one’s response
- **Assuming personal responsibility**: Recognizing and understanding one’s obliga-
tion to engage in ethical, safe, and legal behaviors

- **Respecting others:** Believing that others deserve to be treated with kindness and compassion and feeling motivated to contribute to the common good
- **Problem solving:** Generating, implementing, and evaluating positive and informed solutions to problems

**Relationship Skills**

- **Communication:** Using verbal and non-verbal skills to express oneself and promote positive and effective exchanges with others
- **Building relationships:** Establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding connections with individuals and groups
- **Negotiation:** Achieving mutually satisfactory resolutions to conflict by addressing the needs of all concerned
- **Refusal:** Effectively conveying and following through with one’s decision not to engage in unwanted, unsafe, unethical, or unlawful conduct

Schools have an obligation to prepare students for the tests of life and not just a life of tests, by taking SEL seriously. And that means ensuring systematic opportunities for students to engage in SEL.

It turns out that one of the most important avenues for this to take place is in the visual and performing arts. The reason is obvious. It’s hard to imagine students creating, presenting, performing, reviewing, responding to, and communicating about the arts in the absence of empathy, perspective taking, a sophisticated knowledge of emotions, and the emotion regulation, problem solving and relationship skills needed to do the work that artists must do.

As you will see, research supports this intuitive relationship, and further suggests that it’s now time to make the implicit connection of SEL and the arts into an explicit connection. New Jersey is poised to be a leader in doing exactly that.

**Arts Education & Social and Emotional Learning** A recent report from the University of Chicago and Ingenuity entitled *Arts Education and Social-Emotional Learning Outcomes Among K-12 Students* noted that much of this can be understood by considering the framework of how students learn. This document quoted from the report, *Foundations for Young Adult Success: A Developmental Framework*, highlights the following two ways that students learn:

1. The way children and youth develop competencies, beliefs, and behaviors is through developmental experiences—opportunities to act in the world and reflect on their experiences, and;
2. Experiences are most influential in shaping the course of development when they take place within the context of strong, supportive, and sustained developmental relationships with important adults and peers.

Developmental relationships and developmental experiences form the bedrock of SEL for our students. The key is whether or not these experiences are positive ones!

The report further notes the developmental experiences that play a key role in education:

Researchers identified 10 developmental experiences that were particularly powerful contributors to youth learning and development, including the development of social-emotional competencies. These 10 developmental experiences include five action experiences (encountering, tinkering, choosing, practicing, and contributing) and five reflection experiences (describing, evaluating, connecting, envisioning, and integrating). Evidence from a range of disciplines suggests that the more students have the opportunities to
The arts, by their very nature, are also emotional. This is key. For SEL to be effective, it must be taught and embedded in the curriculum.

How do we intentionally embed SEL to the work in our arts classrooms to make meaningful connections? With the Arts Education & Social and Emotional Learning Framework.

The Arts Education & Social and Emotional Learning Framework was designed by a team of experts (co-chaired by the authors of this article) in the areas of SEL and arts education with members drawn from SEL4NJ (www.SEL4NJ.org) and Arts Ed NJ (artsednj.org). This team explored all of the intersections between SEL and arts education through the lens of the arts standards. This approach maintained the focus on the primary goal of teaching the arts while making a clear connection to SEL to inform the instructional approach. This allowed the team to illuminate the inherent nature of SEL within arts education and examine how this can be activated in students intentionally.

This task force combined the just released New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS) in the Visual and Performing Arts (https://njartsstandards.org) and the Social and Emotional Learning Competencies adopted by the New Jersey Department of Education in 2017 (https://www.state.nj.us/education/students/safety/sandp/sel/SELCOMPETENCIES.PDF).

The new NJSLS in the arts are based on the National Core Arts Standards, which is organized around the artistic processes—the cognitive and physical actions by which arts learning and making are realized. The arts standards are based on the artistic processes of:

- Creating;
- Performing/Producing/Presenting;
- Responding; and
- Connecting.

Each of the arts disciplines (dance, music, theatre, visual art and media arts) incorporates all of these processes in some manner. These processes define and organize the link between the art, the learner and the audience.

The task force worked to connect the artistic processes to the SEL competencies of:

- Self: Self-Awareness and Self-Management
- Social: Social Awareness and Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

Understanding how the artistic processes intersect with the SEL competencies will enable administrators and arts educators to intentionally activate and maximize these connections for the benefit of students.

This crosswalk or “matrix” approach to revealing the intersections between arts education and SEL served two primary goals:

- Empowering arts educators with the information they need to revise curricula and instruction to embed the activation of the SEL components into practice.
- Providing arts educators, administrators, and other decision-makers with the information needed to elevate the understanding of how arts education is a valuable tool to support the implementation of SEL strategies in a school or district.

The results of this 18-month process can be accessed at SELArts.org, which every arts educator and school administrator in the state can now utilize as a resource to embed SEL into instructional practices.

As New Jersey moved towards the implementation of the newly adopted
Student Learning Standards in the Visual and Performing Arts Standards, the *Arts Education & Social and Emotional Learning Framework* becomes a critical resource. Districts across New Jersey are required by law to revise their own curricula to come into alignment with these new arts standards and be approved by the individual boards of education by September 2021. By encouraging your own district to embrace this approach, our schools and districts will accelerate the incorporation of SEL into the curriculum during the revision process in a way that underscores the inherent nature of SEL within the arts.

By connecting the new arts learning standards to the SEL competencies, along with examples of effective strategies, New Jersey arts educators and administrators will have a road map they may use to aid in the SEL integration process and our students, schools, and communities will be the better for it. Opportunities to develop literacy and fluency in the arts have always been an important dimension of education, but now more than ever these opportunities are essential to the well-being of our students.

We both believe everyone will soon come to realize that our arts educators are the secret weapon to the successful implementation of social-emotional learning in our schools for all students and that arts education is the superpower to once again connect all of our students to our schools and provide a pathway to express themselves in this mid-COVID-19 world we reside in.

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**REFERENCES**


