



# Social Emotional Learning and Music Education

## NOW MORE THAN EVER

by Scott N. Edgar

**S**ocial Emotional Learning (SEL) was around before the COVID-19 pandemic and will be around long after. The common trauma we are experiencing, however, has put a magnifying glass on the need for schools to help students survive and thrive when confronted with profound challenges. The singular priority of schools as they seek strategies to navigate the pandemic is student and staff safety—physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally. SEL is a skill-based approach that can help achieve that safety by building students’ self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making skills (simplified to the three goals of: *self, others, decisions*). Rather than react, SEL enables us to respond to challenges.

Music is inherently emotional: *it makes us feel.*

Music is social: *it has been a rallying call for humans, always.*

Music teachers must capitalize on the connections between SEL and music because our students need it and music education now more than ever!

### It’s Not Just a Byproduct—We Must Be Intentional

For SEL to be effective in teaching students the life skills needed to navigate their world after they leave our music classroom, it must be embedded into curricular content—for us, it must be musical. We must make SEL intentional and meaningful—it doesn’t *just happen*, and we can’t rely on the inherent fertile ground and potential that music education provides to teach our students these skills. SEL is not another box to check or another item to squeeze

I believe everyone will soon come to realize that our arts educators are the secret weapon to implementation of Social Emotional Learning in our schools.

—Dr. Maurice Elias

into our time with students. When done well, Musical SEL (MSEL) should feel like great music teaching! If it feels like SEL detracts from teaching music, we aren’t doing it optimally, nor are we maximizing the true power of music.

Intentional MSEL can begin with four broad ideas:

- **Connection:** We need to foster every opportunity for students to connect with us, the music, and each other. Relationships are essential for meaningful teaching and learning to occur. Admittedly, this has become more difficult with remote learning and distancing. Two of the best ways to build relationships between music educators and student musicians are to honor students’ voices and give them choices. Give up some control and allow students to take ownership and have active roles in the educational process. Offer students choice, as simple as whether to sing a song first or last today or as involved as repertoire selection and musical decisions that affect performance or self-assessment of a musical activity.
- **Repertoire:** One of the most important elements of quality repertoire is that students can connect with it and become motivated by it. Every music teacher remembers *that performance* and the piece that helped spark their interest in

becoming a music teacher. As we consider music selection (at every level) we should always consider how we can make it personal for our students. MSEL is only as good as the repertoire it is connected to—*music first!*

- **Experiences:** Students must be given the opportunity to *do* MSEL. This is the culmination of connection, repertoire, and reflection in a musical experience that allows students to explore, create, contribute, choose, and encounter music with other students. To maximize the effect these experiences can have on students, exploring music that interests students must be melded with the music we see value in teaching. These experiences must be intentional and thoughtful and put on the same level as we have traditionally placed performance.
- **Reflection:** To achieve voice and choice and to connect students with the music, every performance, activity, or objective should have a student reflection component. The process is just as important as the product and can help unpack creativity, self-awareness, self-assessment and can support students' goal-setting. These reflections often result in the best responses online, and they give valuable information as we continue to design in-person and remote music education. While reflection typically follows an activity, consider peppering reflection throughout the process so students can connect and consider the *why* as they complete the *what*.

For safety reasons, performance won't have the role it had prior to the pandemic disruption for some time. We need to adapt our pedagogical approaches to capitalize on other elements of music education including creating, responding, and

connecting. Some music educators might view this as *lowering the bar*. While I am confident we will return to focusing on musical excellence through performance, for now, we must reconceptualize our standards. We cannot lower the bar; we need to change the bar and keep it high.

This adaptation—adjusting the *how* we teach music—will allow us to continue to teach music at a high level and still reach our students. But it will be different. When we give ourselves space to prioritize non-performance elements, it makes room for essential components of music education including creativity, personal connection, and MSEL.

### Reentry into the Music Classroom and How MSEL Can Help

The trauma everyone is feeling as a result of COVID-19 is real. Individual situations greatly impact our ability to respond to these profound challenges, including resources, family support, and existing SEL competencies; however, many of these are out of students' control. Students have been away from school and their friends for five months. Issues of reentry, trust,

and mental health will be paramount (along with the obvious need for physical health precautions).

Students often rely on music teachers and the music classroom for security, school connectedness, and support. They need us now more than ever. This doesn't mean we disregard music and focus solely on social and emotional challenges. These conversations can be valuable; however, we must remember we are music teachers, not licensed counselors. Students gravitate to us because of music; we must not forget that. As the school year begins, students will need opportunities to regain trust, interacting with people and reconnecting and rebuilding relationships, and they will be starved for music. It will be our job to meet all those needs.

SEL skill-building can help with these challenging tasks. Below are the three broad goals of SEL (derived from the CASEL, Illinois SEL Standards), relevant skill sets, and musical strategies.

While music classrooms will look, feel, and sound different than they did pre-pandemic, with purposeful, thoughtful, and realistic instruction focused on the

SEL GOALS	SKILLS	STRATEGIES
<b>Self:</b> Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and recognize emotions</li> <li>• Persist</li> <li>• Cope</li> <li>• Manage stress</li> <li>• De-escalate emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utilize emoji worksheets for reflection, listening exercises, and current mood assessment.</li> <li>• Give students opportunities to self-evaluate their current emotional state and the time and space to recenter (e.g., "I need a break" pass; calm corners; anxiety meters).</li> </ul>
<b>Others:</b> Use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperate</li> <li>• Be empathetic</li> <li>• Build relationships</li> <li>• Have concern and compassion for others</li> <li>• Seek and provide help</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collectively develop a soundtrack of meaningful music that can be played as students enter class.</li> <li>• Develop teams of students willing to help with reasonable tasks to keep music classrooms safe (following all school, district, and health professional guidance and only allow students to do what is possible and safe).</li> </ul>
<b>Decisions:</b> Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote one's own health</li> <li>• Avoid risky behaviors</li> <li>• Anticipate consequences</li> <li>• Analyze situations</li> <li>• Plan realistic and adaptive response strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have students inventory and rank music classroom activities in terms of risk, their comfort performing them, and protocols that could make them feel safer.</li> <li>• Create a new mission statement accounting for musical, social, and emotional objectives accounting for a decreased emphasis on performance.</li> </ul>

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students and MSEL, you can facilitate an environment where students can reconnect with the space and the people who mean so much to them.

### Advocating Utilizing SEL

SEL represents a widely accepted construct that policy makers at all levels value. To effectively make an argument, all elements of SEL are needed:

- realizing the personal–collective value of music education (self-awareness),
- understanding how this value will be perceived by decision-makers (social-awareness), and
- promoting music education through advocacy (responsible decision-making).

Engaging students in this process not only lends relevance to music education's value but also models/teaches students these important skills while forwarding the cause for music education.

Compelling arguments for music education utilizing SEL are:

- Purposeful integration of SEL into music education will enrich the students' personal connection to music.
- The relationship built between teacher and students over multiple years of instruction fosters the caring environment necessary to help build school connectedness and foster empathy.
- The perseverance needed to dedicate oneself to musical excellence fosters resiliency in and out of the music classroom.
- Musical creation fosters self-awareness and allows students to develop a greater sense of autonomy and emotional vocabulary.
- The collaborative community developed in the music classroom around music-making welcomes discussions and an awareness of acceptance and embraces diversity.
- Musicians learn the necessity of personal goal setting, self-assessment, and accountability as they develop high standards for musicianship and themselves.
- Music education provides developmental experiences that actively allow students to practice and hone social-emotional competencies.

Rough, uncomfortable waters lie ahead; however, music is a *cultural necessity* and is *fundamental to being human*. Music education and SEL exposes and deepens this for our students.

SEL will be front and center for administrators, and MSEL can provide one solution to help our students cope, heal, and move forward through music.

### Onward

We have often been told *the only way out is through*. This is true as we prepare for musical performances, struggle to teach a musical concept, persist through personal musical roadblocks, and navigate the profound social and emotional challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of our students are mourning the loss of music education as they know it and are craving the support and security they have relied on. Rough, uncomfortable waters lie ahead; however, music is a *cultural necessity* and is *fundamental to being*

*human*. Music education and SEL exposes and deepens this for our students. Through our intentional integration of SEL, our students will build the social emotional skills to thrive in our classrooms and beyond. 🎵

Scott N. Edgar is Associate Professor of Music, Department of Music chair, and Director of Bands at Lake Forest College. Edgar is the author of *Music Education and Social Emotional Learning: The Heart of Teaching Music*, and he delivers clinics internationally on the topic. He is a Conn-Selmer Educational Clinician and VH1 Save the Music Foundation Educational Consultant. He can be reached at [edgar@lakeforest.edu](mailto:edgar@lakeforest.edu).

## Resources for SEL and Specific Strategies for Implementing SEL in the Music Classroom

- *Music Education and Social Emotional Learning: The Heart of Teaching Music* (and student workbook), by Scott Edgar, GIA Publications.
- *Optimism Through the COVID-19 Disruption: Utilizing Social Emotional Learning for Reflection and Growth*, by Scott Edgar, Andrew Morrison, & Bob Morrison: <https://sbomagazine.com/6934-optimism-through-the-covid-19-disruption-utilizing-social-emotional-learning-for-reflection-and-growth.html>
- *Music Education and Social Emotional Learning*, by Scott Edgar, NAFME blog: <https://nafme.org/music-education-social-emotional-learning/>
- *Music Education and Social Emotional Learning*, by Scott Edgar and Bob Morrison, NAFME webinar: <https://nafme.org/advocacy/quarterly-advocacy-webinars/social-emotional-learning/>
- *Music Education and SEL During COVID-19: Resiliency and Empathy Now More Than Ever*, by Scott Edgar, NAFME webinar: <https://nafme.org/my-classroom/nafme-online-professional-learning-community/#Webinar%20Recordings>
- *Advocating for Music Education Utilizing SEL*, by Scott Edgar and Bob Morrison, NAFME webinar: <https://nafme.org/my-classroom/nafme-online-professional-learning-community/#Webinar%20Recordings>
- Music Education and Social Emotional Learning Facebook Page: [@MusicSocialEmotionalLearning](https://www.facebook.com/MusicSocialEmotionalLearning)
- New Jersey Arts Education and SEL Learning Framework: [www.selarts.org](http://www.selarts.org)
- Collaborative for Academic Social Emotional Learning (CASEL): [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)