



The Canadian Music Educators' Association/L' Association canadienne des musiciens éducateurs has explored the aims and goals, efficacy, and program delivery of the music education program known as El Sistema and hereby presents the following to summarize the CMEA/ACME's current position.

What is El Sistema? ¹

El Sistema is a set of inspiring ideals that has led to an intensive after-school music program that seeks to effect social change through the pursuit of musical excellence. El Sistema focuses on children with the fewest resources and greatest need and is delivered at no cost to participants.

Core values:

- Every human being has the right to a life of dignity and contribution.
- Every child can learn to experience and express music and art deeply and receive its many benefits.
- Overcoming poverty and adversity is best done by first strengthening the spirit, as El Sistema founder Dr. Abreu puts it: creating “an affluence of the spirit.”
- Effective education is based on love, approval, joy and experience within a high-functioning, aspiring, nurturing community. Every child has limitless possibilities and the ability to strive for excellence. “Trust the young,” informs every aspect of the work.
- Learning organizations never arrive but are always becoming – striving to include more students, greater musical excellence, better teaching. Thus, flexibility, experimentation, and risk-taking are inherent and desirable aspects of every program.

CMEA/ACME position.

Upon review of research documents, activity reports, and engaging in conversations across Canada with stakeholders of El Sistema and music education, the CMEA offer their support, in principle, to El Sistema inspired programming. It is felt by the review committee that El Sistema has benefits that resonate with the mandate and mission of CMEA. “CMEA/ACME is a professional association that

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nurtures a vital music learning community throughout Canada.” Further, “The CMEA/ACME fosters the advancement of teaching and the lifelong learning of music.”².

CMEA/ACME’s endorsement of El Sistema is based upon the following conclusions.

- The El Sistema program is in keeping with the CMEA mandate and mission of music for all, and lifelong learning.
- El Sistema is reaching out to a community of young people that are currently underserved and/or less engaged in authentic music making opportunities.
- The positive impact on social structures within communities and the building of a sense of community within identified socio-economic groups through participation in musical ensembles is important and valued.
- The program is, by design, strongly supported by private corporations and, in some cases, government agencies. Partnerships between music education groups and community should be encouraged.
- El Sistema is a way to provide transformative social interventions and expansive learning opportunities with explicit aims of fostering positive values and experiences, personal sense of well being and identity, emotion and embodiment, and a moral commitment to learning music that engenders personal and collective responsibility for contributing to the success of the program.

Implementation of El Sistema

CMEA/ACME qualifies its endorsement of El Sistema as follows:

- El Sistema programs must not lessen the responsibility of governments at all levels to provide quality music education within school systems.
- El Sistema should be considered a community music education program and not be considered as a replacement or substitute to state supported music education. El Sistema, in the Canadian context, does not, or should not, claim or position itself to be a replacement model for publicly funded school music education. Indeed, the strong emphasis on social change is not embedded in any identified school music curriculum in Canada nor does El Sistema attempt to meet the curricular outcomes of any jurisdiction. El Sistema is therefore not suitable as the primary source of music education in school systems. Problem areas include:
 - Assessment of individual students’ learning is not a focus in El Sistema
 - The complete broad scope of provincial music curricular outcomes are not consistent with the aims of El Sistema
 - Integrating technology is not an objective in El Sistema
 - Most school systems have mandated objectives for inclusiveness and diversity that may not resonate with El Sistema objectives.

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- Teacher qualifications (certification) for El Sistema faculty may not meet provincial requirements.
 - The strong emphasis by El Sistema on western European art music, as in the original Venezuelan model, does not reflect the broader reach of music education goals and specific curricula goals currently in practice in most school jurisdictions in Canada.
 - Frequency of contact time within El Sistema programs far exceeds what is possible within the typical Canadian school system.
- Current funding for state supported, curriculum based music education programs should not be diverted to funding for El Sistema.
 - Typically, El Sistema style programs are not grounded in solid, well-researched music pedagogy. This is an area with which CMEA and/or provincial affiliates could assist.
 - El Sistema needs to be flexible and adaptive to the particular circumstances of a region taking into account, local programming, local funding, local resources and specific needs of the identified community. A one-size-fits-all programming is not supported.
 - El Sistema is best delivered in partnership with existing music education support groups. These groups include, but are not limited to:
 - Community leaders
 - Business partners
 - Professional music organizations (local orchestras etc.)
 - Music Conservatories
 - School districts
 - Local music advocacy groups including where they exist;
 - CMEA
 - Provincial/territorial MEAs
 - String and orchestra associations
 - Coalition for Music Education in Canada
 - Community social service organizations
 - Music outreach programs and others

CMEA support for El Sistema

This position of support for El Sistema inspired programming in Canada does not articulate the nature of the ongoing support offered by CMEA. However, it is recommended that where resources and infrastructure exist, the CMEA be prepared to engage in dialogue with the managers of El Sistema to offer support that might include, but not be limited to;

- Stated endorsement of El Sistema programming
- Sharing of knowledge regarding best practices in music education
- Assistance in professional development for El Sistema faculty
- Sharing of knowledge regarding local resources. (Instructors, venues, potential supporters, funding)
- Partnering with El Sistema to engaging in action research surrounding the efficacy of El Sistema as delivered within local context

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- Supporting and encouraging El Sistema as a partner in music education locally, provincially and nationally

Conclusion

Music education can take many shapes and many forms. The CMEA offers encouragement for El Sistema to be a partner in a vital learning community throughout Canada.

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Notes:

1. This description is from a document prepared by the El Sistema USA National Steering Committee, May 2010.
2. Excerpt from CMEA purpose and mission as articulated on their website - <http://cmea.ca/about/>