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Joe Seidel's love for music is infectious. His fervor can be seen in the 125 students he teaches at First Montessori School of Atlanta, many of whom have gone on to continue playing and performing at the high school and college levels.

"I love it when all my students do really well," the Canton resident said. "Passing on that love of music is something that I am able to do really well. I'm passionate about what I do, so I think it rubs off on them."

Musical instruments have long been Seidel's companions since a young age. After picking up the clarinet in the fifth grade, he moved on to the piano and later, the oboe.



Special

**Montessori music teacher Joe Seidel, of Canton, plays a xylophone in the classroom at First Montessori School of Atlanta.**

He received a master's degree in music, has taught at Clayton State and performed up and down the East Coast, with the Atlanta Chamber Players, the Atlanta Ballet Orchestra and the symphony.

Through family ties, he learned of Montessori schools. An Army friend and his wife, as well as Seidel's niece, were all taking training to become Montessori teachers. Seidel's wife, Charleen, was a Montessori teacher and their daughter, Jory Cannon, was attending a Montessori school. A couple years after his own Montessori training, the Seidels founded Southwest Montessori School in Atlanta, which they would run for 15 years. While he enjoyed it, he found himself missing music.

An opportunity arose with First Montessori, which was looking for a music teacher, and Seidel seized it. He's now been with the school for more than

18 years, having started as a music teacher, moving on to the head of the school, director of admissions and most recently, returning to his role as music teacher while still handling admissions.

As passionate he is about music, Seidel said teaching in the Montessori way has its rewards, for both him and his students. Montessori schools were developed by Italian physician Maria Montessori, who also was an anthropologist and scientist. Seidel said her ideas started as just theories, but have now been proven as successful.

"What she did was observe children and figure out how they learn and how the brain works," he said. "What's different about it, the children are in three-year groupings, so you have 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds together; you have 6-, 7- and 8-year-olds together, 9-, 10- and 11-year-olds together."

The concept, Seidel said, is the younger children learn from the older children and the older children learn to be role models and teachers, giving lessons to the younger children.

Also part of the Montessori way is employing hands-on activities that don't just teach students how to get the right answer to a problem, but to understand what they're doing in order to arrive at the right answer.

Seidel teaches elementary- through middle-school-aged children, roughly half of the school's 244 students, who are as young as 18 months through the eighth grade.

Though a majority of students stem from the region where the school is located in Sandy Springs, Seidel said he has students from Cherokee County, and as far south as Newnan.

Seidel said he caters his lessons to the child's age, but that all students work in a collaborative process with music.

"We start with something concrete; we'll sing songs and act it out, or we'll move to it," he said. "Then we take that rhythm, and we clap it on our bodies. Then we may take the rhythm and we take it to what I call non-pitch percussion type instruments, things like shakers, drums or tambourines. Then, the last thing we do after we've sung the song what seems like 10,000 times and we've done the rhythm on the non-pitches, I have a set of xylophones—alto, baritone and soprano, since they have different pitches—and we learn to play these instruments on the xylophone and then play them together."

This curriculum, he said, was developed by 20th century European composer Carl Orff. To get every age group involved, the younger children will play a simple quarter-note rhythm while the older students may play the melody of the song, so that everybody can participate at their own levels. Seidel is a trained Suzuki piano teacher, an oral-based teaching method named after Japanese musician Shinichi Suzuki, which uses a "mother-tongue" approach.

"He noticed that children, regardless of their culture, are able to learn their native tongue effortlessly and that music is a language," Seidel explained. "How do kids learn to speak—they hear it, right? They hear their parents, and their brothers and their sisters talking to them constantly. And then they start to imitate. So I'm teaching these kids how to play piano and the first thing they're playing, hands together, a melody with accompaniment, before we ever start to read a note of music."

Technique is honed, and Seidel helps students work on their hand balance—between the melody hand, which should be louder than the accompaniment hand—all before they learn to read sheet music.

"Traditional piano teachers are trying to do everything simultaneously, teaching to read at the same time they're teaching them to play," he said. "I've found that students get really frustrated by that, so this is a way, regardless of the talent of the child, they're able to learn to play."

Students play everything from a range of xylophones, non-pitch percussion instruments and by middle school, recorders. The school also offers a violin program, and Seidel guides an elementary chorus and 125-voice choir. This week, students of the music program will perform for an international-theme night, featuring songs from different countries. In the spring, Seidel will produce the school's annual opera featuring elementary children, with this year's subject of Greek goddess Persephone. This year's performance will be especially unique for Seidel, as one of his former students will return to play the role of Persephone's mother, Demeter.

When he's not teaching at First Montessori, Seidel also gives private lessons for children and adults, is on the adjunct music faculty at Reinhardt University, where he teaches organ, and is the organist at the Canton First United Methodist Church. For information, visit [www.2pianosstudio.com](http://www.2pianosstudio.com).