

Interview

The Right Turn that Changed a Culture, An Interview with Mitch Bahr

By [Dan Blaufuss](#)

How the 2016 California Teacher of the Year built a thriving program.



Director of bands and 2016 California Teacher of the Year Mitch Bahr is in his 16th year at Foothill High School in Palo Cedro. The school opened in 1991, and when Bahr arrived in fall of 2002, he was already the ninth band director. “There was great difficulty getting the program started. The freshman band had eight students and my advanced band wasn’t much bigger. The band students were the laughing-stock of the school, and students were ashamed to be in band. The jazz band students were not required to sign up for concert band, which led to an elitist attitude from them. When a program is in disarray, the only solution is to start working.”

What were the first steps you took to build up the program?

Prior to my arrival, the band was tucked away in the corner of the bleachers, playing songs no one knew, and few enjoyed. At my first football game, students trudged toward the field and made a left toward their usual spot, but I made a right. I got to the 50 yard line, saw them still by the end zone, and waved them over. When they got to me, I said, “This is our spot now,” and we played from there that week. As I started to overhaul the pep band repertoire, the kids played their hearts out...and people took notice. That next Monday, the varsity cheerleaders came into band room in full uniform. They brought us cookies, thanked us for adding to the football game, and cheered for the band. My drum major that year was a senior, and she broke down crying when the cheerleaders left the classroom. It was the first time she had ever felt validated or celebrated as a musician at Foothill.

Truthfully, it started right there. That was the beginning of the culture change at the school. I promised students right away, even before that first game, that I would never put them in a situation where they would be embarrassed about a performance. People began to quickly see what we were building.

It often doesn’t happen that quickly, right?!? It often takes time to gain that trust from students. However, once that trust (that we will not ever set our students up for embarrassment) is earned, the buy-in is off the charts. A former professor who I admire greatly, Bob Feller of Biola University, is someone I describe as firm in his expectations, but gives grace when needed. So, while I was pushed to be better than I thought I could ever be in college, I knew he was driving me...and backing me...every step I took. This is the approach I now take with my students. By pushing them, with heart, they know I have their back. My drive is to serve the students and serve the music – in that order. If students do not see that you have compassion for them, they won’t believe that you really are in their corner. I want students to understand that everything I do on the podium is for *their* benefit.

What are the unexpected difficulties of teaching in a rural area?

It’s all about awareness. Set your ego, and your Grade 5/6 music aside. If you take on a high school job in a rural area, but come in with unrealistic expectations of a student who lives five miles down a dirt road off a rarely-traveled road, it can become frustrating quickly. You want them to practice several hours a day, but they have no internet access and own one sweatshirt. We have students who really struggle, and you have to meet them where they are.

Some people may bristle at this, but our Foothill Band was built with a Frisbee, a deck of cards, and pizza! When we have Friday night football games, I leave the band room open all day and am at school until the game ends so the students who usually ride the bus after school can stay in town and have a place to be. Students can practice a little bit if they want or just hang out with friends. They look forward to it. We have snacks and hearts tournaments. This is how you build memories with students, especially in a small town.



How do you assimilate beginning high school students into the band?

I've always loved playing basketball, but in high school I was too nervous to try out for the team. Finally, my senior year, people begged me to try out for the team. One problem, I didn't know how to play organized basketball. I could shoot the lights out...and, that was it! I went over to a friend's house, and he showed me plays with Legos; moving the characters to demonstrate how the game worked! People will put in hours with sports, but musicians rarely think about getting together and sharing things like that. There is so much worry among musicians about whether it is perfect and how others will react if it isn't. The reality is that it will not be perfect, so I tell students to be content where they are, where they started, and to cherish the opportunity to be on the journey of learning music.

My section leaders are not in that position because they are the best players. They earn the position because they are that friend I had in high school; they care about everyone in their section. They are servant-based leaders. Side note, I absolutely do not believe in chairs. I rotate my large sections quite a bit. Leadership and authentic friendships arise when leaders care about building the musicianship of the whole section.



What are the keys to improving musicianship?

There is no magic exercise/etude/chorale that changes sound for the better. The primary way to improve musicianship in the band is getting each student to genuinely care about how they sound. Period. When someone sings, you can instantly tell what music they like – they are a product of who they listen to. Our music department is full of students who enjoy listening to music. This is not easy to achieve, and it was a long road to get there! Kids want to play. I want them to play. But, left to their own devices to listen to music, many will choose not to do so. We must take the time to expose students to many artists, and teach students how to listen. In the short-term it may feel as though you are sacrificing important rehearsal minutes. Long term, you realize that students are turning into self-motivated, self-disciplined players.

How do you reach out to the community?

The school music program should be woven into the culture of the community. If there is an assembly at school, we play in it. If there is music performed on the campus, we want to be the ones playing it. If a community event needs music, I want us to be the ones providing it. The Veterans Committee cannot afford to bus us? Fine, we'll pay for it ourselves. To me, the expense is worth it. Paying it forward, and being able to teach students how to sit through a military service? Totally worth it. I want the community to understand how much everyone would lose if the Foothill band ever went away, or if funds were lost. We also reach out to elementary students by doing Children's Concerts, volunteer cleaning the Community Park, and try to do many other things to stay active within our area.



How do your school exchange programs work?

A school exchange is just a get together to hang out and play music. Much like an Athletic Director, I call up a school and set up a home and away date on consecutive year. These happen during the school day; the idea is to take a couple hours out of school to share ideas. This shows students that bands at other schools are doing the same thing they are. Each has a culture.

The last school we went to was struggling. The students there had had a new director each year for a long time. I told my students, “They probably are going to have little trust in their director. I am going to pump up the kids, validate the new director, and we are going to find the good in their performance. I want you be celebratory when they’re done and appreciative of the music you’ve heard. Be genuine and positive.” It takes few brain cells to be a critic. Mistakes in music are easily heard. It takes more skill to find the good in a struggling program. What do you hear that they’re doing well? If a group is far behind on music, you may have to praise the culture of the classroom. It may be the only thing you can find to compliment is eye contact with the director, but this matters, too.

The truth is that I rarely stop for a missed note. They happen. It is more important to me that students commit to good tone on every first note. Try hard...every time. And, if you fail? Fail gloriously! The discipline it takes to commit to a course of action or to self-improvement transfers to every area of life, while fixing a wrong note takes just a pencil mark. It is more important to me that students, most of whom will stop playing their instruments after they graduate, master the former two. The discipline, accountability, and compassion we learn from each other goes way beyond whether someone misses an accidental.

What else makes you who you are?

Carmen - My beautiful wife of twenty-two years. As much as I love my job, I simply won’t allow my job to be more important than my wife and my two incredible kids. The old saying “behind every band director is a great band director’s wife” is archaic, and it needs to go away. I do not my wife to be defined by her support of my job, nor should she be in the background behind me. Much more than that, I want my students to see that my wife is right beside me, my priorities are well-balanced, and that I value and treasure my family.

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