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Meet the School Board Candidate Music in MBUSD Issue Sheet

As part of the Town Hall, the Manhattan Beach Music Coalition asked each candidate a set of questions that were specific to the issues facing the Music Program. It was agreed in advance that the publication of each issue sheet would happen once the candidate had submitted responses (issue sheets would not be held up waiting for others to respond). Our thanks goes to the candidates for their willingness to share their views on the crucial topic of music education for all.

Candidate: Mike Brunick

Website: <https://www.mikebrunick4mbschools.com>

Mike Brunick's Manhattan Beach roots run deep: he is a third-generation resident, was raised here and attended our Manhattan Beach public schools, and his three children (9, 7 and 4) will be third-generation Mira Costa graduates! His wife Emily is an educator — she teaches 5th-grade at Meadows Elementary — and strong public schools are incredibly important to their family. He is also a professional with a 20+ year career in media and technology, and working in a next-generation industry gives him key insight into the skills our kids will need to be successful in tomorrow's world.



What is your personal relationship with the arts (music, theatre, dance, visual arts and/or media arts)? Did you have arts in your school? What meaningful arts experiences did you have growing up and how did they impact you?

During my elementary school years at Pennekamp, I had the opportunity to play the saxophone, through 6th-grade. I have to say, it's an experience that really impacted me in ways that I have a hard time putting into words to this day. I also have some of the best memories of my life from going to plays, musicals, orchestra performances, concerts, and operas, particularly while growing up. I remember going to see an outdoor performance of Midsummer Night's Dream in Palos Verdes, and it really

helped shape the perspective I now have around the importance of a balanced education and experience.

What is your philosophy about music education? Do you believe it is a critical and essential cornerstone in our schools? What role do you believe the music program plays in our district?

Above all, I believe in a balanced educational experience. Academics, athletics, arts, electives - they all have a role. Music, however, is one of the most important components in developing the whole child (and the whole person). Music has the ability to both bring people together and provide people with something that can be their own. It is a critical element to education, and it can be incorporated into many areas of curriculum, as well as stand on its own. Music has also been shown to increase student acumen across the curricular spectrum and should be valued by educational systems as such.

ESSA (the Every Student Succeeds Act), which was signed by President Obama in 2015, establishes that music and the arts are core curriculum in grades K-12. What is your perception of the extent to which MBUSD has adopted that policy? What factors need to be implemented to meet Visual and Performing Arts policies and standards established by ESSA and by the California State Board of Education?

ESSA created a platform for music education that wasn't as explicitly accessible under previous guidelines such as No Child Left Behind. I believe that was an important step that signaled the importance of "Well-Rounded" as a more structural priority. My observation of our implementation of that guideline within MBUSD is more optional rather than required, and I do think that is not advantageous for our students. I can tell you that the music education my own kids have experienced thus far in our schools has been incredibly impactful, even at the Preschool level. My perspective is that breadth of experience is critical to student growth, and that we need to be prioritizing that breadth at ALL levels of our educational spectrum, from Preschool all the way through High School.

I will also share that the work I have done as a member of the MBEF Board has provided me a window into the incredible talent of both our music students and our teachers. The strength of our music education across all levels and sites of our district - coupled with that model where they start in such early years - are both key ingredients to our success. This current school year, where we had to reduce our music education in first and second grades have truly been a loss for our students, and I believe that bringing them should be made a priority when evaluating district priorities and MBEF programs for 2021-2022 and beyond.

The Declaration of the Rights of All Students to Equity in Arts Learning states that all students have the right to participate in high-quality, sequential standards-based arts learning. Do you believe all students in MBUSD are currently able to exercise that right? If not, in your view, what barriers currently exist? If elected, how will you support these rights for all students?

Our MBUSD schools do provide a quality arts education, and much of it is a result of the grants funded by MBEF. With that said, I do think there is significant room for improvement, and part of that improvement will require a shift in mentality away from an 'academics-takes-all' mentality. I have said before that balance is an incredibly important principle to me, and that is why I continue to push for much more frequent, substantive and participatory accountability when it comes to district priorities and programs. Most public schools have defaulted to a one-size-fits-all model, where all students are placed on the same (or similar) paths, and there is not enough room for deviation. We have an opportunity to re-evaluate how we can tailor our educational programs to be more reflective of student-, community- and society-led priorities, while still adhering to the necessary standards. It will require creativity and it will require change, but it is something that I know we can accomplish if we go on the journey together.

The California State Board of Education adopted the California Arts Education Framework for Public Schools (TK-12) on July 8, 2020, which supports the California Arts Standards (adopted in January of 2019) which establishes curricular standards for arts education in California. How will you ensure that these Visual and Performing Arts curricular standards are implemented in the district, and once implemented, how would you work to ensure compliance?

This is another area where I believe we have an opportunity to push ourselves and lead. Success is based on two things: setting specific goals and measuring progress against those goals. If we work together to develop priorities, establish goals and define metrics of success, we can then assess progress against those goals. From there, it becomes a process of continuous improvement. This is another area where we must be sure that we are engaging all of our core groups - students, parents, teachers, administration and partners - to be sure that our goals are reflective of identified priorities.

As you may be aware, the district does not currently have a finalized curriculum for the K-12 Music Program. As a board member, would you support finalizing the K-12 curriculum for the Music Program, and what steps would you take to achieve this?

Absolutely - and this is an area where I think we can leverage the model that was created by the Special Education program as inspiration. The audit that was completed for Special Education created a roadmap, and now the district is on a path towards building capabilities based on that roadmap. I know the MB Music Coalition commissioned an assessment that resulted in a series of findings, so my recommendation would be to start with that as a rough framework, and then work with district, program and parent leadership to develop a go-forward plan for our K-12 Music Program. Again, related to the point above, I would also want to ensure that we build in measurement metrics to make sure that we are evaluating our progress so that we can course-correct along the way as needed.

Would you classify music a core curricular academic subject, co-curricular, or extracurricular? Why, in your view, does it fall in that category?

In my mind, everything is “co-curricular” - arts, music, athletics, academics and electives. Meaning, they all end up working together, and we should be exposing ALL of our students to as many subjects, topics and programs as possible, for as many years of their educational path as possible. With that said, every student can’t take every subject every year, so we have to be balanced in our approach to constructing our various options and pathways.

Do you support having a Visual and Performing Arts Coordinator at the District level?

I don’t know enough about how the Arts program is administered currently, but I would work with my fellow board members, educators, administration and community leaders to evaluate whether we are and aren’t accomplishing our goals so we can determine what adjustments are needed. I would again point to our Special Education program as an area where we worked collaboratively to evaluate, identify needs, develop a plan and take action against that plan as an example of how we should approach it.

What, if any, do you see as the primary academic and social benefits of offering music in elementary, middle and high school?

I strongly believe that the earlier you offer programs, the more beneficial those programs ultimately are. Music has an influential role at all stages of life, and that is no different for stages of education. I also know that the benefits of music education are multi-dimensional, not only for a child's brain development, but also - and potentially even more importantly when they get into secondary grades - their social well-being. Music and Arts programs give many students who may not fit the ‘one-

size-fits-all' model a place to belong, a way to develop confidence and a place to be a part of something, much in the same way debate/Model UN or athletic teams do. I have spoken to parents about how many kids choose to spend much of their free time in the music or band rooms, and the social community that is created. That community also includes the teachers and instructors, which are an incredibly influential force in our kids' development.

I also believe music education impacts and expands students' thinking and performance in other areas of school and academics. This is a proposition that is true from Preschool all the way through 12th-grade, and I think presents an opportunity to embed music principles across the curriculum, so that it doesn't always need to be presented as something separate.

The structure of the music program does not currently conform to best practices and current research, especially at the elementary level. To restructure the elementary program in order to align it with best practices and current research, the Full Time Equivalent (# of teacher hours) dedicated to the music program would need to be increased. What is your position on this?

This is another area where I don't know enough about how the programs are administered currently, and would work with my fellow board members, educators, administration and community leaders to evaluate whether we are accomplishing our goals and determine if adjustments are needed.

One specific area I would recommend we dig deeper is the current model where we are so reliant on 'FTEs' to deliver our programs. I think we have opportunities to look at alternative models where we can leverage partners, experts and community leaders - guided by the existing leaders within the program - to help augment and expand what we can offer to our students.

Currently, large numbers of middle school and high school students do not have realistic access points into the MBUSD Music Program because they did not attend elementary school in the District. In addition to serving new enrollees from other districts, introductory level classes would also offer an option for students to switch instruments within the same group (from cello to the bass in orchestra, for example), or switch groups (from choir to band). Do you support increasing FTE in order to create those access points by offering additional introductory level classes at both the middle school and high school levels?

This is another area I would recommend we dig deeper into the current model where we are so reliant on 'FTEs' to deliver our programs. More flexible and scalable staffing models would allow us to offer additional levels and services than we have

today, expanding the students we can reach.

Music is not currently being offered in kindergarten, first or second grades. Do you believe robust music education should be offered from Kindergarten through twelfth grade? If so, what would you do to bring music education to our youngest students?

Much of our kindergarten music education is embedded into everyday instruction. Our kindergarten teachers are doing a great job of including songs, dancing, mini performances and sometimes even instruments into their classrooms. I think that is an appropriate approach at the kindergarten level.

From there, I believe music should both continue to be embedded into the curriculum and provide areas for additional exposure. Dance, plays, musical instruments - all are great options for kids to continue to expand their artistic endeavors. I would also like to see us evaluate including programs in younger grades - such as the choral program - in a way that does not require cutting music programs in other grades. Much of the current K-2 programs can be supported by classrooms and PTAs, so the district and board don't have to explicitly fund. If we can scale that model, it can be sustainable, which is what we need more of in education.

Do you believe that music education, including early childhood music education (k-3) provides benefits to healthy brain development? If so, what are those benefits? Are they specific to music, or do they impact other learning areas?

There is a lot of evidence that music education positively impacts mood, brain development and performance in other areas of school. I also believe music and the arts are important dimensions of developing the balanced, whole child. This is an area I would like to see the district do more research and assessment.

Given the years-long investment the District has already made in the music program, and in light of the fragile state of that program now, as well as the fact that the outstanding music faculty are currently stretched to untenable limits, what do you think is the right thing to do in terms of continued funding for the program?

I think we have three areas we should be focusing on: 1) Prioritization, 2) Funding; and 3) Delivery. In terms of Prioritization, the district should do an assessment - similar to what was done for Special Education - to identify the gaps between what we are currently delivering, and what we want to be delivering. That of course has to be done collaboratively with our entire educational community to ensure we are incorporating a variety of inputs so we can develop a balanced perspective.

Once we have the priorities identified and roadmap developed, we have to address any gaps in Funding. This is an area where we have an opportunity to be creative, including exploring grants and partnerships to augment what the district is funding through current budget allocations, including but not limited to MBEF.

That funding plan will lead us to exploring a series of delivery models. I mentioned this before, but I think we need to explore additional Delivery models for music education. There are many different methods and groups we can engage with, and this is an area where I really think we have an opportunity to both expand and improve our capabilities.

How, specifically, can the District strengthen and support music programs?

My answer to Question 14 above outlines my approach to evolving our programs. [Question 14: Given the years-long investment the District has already made in the music program, and in light of the fragile state of that program now, as well as the fact that the outstanding music faculty are currently stretched to untenable limits, what do you think is the right thing to do in terms of continued funding for the program?]

Do you believe there are “excess” or “extra” parts of the music program that could be cut? If so, what are those specific areas?

I have to repeat a response from above - I don't know enough about how the Music program is administered currently, but I would work with my fellow board members, educators, administration and community leaders to evaluate whether we are and aren't accomplishing our goals so we can determine what adjustments are needed.

Do you believe there are financial benefits uniquely provided by the music classes at the secondary level? If so, what are those financial benefits?

I do know that many music classes do create efficiencies in teacher:student ratios and average class-size calculations. While that can be a secondary benefit, I do not believe that should be a core motivation for expansion of our programs - we should do it because we believe it enhances the educational experience of our students.

Do you see the music program as a “draw” to the district - an inducement for families to enroll, or a reason they stay in the district? If so, what steps would you recommend to utilize the value that the Music Programs bring to the community as an inducement to increase overall district enrollment. Do you believe that the district should actively be recruiting music students using permitting as a viable tool?

I'll be honest, I have never thought of it that way, but it is an interesting idea. We have some incredible programs, and if that can be a draw for students, we should absolutely champion and advertise it.

That said, my number one concern would be: if we are putting ourselves out there, can we live up to the expectation? I would prefer to see us take a hard look at what we have currently, develop the vision and roadmap for where we want our programs to be, and then do the work to get us there. Once we have a plan established, and are on our path to accomplish it, we can be much more credible in any kind of merchandising or recruiting effort.

Do you believe the music program is a particular source of pride for the community? What is your personal experience in witnessing community outreach and pride related to music programs?

I absolutely do think it is - and should be - a source of pride, both for our schools, and for our community. I remember hearing about the program at our elementary school orientation and being amazed at the awards and accomplishments our music programs have achieved. I would love to see us continue that tradition, but I would also like to hear from all of you in the MB Music Coalition: is it a source of pride for you?

[We at MB Music Coalition offer this interview with the candidate so that those who are passionate about music in our schools can make an informed choice for school board. We would not normally inject ourselves into the conversation, but are delighted to offer a response to Mike's question.

That MBUSD high school students are able to engage in musicianship at a professional level on the world stage makes our hearts burst with pride. That middle school students lead the way as ambassadors in the community, bringing the joy and power of music to such spaces as assisted living centers, and singing and playing at time-honored neighborhood events (such as the Hometown Fair, Pier Lighting, and the Little League parade), confirms that not only is the music program rightly viewed as a source of community pride generally, but the students who have the honor of participating in it are also bringing small moments of sunshine to often forgotten or overlooked individuals. None of that would be possible without an elementary program (one that we believe needs to be thoughtfully constructed, redesigned to maximize student success and align with best practices, and allowed to become of such high quality it provides the strong roots necessary to support the program as a whole).

Thanks to the careful tutelage and skilled instruction students receive in their music classes, we have witnessed performances at every grade level that have moved us to tears. So yes, we are proud of the MBUSD Music Program. But we are also acutely aware that the program that has delivered those valuable benefits in the past is now at risk of collapse. Critical support structures have been cut, and the faculty are being pushed to untenable limits. That is why we're dedicated to the cause of preserving it, reversing the erosion that has been done to it, and shoring up the foundation of it. It is our greatest hope that the benefits of a robust, high-quality, egalitarian, and integrated music education will continue to be available to all, and that every student in MBUSD may know the joy provided by music education for decades to come. We urge everyone who is interested in finding

out more about these efforts, or in learning how to become involved in advocating for the Music Program, to visit our website - MBMusicCoalition.org]

What is your vision for the Music Program? What do you believe the program should look like in 5 years?

I'd love to see us expand and enhance our music programs, at all levels. I outlined what my approach would be to help us develop that plan, and I would very much like to work collaboratively to help us deliver against what that evolution would look like. I strongly believe we will have to challenge existing funding, partnership and delivery models in order to do that, and I hope you are up for going on that journey with me.

*Thanks for reading!!
~ Mike Brunick*