



Your Contact Center's Secret Weapon for
Better Customer Service & Profitability

Learn More



Muncie schools: Bill would permit Ball State to govern MCS

Seth Slabaugh, The Star Press

Published 10:48 a.m. ET Jan. 17, 2018 | Updated 3:36 p.m. ET Jan. 18, 2018



(Photo: Corey Ohlenkamp/The Star Press)

MUNCIE, Ind. — A bill amendment introduced at the State Legislature on Wednesday calls for Ball State University to take control of governing deficit-ridden Muncie Community Schools.

The House Ways and Means Committee heard testimony from BSU officials on Wednesday but did not vote on the amendment to House Bill 1315.

The amendment, which came as a total surprise to local elected officials, "permits the Ball State University Board of Trustees to adopt a resolution to govern the Muncie Community School Corporation using a newly appointed seven-member governing board."

► **IN HIS WORDS:** [Mearns delivers letter to students, faculty, staff and alumni \(/story/news/education/2018/01/17/mearns-delivers-statement-future-mcs/1041978001/\)](https://www.starpress.com/story/news/education/2018/01/17/mearns-delivers-statement-future-mcs/1041978001/)

If adopted, Ball State's trustees would appoint five members of the Muncie school board from nominations presented by university President Geoffrey S. Mearns. The mayor and city council would each have one appointment to the new seven-member board.

The current board is made up of five elected members.

The amendment authored by Ways and Means Chairman Tim Brown, R-Crawfordsville, is meant to address "unique issues" faced by MCS and to not set a precedent for other struggling school districts.

The Muncie school district would retain "all of the characteristics of a community school corporation." It would not be a charter school.

State Rep. Sue Errington, D-Muncie, said the first she and Sen. Tim Lanane, D-Anderson, heard about the amendment was on Wednesday morning when Mearns disclosed it to them.

"I might remind you that both Sen. Lanane and I represent Muncie," and "you're talking about something that just about any representative or senator would want a heads up on," Errington complained to the GOP-controlled Ways and Means Committee.

While she sees some positives in the amendment (such as Ball State having control of MCS rather than a state-appointed, private, emergency management firm), "the community has to feel they are part of the solution and the solution is not being imposed on them."

In that regard, "we haven't gotten off to a very good start — when the state representative and the state senator of the school district find out at the last minute," she said.

Mayor Dennis Tyler told The Star Press the proposal caught him off guard.

"Was unaware of (the) amended legislation," Tyler wrote in a message. "I believe everyone was taken by surprise. I'll be talking with teachers, parents, administrators and reading (the) legislation ASAP to understand (the) potential impact."

Current Muncie School Board members weren't aware of the amendment until just before Wednesday's hearing began, finding out through a Star Press article, President Debbie Feick said Wednesday evening. "We would have gone; I would have been there," she said.

Her concerns with the proposal include "how punitive it is" and how sweeping the restructuring would be. Citing longstanding partnerships between the schools and the university, she said, "We welcome the support and collaboration (with Ball State)," but added, "the legislation is so overreaching that we feel like we're being punished."

She also questioned the replacement of elected officials on the board, both on the basis of local representation of the community and also in terms of whether the Legislature has the authority to replace the board without cause, when "we haven't done anything wrong."

Feick said she was already in touch with representatives from state associations for school boards and superintendents, and would work with them to meet with legislators.

"My takeaway from her comments," Mearns told The Star Press when asked to respond to Errington's remarks, "is the importance of community engagement, not just with Rep. Errington and Sen. Lanane but ... our obligation to engage every stakeholder in the community."

He went on, "And the commitment I made today is that's precisely what we want to do. That's why the two-year runway to develop the plan is so important ... because it gives us that opportunity to engage the stakeholders."

He was speaking of a section of the amendment that would require the new school board to submit a plan no later than June 30, 2020, "for the long-term viability and academic innovation" of MCS.

The goal is to make the school district a place parents will want to send their children. The goal is not just "to survive," Mearns said. MCS has been losing enrollment for decades. Due to changes in the state funding formula, the district loses state financial support for every student who leaves.

Mearns told the committee one of the things he did to educate himself was to read a study of MCS conducted by a consultant in 2009-2010, when enrollment was 9,000. (It's now about 5,100). The consultant made many recommendations, none of which was implemented, Mearns said.

High-quality academic programs and wrap-around services for students will convince parents that "the best option is to come back to Muncie Community Schools," Mearns said, noting that some 1,200 students who live in the Muncie school district attend other schools.

If the amendment is enacted, "the school corporation will remain intact as it presently is, as a legal entity with its own financial resources and its own financial liabilities," Mearns told The Star Press. "It's simply replacing the governance structure. The wisdom of this arrangement is it preserves the financial and legal independence of Ball State University on the one hand, and Muncie Community Schools on the other."

Rick Hall, chair of the university's board of trustees, told the committee BSU was well positioned to help the Muncie community, whose philanthropy helped start the university 100 years ago. He said the amendment set the stage for "neighbors working with neighbors to create a healthier community."

BSU and Muncie have a long history together, so the university is not seen by the town as "an outsider," Hall said.

Referring to community forums attended by Mearns last fall, Rep. Brown told The Star Press last week that "I think there is interest at Ball State in what the city of Muncie looks like and what the Muncie Community School Corporation looks like. I know there has been a little more discussion ... and the community forums started some of these discussions."

►BETTER TOGETHER FORUM: Mearns hears from Muncie residents about schools ([/story/news/local/2017/09/13/ball-state-president-hears-muncie-residents/637033001/](https://story/news/local/2017/09/13/ball-state-president-hears-muncie-residents/637033001/))

The series of three community forums were hosted by The Star Press.



Sen. Luke Kenley, left, and Rep. Tim Brown. (Photo: Tony Cook/IndyStar file photo)

RELATED:

► [State takes full control of MCS \(http://tspne.ws/2CcsIFU\)](http://tspne.ws/2CcsIFU)

► [Wide-ranging bill would impact financially distressed school districts \(http://tspne.ws/2CcsIFU\)](http://tspne.ws/2CcsIFU)

► [State rep feared more hostility at Muncie schools \(http://tspne.ws/2DgZFkM\)](http://tspne.ws/2DgZFkM)

► [Michael Hicks: School financial problems an important issue for this legislative session \(/story/money/business/2018/01/14/michael-hicks-school-financial-problems-important-issue-legislative-session/1023842001/\)](/story/money/business/2018/01/14/michael-hicks-school-financial-problems-important-issue-legislative-session/1023842001/)

Other provisions of HB 1315 would:

- Require DUAB to create a watch list of school corporations that show fiscal distress. Allow DUAB to revoke or suspend a superintendent's license if a school corporation remains on the watch list for four consecutive years. Permit DUAB to enter into an agreement with a school corporation showing fiscal distress to establish a corrective action plan.
- Require the Management Performance Hub (MPH) to determine the fiscal and qualitative indicators to be used in analyzing the financial condition of school corporations, such as debt ratios, referendum revenue, loans, federal revenues, operating deficit, state funding, missed debt payments, missed payroll, and past-due vendor payments. Require MPH to determine the financial condition of each school corporation and to present it online.
- Require the attorney general to represent an emergency manager of a distressed school district if the emergency manager asks for representation.
- Allow distressed school districts to terminate employees during a school year due to a reduction in force (RIF). According to the Legislative Services Agency, current law limits the ability to RIF employees between May 1 and July 1. The RIF could not exceed 5 percent of the full-time equivalency of all teachers in a union.
- Specify that waivers regarding the allocation of protected property taxes apply only to distressed school corporations.

Keith Roysdon and Robin Gibson contributed to this report.

This article will be updated.

Seth Slabaugh is an education reporter at The Star Press who can be reached at (765) 213-5834 or seths@muncie.gannett.com.

[Fullscreen](#)

Read or Share this story: <http://tspne.ws/2mGJQwM>

Muncie and BSU open dialogue at the Better Together Public Forum



NO EXCUSES, LADIES!

**No health insurance? No problem!
Mammogram Assistance Program**

765.529.4403

