

Time for Muncie to change its story with help from Ball State

E. Scott Smalstig Published 4:00 p.m. ET Jan. 27, 2018 | Updated 9:40 a.m. ET Jan. 28, 2018



(Photo: Corey Ohlenkamp/The Star Press)

Amen.

Yes. Amen. I truly believe that Ball State University's desire to operate Muncie Community Schools is an answer to thoughtful prayer.

So why would someone who grew up in Carmel, whose kids go to Yorktown schools, be praying about Muncie Community Schools?

While I have lived in seven states and traveled to 40, I love Muncie. Muncie has been my home for more than 25 years. Muncie matters to me.

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But, why would it matter to me what the solutions are to the challenges at MCS?

Simple. As MCS goes, so goes Muncie. A school system is the heart and soul of a community.

Unfortunately, the recent FBI indictments and an ongoing investigation of our city government, coupled with the issues of MCS being named a distressed unit and now under emergency management, have meant that literally millions of dollars in network news time and dozens of front page newspaper stories have been dedicated to the portrayal of Muncie as a community of, euphemistically, challenges, and pessimistically, a questionable future.

So, as the news stories continue, I continue to get questions from my business colleagues and friends around the state and country, "What the heck is going on there?" as they would roll their eyes.

I respond with the same lines I have for 25 years, "The people in Muncie are phenomenal. You don't know the real story."

Well, it's time for us to change the story. Drastically. Now. The longer the current stories continue, the harder it is for businesses to recruit people to Muncie, or even stay in Muncie. While my own children see how much my wife and I love this community and pour into it, they often question if their own futures have Muncie in them.

Today, there is absolutely no reason to look back and/or try to assign blame for the situation at MCS, or to get into whose feelings are hurt based on how things have evolved with the new legislation. Talking about feelings will not change the trajectory of this community. Deeds will. Ball State will. President Geoffrey Mearns will.

Why do I have this faith?

The simple facts are that business as usual will not change the story. An emergency management team chartered only to balance the budget of MCS will not change the story. Or, we can give Ball State a chance to truly transform the school system and ultimately the community. The future of MCS affects them, too. This would change the story immediately.

There are other "distressed" schools systems throughout the state who aren't fortunate enough to have a university in their backyard ready to mobilize 5,000 faculty/staff, 24,000 students and possibly 190,000 alumni to help the hometown school system bounce back. What a story this will be.

People talking about the inevitability of a continued exodus from MCS and managing it with 4,000 students (vs. the 5,000 currently, down from a peak at 10,000) are not going to change the story. In fact, a 4,000 student MCS means having to operate on a budget of *another* \$7 million less per year, which will only mean more cuts, more buildings closed and more teachers let go. More of the same story. More news stories. More front page articles. More businesses finding it harder to call Muncie home.

Yet, in steps Ball State, or should I say, in flies Ball State. Nowhere in its mission does it describe handling a public secondary school system. President Mearns, however, arrived on campus with a well thought-out mantra of "Better Together," understanding that the futures of Ball State and Muncie are inexorably connected, and, dare anyone proclaim, synergistic. Little did he know that a perfect project like MCS would present itself to truly test the mettle of new mantra.

Now that the legislation has been drafted and proposed, it's time to weigh in. Don't get caught up in how quickly it was drafted or who was or was not consulted. After all, decisive action is hallmark of true leadership. The legislation is out there for all of us to review and provide feedback to our representatives. That's exactly the way the process works. Involve yourself in a classic civics lesson that will have real impact for our community.

I support the legislation proposed by Rep. Tim Brown. It allows Ball State a reasonable structure to leverage its vast resources. Some are concerned about citizen representation, but there are 11 other appointed school boards around the state, and two of the seven board positions in this situation would be appointees suggested by the mayor and city council, both of whom have been publicly elected. All seven will be thoroughly vetted.

I believe this is far more agreeable than having a bureaucratic emergency management team handle our community's future. Ball State's vision is not one of simply balancing budgets, but of creating a truly transformative school system, one that becomes the envy of the state.

If not Ball State, then who? If not now, then when? Yes, in my mind, prayers have been answered. Let's let Ball State fly. Let's let them do what the world trusts them to do – and has trusted them to do for 100 years – educate and develop the best teachers and administrators in the world right in our back yard, so that we all can truly be "Better Together" and change the story. We should all have faith in that.

Amen.

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