Muncie Central High School students to help brand their school

*Seth Slabaugh, Muncie Star Press*  Published 9:35 a.m. ET Sept. 25, 2018

MUNCIE, Ind. — Central High School Principal Chris Walker invited several of his students to address a recent school board meeting regarding their positive experiences at the school.

Board President Jim Williams encouraged the students to help Muncie Community Schools create a new brand as it tries to shed its image as a financially recovering district taken over by Ball State University.

In this era of school choice/competition, the goals of the branding campaign include convincing Muncie families who transferred their children to the county's rural and suburban districts ([story/news/education/2017/12/08/nearly-1-200-muncie-students-attend-county-schools/922902001/](/story/news/education/2017/12/08/nearly-1-200-muncie-students-attend-county-schools/922902001/)) to come back.

"Mr. Williams is starting a student school board, and I assume marketing will be part of what that board will be doing," said George Schafer, a leader of Central's progressive-student club and a soccer team captain.

"He's asked us our ideas as to how to better market our school … and I want to be part of it because Central is the best school to go to in this area," Schafer said in an interview.

Williams, a Muncie attorney, followed up after the school board meeting by visiting Central's government classes to enlist more student volunteers in the branding campaign.

Ball State is lending its expertise in the coming months as a senior-level marketing class works with the university's and the school system's communications staff to rebrand the district.

►**TRANSFERS**: [Nearly 1,200 Muncie students attend county schools](/story/news/education/2017/12/08/nearly-1-200-muncie-students-attend-county-schools/922902001/)

Branding is a way to differentiate yourself from the competition, to establish a unique identity or personality and to create an image, a reputation and a culture, such as Disney's commitment to making its parks "the happiest place on earth."

Ball State says the goal of Central's branding effort is to increase MCS enrollment — and therefore state funding — by telling many of the district's success stories.

Schafer told *The Star Press* the project needs to include more than just "students like us who were picked by the administration," referring to himself, senior class President Allison Polk and Laurenz Sims-Jones, a Fellowship of Christian Athletes huddle leader and member of the student newspaper staff — the trio that spoke to the school board last month.

"We obviously have had good experiences here, while there are students not as academically qualified as us that wouldn't have had as good an experience as us and probably have different ideas how we can improve Muncie Central," Schafer said.

A co-organizer of Central's participation in last March's National School Walkout to protest gun violence, Schafer noted that some local schools were not allowed to take part. Students at Burris Laboratory School and Delaware Community Schools, for example, received after-school detention for walking out.
"It was stressful to us," Walker, the principal at Central, said of the walkout, "but as an administration you've got to take your hand off the wheel sometimes and trust the students. It ended up being a very positive day for us."

School spokesperson Anny Pichardo, who, along with Walker, sat in on The Star Press's interview last week with the three students, added, "We were very concerned for their safety. It was their idea and they ran the show, but we had to make sure they were protected."

► RELATED: Most students not allowed to walk out to protest school shootings (/story/opinion/columnists/ward/2018/03/13/national-school-walkout-teachable-moment/417959002/)

► RELATED: Burris, Delta students disciplined after walkout (/story/news/local/2018/03/16/burris-delta-students-disciplined-after-walkouts/431889002/)

Building relationships and a culture of trust is one of the things Central might be able to market.

"I'm a huge fan of freedom," Sims-Jones said in the interview. He feels like he has freedom to express himself at Central. "Having them wanting opinions from us boosts confidence and it's reassuring to have people want to know what you think," he said. It teaches him how to "use your voice later in life."

According to Pichardo, "The trust these kids have with the administration is second to none. It's really impressive."

The students told the school board Twitter is probably the best medium to deliver the new brand messaging.

Polk is also suggesting a documentary to kick off the next school year, perhaps at an event at Canan Commons where Ball State President Geoffrey S. Mearns, student ambassadors and others might speak.

► STUDENT COUNT: MCS enrollment dropped nearly 9 percent from 2016-17 to 2017-18 (/story/news/education/2017/09/22/mcs-enrollment-drops-5-183692259001/)

At the school board meeting, Principal Walker listed some of the positive things happening at Central:

- Math teacher Kris Scholtes was named an Indiana Teacher of the Year finalist.
- Twenty-five students received AP Scholar awards in 2018 for their scores on the AP (advanced placement) exams. Thanks to aid from the Ball Brothers Foundation, students earn an incentive of $100 for each AP math, science and English exam passed with a score of 3 or higher. This past year, students won $14,400 in incentives.
- In 2017, Central was selected to participate in the AP Teacher Investment Program, through the University of Notre Dame, which provides resources to AP teachers.
- Central's early college program is one of only 23 in the state fully endorsed by the Center of Excellence of Leadership in Learning at the University of Indianapolis.
- Central offers 19 dual-credit college courses that save students hundreds of thousands of dollars in college tuition every year. Members of the class of 2018 also were offered $4.5 million in college scholarships.
- Twenty-three Central students earned a college associate degree this past year and more than 40 others earned one-year certificates from Ivy Tech Community College. The college's most popular certificates to meet workforce demand include structural welding, HVAC and pre-nursing studies.

Areas that have been challenging for the school, Walker told the school board, include student attendance, student achievement and staff retention (Central was forced to hire 27 new teachers last year, including the entire math department, due to salary considerations or other reasons, though it has needed to hire only five new teachers this year).

"We do have areas where we need to improve, with attendance and our academic performance, especially on standardized testing," the principal told The Star Press. "We also know we just can't teach to the test."

Speaking to the three students being interviewed, he said, "None of you have sat here and said your greatest experience or what we do best is that I passed ISTEP. You can tell the tone is definitely academic in nature, but it's more about your experience, being able to express your thoughts and being able to feel comfortable about doing so."

He went on, "We tend to gravitate to students we think give a positive image, in an honest way, but George is right. Sometimes we build things for the most gifted and most troubled students. But we definitely try not focusing all our attention in one particular area and ignoring others. George makes a good point about getting all voices heard, even though you have to go search for it."

Contact Seth Slabaugh at (765) 213-5834 or seths@muncie.gannett.com
Read or Share this story: https://tspne.ws/2xC41IN