

Ward: Ball State will face challenges with Muncie schools

Jeff Ward, The Star Press Published 2:11 p.m. ET Feb. 7, 2018



(Photo: Seth Slabaugh/The Star Press)

When talking about the Indiana Legislature, anything is possible and some things are impossible (think Sunday cold beer sales), so the fate of House Bill 1315 allowing Ball State University to take over Muncie's public schools is not certain, but it appears on track for passage.

It's moved over to a Senate committee after being passed out of the House 65-26.

HB 1315 has been greeted with enthusiasm by many in the community, and apprehension by others, especially over the loss of directly elected school board members. That's understandable. There's great fear that "outsiders" will be appointed to run Muncie's schools, people who have few if any ties to Muncie and Delaware County, and therefore, their decisions will have minimal consideration for how they affect the community as a whole.

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If the bill is enacted and Ball State is allowed to appoint the board, or most of the board, the university must take extra pains to engage the community – parents, taxpayers, business and government leaders. In order for this endeavor to be successful, Ball State must ensure that Muncie's school board does not become Ball State's school board, that is, a board not answerable or responsive to the city and its citizens. I think Ball State President Geoffrey S. Mearns is well aware of that factor and he will take steps to keep the community informed and engaged.



Columnist Jeff Ward (Photo: The Star Press)

But that's not the only pitfall the university will encounter. Here are two more:

Poverty: In MCS, 74.8 percent of students are in the free and reduced school lunch program, and that's an indicator of the poverty level of MCS. The state average is a much lower 47.1 percent, according to data provided the Indiana Youth Institute.

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As any educator knows, poverty presents its own challenges and barriers to educating children. Studies show that children from affluent families do better than those from lower incomes, mainly because parents have the resources to devote to their children's educational success. Those resources are not readily available in lower income households.

Ball State will be challenged to break the mold and raise the academic performance of all children within MCS. Again, the community should play a role and partner with Ball State.

[United Way of Delaware County \(https://www.invitedtoliveunited.org/\)](https://www.invitedtoliveunited.org/) seeks to reduce poverty, and [BY5 \(http://www.muncieby5.org/\)](http://www.muncieby5.org/) aims to make every child ready to perform kindergarten-level work when they start school. Those are just two programs (there are more) that Ball State should tap into.

Infrastructure: With a \$10 million bond used by MCS for operating expenses instead of capital improvements, it's a sure bet MCS buildings are falling behind needed repairs and maintenance. Ball State must somehow find the money to make those repairs, perhaps by tapping into low-interest loans or partnering with the city. A healthy school also benefits the neighborhood where it's located.

And there's this to consider. Ball State excels at leveraging philanthropic resources, raising funds and tapping into grants. That expertise presents a unique opportunity for MCS unmatched by most public school systems in Indiana. Will it solve all of MCS's financial woes? Nope. But it could potentially offer a new source of funds.

And what about the fate of the Fieldhouse, damaged in a storm last year? With a hole punched in the roof, a damaged playing floor, and many repairs needed to other parts of the building, will Ball State choose to save the historic structure? Strong arguments can be made to walk away from the building, as well as keep it open.

None of the issues listed above are insurmountable. Realistically, however, they will serve to "distract" Ball State from its core mission of educating Muncie's schoolchildren. MCS will be a different challenge than operating Burriss Laboratory School or The Indiana Academy. What works at these two schools might not fully apply to MCS.

I believe Ball State is up to the task, and can succeed where past ventures have fallen short.

That's something to keep in mind as the legislature works at handing the reins over to Ball State.

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