Ball State would take over Muncie Community Schools in new proposal

An amendment offered to a wide-ranging education bill would give control of Muncie Community Schools to Ball State University.

Muncie’s struggling schools were taken over by the state and handed to an emergency manager over the summer. Last month, the state’s Distressed Unit Appeals Board voted to make Muncie Schools an official distressed unit, setting the district up for at least two more years of emergency management.

This new proposal would instead give control of the district to Ball State University. It was discussed Wednesday in the House Ways and Means Committee, as an amendment to Rep. Tim Brown’s bill aimed at creating an early warning system for schools in financial trouble.

Ball State President Geoffrey Mearns called the proposal an extension of the university’s "core mission of educating students" and said the university was "uniquely positioned" to take on the task. Ball State was founded as a teacher’s college.

“The future of Muncie is dependent on the quality of our public schools,” Mearns said. “The fortunes of our university are effected by the fortunes of Muncie.”

The proposal came as a surprise to lawmakers and Muncie officials. Rep. Sue Errington, D-Muncie, said she and her counterpart in the Senate, Democrat Tim Lanane, found out about the amendment Wednesday morning. By the afternoon hearing, she still hadn’t seen the actual language.

“I haven’t had much time to digest what this means for Muncie, Muncie Community Schools or Ball State,” Errington said. “I can see there are some positives that can arise.

“The community has to feel that they are part of the solution, that the solution is not being imposed on them.”

Errington said she spoke with Muncie’s mayor, Dennis Tyler, before the committee hearing and he was not aware of the deal.

Ball State officials said they’d been in talks with Brown and DUAB Chairman Micah Vincent since DUAB’s decision in December to make the district a distressed unit.

University-run school districts are rare, but partnerships with individual schools are not. Ball State already manages the Indiana Academy and the Burris Lab School.

In Indianapolis, Butler University partners with the Indianapolis Public Schools district to sponsor the popular Butler Lab School.
Muncie schools have been bleeding students for several years as more than 2,000 head to neighboring public school districts, charter schools and private schools. Some of those charter schools are authorized by Ball State University, which authorizes charter schools around the state with mixed academic results.

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Neither the bill nor the Ball State amendment was voted on by the committee Wednesday.

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When asked about those programs, Mearns said the university is continually evaluating the process by which it authorizes and reauthorizes charter schools. Hoosier Academies Virtual Charter School, serving thousands of students across Indiana, recently decided to close rather than apply for reauthorization after years of failing state grades.

Mearns said he didn’t know if Ball State authorized any charter schools in the Muncie market.

Ball State is the authorizer of one charter school in Muncie, Inspire Academy, and two in neighboring counties.

Charter schools located in Muncie enroll about 1,200 students. About 200 of those students attend Inspire Academy.

Of the more than 7,000 students living in the Muncie Community Schools district, nearly 800 attend charter schools this year. Another 1,300 students chose to attend another public school and 175 more use public vouchers to attend private schools.

Those with knowledge of the amendment said it would not allow Ball State to turn Muncie schools into a charter district. A printed copy of the amendment was not immediately made available to IndyStar.

Mearns said Ball State will work to institute innovative programs and wrap-around services to try and attract families back to Muncie schools.

"What we hope to be able to do, with community and parent engagement, is to develop programs to sustain and improve the academic quality so students do not choose to leave Muncie public schools," he said.

An IndyStar investigation

The Muncie school district is more than $10 million in debt and will need a loan to pay back misspent bonds needed for construction projects. Brown’s bill paves the way for the district to get an interest-free loan from the Common School Fund, putting the district in good shape to dig out of its financial hole with sound management.

The bill would also create a new financial health dashboard for all schools, establish a watch list for school districts in financial trouble and set out harsh penalties for districts who don’t turn things around in a timely matter.

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