Ball State, Muncie schools business reaction: Hope, optimism and skepticism

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MUNCIE, Ind. — A proposal to allow Ball State University to govern troubled Muncie Community Schools drew reactions Thursday ranging from enthusiastic and optimistic to skeptical.

The Ball State board of trustees would appoint a majority of a new Muncie school board under the terms of an amendment to Indiana House Bill 1315 (/story/news/local/2018/01/17/bsu-officials-speak-statehouse-today-mcs/1039735001/). Five of seven seats on the board would be filled by Ball State and two seats filled by city appointments.

Contacted Thursday, Muncie business leaders offered a variety of opinions.

"I believe that it is an excellent solution, to further a community partnership," Mike Lunsford, local real estate agent and developer, said. "Ball State knows how to run a school. They run Burris (Laboratory School) and there's a wait list to get in."

"Ball State is local," Lunsford added. "I'm excited to see local control. It's out-of-the-box thinking to address a problem that's been there for a long time."

Some expressed a degree of skepticism.

"First thing, how do you set aside the voting taxpayers that voted on representation (by the school board)?" Jeffrey Howe, president for Old National Bank's northeast region, asked. "You're changing the board that's elected and if there are no financial resources, the immediate problems are still the immediate problems."

"Obviously there's a lot of detail that needs to be filled in," Howe said. "I have a lot of confidence in Ball State University. They have a lot of smart people."

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Jeff Bird, president of IU Health Ball Memorial Hospital, noted that his four adult children attended Muncie schools, adding that watching the school system's troubles unfold has been "disheartening."

"When I heard the news (about Ball State's possible role), I was energized and encouraged," Bird said. "Having Ball State play a role is a great idea and I'm fully supportive. They will use their intellectual potential, knowledge, resources and dedication to get our local community re-engaged and re-energized in the schools."

The Ball Brothers Foundation has given grants of $1.25 million to Muncie schools in recent years, Jud Fisher, the foundation's president and chief operating officer, noted Thursday. If the foundation's board approves, another $50,000 will be given to help Ball State put in place at Muncie Community Schools the kind of best practices in place at other school corporations around the country.

"Ball State can come in and work on the financial problems but also maintain the high quality of excellence of teaching, which is not what the state emergency managers were tasked with," Fisher said. "I think it's very positive. I'm totally behind this. I think it's the best way to move forward."

Rick Rowray, CEO of the Youth Opportunity Center, the longtime shelter and treatment center for juveniles, works closely with Muncie Community Schools.

"I think looking at all the options for the health of our school system, as important to the community as it is, is a good thing," Rowray said. "Getting insight from professional educators, Ball State, local leaders is a good thing."
"Everyone understands we're in a dire circumstance and dire circumstances require out-of-the-box thinking," he added. "My initial instinct is that it's a good thing Ball State is willing to come to the table and help out."

From the point of view of one local real estate agent, the possibility of Ball State University oversight of Muncie Community Schools could be "a very good thing."

Sharon Strahan said it's common for people looking for a new home to say they would only consider buying in the Yorktown or Delta school districts, outside Muncie. "It's been so common that it doesn't surprise me ... I would love to see new leadership."

Bassam Helwani, owner of two Muncie restaurants, Two Cats Cafe in the Village near Ball State and Damask Cafe on the city's north side, said the loss of local oversight of the school system "is an indication of the disintegration of the political and administrative system of the city. It's not just the schools."

But Helwani said he wasn't certain that Ball State exerting control over the school system was the answer.

"The spread of the university's influence is alarming," he said. "Even though I own a business on campus and it's not smart for me to criticize, I think too much power to the university ... is a concern. To have themselves in control, it's a little bit alarming."

"I think there's probably no entity better suited to run the school corporation than Ball State," said Jay Allardt, president of American United Appraisal and, until recently, owner of Community Storage. "They run a good ship at Ball State."

"I was not surprised that Muncie Community Schools was in severe financial straits," Allardt said. "I'm afraid more schools around the state will end up in a similar situation. Ball State is much better equipped to manage a school system."

Joel Savage, owner of Savage's Ale House downtown, noted that his child goes to Burris Laboratory School, a public K-12 school overseen by Ball State.

"I think Ball State does a bang-up job with Burris. It's one of the highest-rated schools in Indiana," Savage said. "It says to me that if Ball State can do this here, wouldn't they do great in Muncie? What better investment than having the community's biggest asset putting that effort into it. To me, it's a great thing."

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