Muncie School Board lobbied lawmakers ahead of takeover vote

MUNCIE — After meeting with lawmakers in Indianapolis on Tuesday, Muncie Community School Board members became convinced that a bill affecting governance of the school district will be enacted during this year's legislative session.

House Bill 1315, a school financial management bill, includes a proposed amendment to replace the five-member elected Muncie school board with a seven-member board appointed mostly by Ball State University.

School board members met Tuesday with the author of the bill, Rep. Tim Brown, R-Crawfordsville, who chairs the Ways and Means Committee, and other lawmakers. A committee hearing and vote on the bill starts at 1:30 p.m. today. (http://bit.ly/2DwaOhS)

The Muncie school board opposes being replaced with an appointed board "but we are not in a position of power to change whatever direction that goes," school board President Debbie Feick said Wednesday.


Overall, "I think the spirit of this bill creates great opportunities for us as a community, but there are revisions we'd like to be addressed," she said. "We felt we needed to provide alternatives. One is to combine the boards — let us serve out our elected terms — or have a blended board of both appointed and elected members. Where they will go with that we don't know."

Only 11 of Indiana's 289 traditional school districts are governed by school boards appointed by town councils, township boards, mayors or city councils. The other 96 percent of school boards are elected.

Among appointed school boards, the School City of Mishawaka's is a hybrid: two appointed, three elected. But in the case of all 11 districts with appointed boards, the appointing authorities are all elected officials at the township, town or city level.

HB 1315 would be ground-breaking by having non-elected officials — the Ball State board of trustees (appointed by the governor) and the Ball State president (appointed by the trustees) — make five of the appointments to the Muncie school board. The mayor and city council would each have one appointment.

The proposed law says turning governance of Muncie schools over to BSU is "necessary to address unique issues" faced by the Muncie district and is "not precedent for and may not be appropriate for issues faced by other school corporations."

MCS is currently under the control of a state-appointed emergency manager because it remains financially unstable.

► MUNCIE SCHOOL BOARD: Should it be elected or appointed? (/story/news/education/2018/01/20/muncie-school-board-should-elected-appointed/1049023001/)

► JEFF WARD'S TAKE: Well, could an appointed school board do any worse? (/story/opinion/columnists/ward/2018/01/23/muncie-school-issues-fail-motivate-voters/1055248001/)

HB 1315 also calls for MCS to "engage academically innovative strategies for developing, testing and evaluating new methods of instruction and materials; comparing new methods with conventional methods in use; and training teachers in new methods of instruction and materials …"

Muncie school board members also expressed concern to lawmakers about the lack of any residency requirements for appointed board members in HB 1315.

"Our biggest concern is just that the demography of our community be represented on the school board," Feick said. "There are no requirements in the bill for residency in Center Township. As you know, the Ball State board of trustees comes from all over the country. We didn't want folks who are not committed to our Muncie community to have a position on the board."
Feick called the meeting with Brown "very positive.* "He took all of what we said under advisement. He was extremely supportive of what we have attempted to do as a fiscally impaired and ultimately distressed school district. I have been impressed with this whole process. They (the state) didn't throw us to the dogs. They maintained steady and constant observation and oversight of our progress. They want to look at corrective action and how to ensure our community maintains excellence in education and that some of the issues being addressed aren't repeated."

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