The bombshell dropped this week from the Indiana Statehouse – an amendment that would green-light a takeover of Muncie Community Schools by Ball State University – ought to be greeted with applause by parents, students and staff.

This is a chance for a fresh start in Muncie schools. It's a chance to embrace something truly innovative and exciting in the education of our local students. It's a chance, as Ball State President Geoffrey S. Means told The Star Press, to go beyond “just surviving” for MCS.

This is an opportunity to take MCS into a direction that other public schools should envy. We have one of the best teacher colleges in our own back yard. It's an opportunity for Ball State to demonstrate what it can do to improve education from kindergarten to graduation. Curriculum, teaching methods, achievement tests and evaluations of students and faculty, it all could be open for discussion.

If the amendment to House Bill 1315 passes and the bill is enacted, Ball State trustees could decide whether to take over MCS. I'm willing to bet they would, since the proposal has the backing of Mearns. Ball State would appoint five of seven members to the school board. The mayor and city council would each pick one representative.

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This board would be tasked with governing Muncie schools. Mearns, who recommends school board members to the trustees, could pick experts on academics, teaching and finances. Mearns, the mayor and city council could pick the best of the best to serve on the board.

Imagine those possibilities, to borrow a slogan embraced by Mayor Dennis Tyler.

I'm not trying to be flippant, here, because Ball State commands huge educational resources and expertise. Anybody who thinks there's some sort of hidden agenda should know this: Ball State succeeds when Muncie Community Schools succeeds. And Muncie as a whole will succeed when the public school system is operating at its full potential.

There's no doubt that Mearns wants Muncie's schools to be the best. He realizes the tremendous opportunity – and responsibility – of operating a troubled public school system. Part of the process, as Mearns said this week, is engaging teachers, teacher representatives, students, families – the entire community – in the educational process. There must be community buy-in to make this process workable. Mearns understands that.
The truth is, MCS has been a drag on Muncie for a long time. With 1,200 students living within MCS boundaries but choosing to attend school elsewhere, that speaks volumes about the absence of confidence parents have in the school system.

Ask yourself this: Would you want to move your family or business here knowing the state of the local school system? Sadly, the answer too often is no. That must change.

The amendment offered by Ways and Means Chairman Tim Brown, R-Crawfordsville, essentially blows up the school system's administrative structure.

The surreptitious manner the amendment was offered, without informing or seeking input from local lawmakers, city officials and the sitting school board, could have been done to lessen hurt feelings. Let's not lose sight of the main issue, which is making Muncie schools better financially and academically.

One drawback to Brown's amendment, and potentially a big one as noted on social media, is this: MCS would be a public school system without a directly elected school board. Taxation without representation. I'm sure proponents of the amendment can argue that giving the mayor and council two representatives negates that issue. We shall see.

Still, we now have a school board that is powerless while the state keeps its clutches on MCS. That goes for the superintendent as well. It's not a big leap to make the board an appointed one.

Look, Muncie schools has endured decades of slow decay. It's not one school board's fault. It's not one superintendent's fault. It's been a slow, insidious process that finally surfaced last year like a cancer. MCS reached a point of no return, leading to the state to step in.

Now the state wants to hand the reins over to Ball State and see what a university well versed in education can do. That makes sense. I don't think Ball State could do any worse.

If all goes well, Muncie schools' enrollment will stabilize. New class offerings at all grade levels could be offered, and new methods to teach relevant subjects that engage students can be used. It would be an exciting time to teach and to learn.

And who knows, maybe MCS could become a model for other school districts. Maybe MCS could reverse the outflow of students and grow.

If somebody has a better idea, let's hear it. Let the statehouse in Indianapolis hear it, too. I'm not convinced there are any better plans.

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