MUNCIE, Ind. — The head of the Muncie Teachers Association on Thursday expressed doubts about a proposed state law to give Ball State University the power to appoint the majority of Muncie Community School Board members.

"It's a shock, and quite frankly, I don't know what all it means, because there's quite a bit of vagueness in it," Pat Kennedy said of House Bill 1315.

She and others, including Muncie School Board member Jason Donati and state Rep. Sue Errington, D-Muncie, also have criticized the secrecy that preceded the filing of the bill by Rep. Tim Brown, R-Crawfordsville.

Speaking individually, not on behalf of the school board, Donati told The Star Press on Thursday: "What does this sort of secrecy and lack of transparency say about the future of such a partnership?"

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The amendment "barely allows our local representation to have a voice by only giving them a total of two of the seven appointed positions," Donati said.

The current five-member school board was elected by Muncie voters.

Ball State officials were expecting some dissenters.

"If Ball State wanted to enhance and improve its relationship with Muncie schools, why didn't they sit down and talk about it rather than take it to the Legislature and have a bill introduced?" Kennedy said in an interview. "This was pretty much done in a vacuum behind doors somewhere … This is really a very heavy-handed piece of legislation."

The amendment caught nearly everyone in Muncie by surprise, including Mayor Dennis Tyler, as well as the two lawmakers representing the city: Errington and Sen.Tim Lanane, D-Anderson.

"If this ends up passing, this is a huge, huge undertaking for Ball State," Kennedy said. "I have no idea how Ball State in three months will be ready to take on 5,000 students, a dozen facilities and 500 employees and make it work."

**BUSINESS REACTION:** [BSU-MCS plan prompts hope, optimism and skepticism](/story/news/local/2018/01/18/ball-state-muncie-schools-business-reaction-hope-optimism-and-skepticism/1043480001/)

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**JEFF WARD:** [Ball State takes over Muncie schools? Let's give it a try](/story/opinion/columnists/ward/2018/01/18/ball-state-takes-over-muncie-schools-lets-give-try/1044153001/)
Donati, the parent of two current MCS students, says he has a lot of respect for BSU and its president, Geoffrey S. Mearns, as well as deep appreciation for all of the community service provided by the university.

But he has a long list of questions, including: "What makes Ball State qualified to run a school district?" "How will this impact our children, who have been subject to so much change, transition and instability over the years?"

►HISTORY: A look at Muncie schools from a one-room schoolhouse until now (/story/news/local/2015/03/20/starting-one-room-schoolhouse/24866803/)

Watching a live webcast of the Ways and Means Committee hearing on the amendment on Wednesday, Donati experienced deja vu. It was during a hearing by the same committee last year that Rep. Brown launched a campaign for a state takeover of financially struggling MCS.

The takeover by a state-appointed emergency manager started Jan. 1 of this year after a limited takeover during the last half of 2017.

"What we are seeing is one of the problems when you have such an imbalance of parties in the Legislature," Kennedy said of the secret nature of the amendment. Republicans hold super-majorities in both the House and Senate.

If the amendment is enacted, the Muncie school board would switch to an appointed school board effective July 1.


After Wednesday's committee meeting, Mearns told reporters: "Will there be skeptics? Will there be tough questions? I anticipate there will be, but I look forward to the opportunity to answer those questions and to address those skeptics."

He confirmed at the time he had not yet spoken to any Muncie school officials about the amendment.

"That is part of the legislative process, so they (legislators) have consulted with us and asked for our input in the solution, but it's a legislative solution and I don't believe it's our responsibility to engage ourselves in directing how the drafters or the committee engage with other elected officials," Mearns said. "We take our direction from the elected (state) officials."

Kennedy responded: 'I think that's not a reasonable excuse … Ball State was certainly a part of promoting this."

Now that the amendment has been made public, Ball State will move quickly to "engage stakeholders and get their input and explain why we believe this is the best option for the community going forward … I think this is far superior to a state takeover along the lines of an emergency manager. This is a community solution to a community challenge," Mearns said.
During a Q & A with reporters at the Statehouse on Wednesday, Mearns was asked questions, including:

**Why is this amendment needed? Did the school board fail?**

"I'm not going to comment on what all of the causes may or may not be with respect to the predicament that we are all in, and that's important. We are in this challenge together. The future of Muncie is dependent on the future of Muncie schools, and the future of Muncie will positively or negatively affect the future of Ball State."

**Why is change needed? Why does Muncie need a school board appointed by Ball State rather than an elected school board?**

"Let's remember right today, on Jan. 17, the local school board has no authority over the Muncie public schools," Mearns responded. "That authority presently rests in the emergency manager. This is what we believe is an innovative solution that's superior to a state-appointed emergency manager."

**But the state could eventually return control to the elected school board after the district regains financial stability. Why not wait for that?**

"As we all have heard, the emergency managers have been saying they anticipate enrollment in Muncie schools is going to be (bottoming out at) about 4,000 students," Mearns said. (Enrollment has been dropping for decades; it was 6,568 just four years ago, currently 5,215). "You don't have to be an accountant to figure out what that means for additional layoffs, reducing programs and closing more facilities."

The emergency manager's job "is to simply balance the budget. We believe we have the capacity at Ball State by engaging the broader community to turn around that enrollment decline, to bring more resources to bear, more state resources as enrollment increases, more participation from the community, and the possibility to leverage local investment to attract more philanthropic resources. You put those ingredients together and we have the opportunity to not just have Muncie schools survive. That's not an ambitious goal. Our goal is to make Muncie schools thrive, so that Muncie will continue to be a vibrant community."

Mearns declined to be specific about his vision for appointed members of the school board; their qualifications, occupations; educational background, residency, et cetera.

"Under this proposed bill, Ball State will collaborate with others to establish a newly appointed school board and fill it with individuals who have the experience, expertise and merit to lead this effort," BSU spokesperson Kathy Wolf said. "This will be a collaborative, ongoing process and the president welcomes input on the types of people who should serve."

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