






An amendment to House Bill 1315 proposed by Rep. Tim Brown (R-Crawfordsville) would allow Ball State to add board members to the Muncie school board. **Kaiti Sullivan, DN File**

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## HB 1315 leaves some questioning Ball State's next steps

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In addition to having Burriss Laboratory School and Indiana Academy on its campus, Ball State may take another school under its wing.

An amendment to House Bill 1315, was proposed by Rep. Tim Brown (R-Crawfordsville) Jan. 17, which would allow Ball State to assume responsibility for Muncie School Corporation.

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The amendment was approved by the Indiana Ways and Means Committee Jan. 24. It was then passed by the House Thursday, which it means it will now go to the Senate floor, likely on March 6.

Ball State President Geoffrey S. Mearns said this legislation wouldn't make Ball State legally or financially responsible for MCS.

"It will not be a subsidiary, so to speak, of the university in the way that Burriss or Indiana Academy are essentially elements or units within the broader university," Mearns said in an interview with The Daily News. "So Muncie School Corporation and the university will be separate legal entities, there will be no commingling of resources, we will not assume any financial debts or obligations that the school corporation has. Again, there will complete legal and financial independence."

If approved by the by the Senate, House and Gov. Eric Holcomb, Mearns said it would then be Ball State's Board of Trustees' responsibility to appoint five of the seven MCS school board members.

### **School board**

Mearns said that while the bill has yet to be passed, the university is already making preparations in the case it does.

A part of those preparations includes looking for school board candidates with not only appropriate expertise on K-12 public education, but also on the history of Muncie.

"I think one of the other important things, and this is somewhat less tangible or specific, but somebody who has the values that this community has," Mearns said of potential school board candidates.

"In order for this initiative to be successful, and by successful I mean not simply passed by the legislature — that really is just the first step — but in order for this to be successful in the long term and achieve those objectives, there has to be community input and there has to be community trust, and one of the ways in which you demonstrate trust is if people represent or reflect those same values."

Board of Trustees chair Rick Hall said that if this legislation is passed, it would allow not only the relationship between Ball State and Muncie to grow, but also school resources.

“We just believe that the relationship between Muncie and Ball State University is a special one,” Hall said. “We have a great tradition in teaching and resources that have been developed over years and there’s a great opportunity to put that knowledge and resources to work to help the community. We view this as neighbors helping neighbors to create a healthier school system.”

However, others in the community, such as Debbie Feick, Muncie School Board president said the possibility of an appointed school board would be an overreach.

“As an elected official, the overreach to have other elected officials to take away power and authority without cause is a very genuine concern that all five of us share,” Feick said. “But given all of that, the end result is we want what’s best for the community or we would not have sought election to the school board.”

## Transparency

When the provision to HB 1315 was announced, Muncie community leaders, such as Muncie Mayor Dennis Tyler, said they were unaware of bill, which has left some questioning whether or not Ball State administrators will be transparent throughout this process.

“The lack of transparency has been an extreme concern because of the shock of the intervention, Feick said. “It bothers us because we have a commitment to community service and we don’t want to let anyone down. We’ve had to wrestle in the weeds, so to speak, to address our debt issue and to have an aggressive debt-reduction plan and we’ve weathered that.

“We’ve weathered criticism, we’ve weathered a lot of scrutiny and yet we’ve hung together to move forward. So, our vision is that we must keep abreast of what our children and families need, our teachers, and if we keep that as our focus, no matter what the outcome, everyone will be served well.”

Feick wasn’t the only one who had no prior knowledge of the amendment. Steve Edwards, emergency manager for MCS, said he was unaware of the amendment as well.

“No we were not aware, and not that we needed to be – not the emergency management team or anyone else,” Edwards said. “I mean, there’s obviously high-level discussions going on so I thoroughly understand why we – I don’t see any reason why we needed to know.”

Mearns said that if this legislation were to pass, Ball State would be very open with the Muncie community because the university wants this period to be collaborative between both Muncie and Ball State.

“The reason we asked for that two-year period is because we recognize the need to engage the community actively in that first-year period,” Mearns said. “One of the successful ingredients in the programs that we have had in the Muncie schools is engaging the

students, their families, and the teachers and the community in those solutions. So, we're not going to develop that plan in isolation on our campus, we're going to develop that plan in consultation with the community."

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