



Seeking a Muncie Schools Solution

By Tom Schuman

One of the major questions any employer or family has when considering a new location: What is the quality of the local school system?

For Muncie Community Schools (MCS), local economics and a delayed recognition of changing demographics precludes a positive response to that question today – at least when it comes to school

system finances and perception.

But local education partner Ball State University (BSU) – under new leadership and preparing to celebrate its 100th anniversary – may turn out to be an integral part of changing that reality. And no one in Muncie is denying the relationship between school system quality and economic development.



Solutions to the financial woes of Muncie Community Schools must include a strong partnership between the business community (top left: a look at downtown's Walnut Street; *Intersection advertising agency photo*) and Ball State University (top right). District enrollment is projected at less than 5,000 for the 2018-2019 school year.



EFFORT

“It (the current school situation) doesn’t make the job any easier,” admits Jay Julian, president and CEO of the Muncie-Delaware County Chamber of Commerce, which is also responsible for economic development activities. “It gives us talking points (or required explanations) other communities don’t have.”

Casey Stanley, vice president of product management and marketing for Ontario Systems, acknowledges the talent gap and skills shortage, adding, “As part of that cycle, if you are not attracting new businesses and not growing new businesses locally, that contributes to a quality of place issue. Employees have the ability to choose where they work every day; they choose with their feet.”

Geoffrey S. Mearns, the BSU president who assumed that role in May 2017, is even more direct.

“We know that a community is dependent on the quality of its public schools. Businesses want to move to where people want to live, so we need to do even more to make Muncie a vibrant community – and it starts and ends with the public schools.”

Long-term slide

MCS is where it is today, in part, due to the economic changes that have taken place in east central Indiana.

“The economic transition from an industrial economy to a more knowledge-based and advanced manufacturing economy is hard,” Stanley emphasizes. “Are there things the community could have foreseen and better planned and better acted upon, rallied together and done 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 30 years ago – absolutely. The planning and execution hasn’t been perfect and clearly it hasn’t in the Muncie Community Schools. It’s an extreme case.”

While not alone, MCS has seen dramatic enrollment decreases –

from nearly 19,000 students in 1965 to what will be projected at less than 5,000 in the 2018-2019 school year, according to Steve Wittenauer, a retired superintendent and founder of Administrator Assistance. That organization served as the emergency manager for MCS over the second half of 2017 and was given further control of finances and academics at a mid-December meeting of the state’s Distressed Unit Appeal Board (DUAB).

“Everyone knows that once your enrollment drops, and with the formula where it’s at where the money follows the student, there are cuts that probably have to be made,” Wittenauer shares. “We believe this problem originated over a multi-year period of time. And maybe they could have done a little bit more to address those situations as their funds became less and less because of the lower enrollment and lower (property tax) assessment. That’s something that they probably didn’t do as good a job as they would have liked to have done.”

More recently, local decisions were made to use \$10 million from a 2014 bond issue (intended for improvements to school buildings) on operating expenses.

Unique solution

Both Stanley and Julian point out that Delaware County is home to three of the top high schools in the state – Muncie Burriss, the Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics and Humanities, and Yorktown. The first two are managed by Ball State. And both community leaders note that academic performance in MCS is trending up. Yet, according to local reports, there are 1,200 students who live within MCS but attend school elsewhere.

The problems are clear. The road to a solution took a sudden turn after that December DUAB meeting, according to Mearns, when

BSU President Focuses on Listening

Geoffrey S. Mearns, the 17th president in the 100-year history of Ball State University, relies on an attribute – listening – from his prior career. And he is combining it with what he also saw in his early days in Muncie in May 2017.

A trial lawyer for more than 15 years, Mearns says he “enjoyed the challenge of being in a courtroom, being an advocate.” But when he asks law school students about the most important skills of a lawyer, most cite communication and being articulate and persuasive.

“I actually believe the most important skill in a trial lawyer is listening.” He cites examples of interviewing witnesses before a trial and on the stand, as well as making arguments before a judge. “The reason that relates to community engagement is I believe that in order for us to be successful we have to listen to the community. If we simply propose to develop solutions on our campus in isolation from their thoughts, their concerns and their interests, those solutions are not going to get any traction. The traction will come if we have established a foundation of trust.”

Mearns listened in a trio of “Better Together” forums conducted in partnership with the *Muncie Star-Press*. The topics: schools and neighborhoods, arts and culture, and economic development. The goal: How can Ball State partner to enhance the community in these areas and more.

The origin of the forums was a conversation between Mearns and *Star-Press* editor Greg Fallon. “We were talking about the disconnect between some people’s perceptions of Muncie and my sense of what was happening on the ground. And my interest, professionally and personally, to see what more the university could do in the community.”

That followed a more visual signal as Mearns took part in a Ball Brothers Foundation bus tour on his first Friday on the job.

“That tour gave me a very different perspective on what was happening in Muncie. That was because I had only heard some of the disappointing aspects – decline in population, some of the challenges the economy was facing, loss of manufacturing jobs.

“But when I got out into the community, I had an opportunity to see there was the beginning of a renaissance in downtown Muncie,” Mearns shares. “I was seeing the kind of things the business community and

the philanthropic community were doing to support their neighbors.

“Not to be naïve, in the sense of not understanding that the challenges are serious, but (I got) a sense that people in this community were devoted, have great pride in the community. Put pride and the willingness to commit both personal time and financial resources, and it gives you a sense of optimism about the future.”

Campus connections

Mearns, of course, utilizes those listening skills on his own campus.

“Some of it is in more structured ways (visits to classrooms or with resident hall assistants or orientation leaders). I say a few

were at Cleveland State University (law school dean and provost) and Northern Kentucky University (president). There was a similar responsibility at both locations to engage with the community.

At Ball State, he and his wife, Jennifer, started (with a \$100,000 personal contribution) a scholarship fund to benefit Muncie Central High School graduates who are first-generation college students. The university also purchased the Northside Middle School building from Muncie Community Schools for potential future campus expansion, but is leasing the building back to the corporation for \$1 a year for five years.

While preparing students for successful careers is the lead university mission, he



Campus and community engagement is a focus for Ball State President Geoffrey Mearns, who came to Muncie from Northern Kentucky University.

words, then ask what are your questions. Informally,” he says, “it’s going up McKinley Avenue (the main campus artery) when heading from one side of campus to another. If possible, I always try to walk, have informal conversations.

“One of the suggestions of the transition committee was to do walking tours of campus. It’s been divided into 10 regions. I go into other people’s offices, classrooms, labs; it’s given me the opportunity to meet faculty and staff and students where they work. I’ve done five of the 10 – five more to do this spring semester.”

Mearns’ previous higher education roles

adds, “An element of that is to also prepare our students to lead meaningful lives. One of the ways you lead meaningful lives is learn how the skills and assets and attributes you have can be used to help others. One of the ways is ... to get engaged in community service or immersive learning projects.

“We’re also a public research university; as a public university, we have a fundamental obligation to do what we can to advance the best interests of the community we serve. And our community consists of Muncie most directly, but also Delaware County, east central Indiana and all of the state of Indiana.”

RESOURCE: Geoffrey S. Mearns, Ball State University, at cms.bsu.edu

the idea of Ball State assuming managerial responsibility for MCS was first proposed. A series of conversations followed, with legislation to put that into motion (on July 1 of this year) having passed the Indiana House of Representatives at the time of this writing.

Asked about previous similar arrangements, Mearns shares, “I think this is unusual and perhaps unique.” He cites an example from approximately 25 years ago when Boston University took responsibility for managing a small downtown school district. That involved a private university and a contractual arrangement, a far different model than what is being considered for Muncie.

Mearns says there are a number of reasons why this approach makes sense.

“I think we’re uniquely situated to have this initiative be successful. First of all, we’ve got our Teachers College. This institution was founded as a Teachers College. We’ve been preparing teachers and outstanding academic administrators for 100 years. We’ll be able to tap into that expertise.”

He notes the management of Muncie Burriss (since 1929) and the residential Indiana Academy public high school (for about 25 years). “Those are different experiences but we do have a substantial track record of success.

“Second, this will give us the opportunity to mobilize faculty, staff and students from disciplines all across campus,” Mearns continues. “There is substantial interest to become more engaged in the community, and in particular in Muncie schools. You can imagine us really enriching the curriculum in Muncie schools in a way that can be innovative, creative and inspiring to the students.”

Stanley and Julian, interviewed prior to the announcement of the proposal for the direct Ball State involvement, offer that the community was already playing an enhanced role.

Julian discloses he is “pretty proud of the business sector. They’ve had a series of meetings with the emergency management folks ... trying to figure out various ways the community can step in and assist with the process. We have a collective team of good thought leaders in Muncie and Delaware County trying to show support of MCS and find ways in which their partnership can be meaningful.

“The new leadership at Ball State has engaged in the community as well as anybody could have imagined. Better Together (see sidebar) is not just words coming out of their mouths.”

With the financial crisis taking center stage, Stanley says, “This has really rallied the entire community. What I see is the conversations are very focused on the here and now, but also the long term. This is causing people to come together and work in a very focused way for the good of all.

“Maybe we’ve started the slow but steady climb back. People are more optimistic. That’s what it feels like is happening to me.”

Wittenauer confirms the business community and BSU involvement. “They’ve all been trying to figure out ways they can be supportive of the school corporation. We’ve had many discussions

over the course of our (first) six months there. We’ve talked to all the bankers. Ball State and Ball Memorial Hospital are working to help us create some programs that hopefully will have some of those students coming back.”

Patience required

No matter the future direction, it is clear that a problem that developed over many years – even decades – will not be solved immediately.

Mearns, anticipating passage of the direct Ball State involvement, hopes expectations remain realistic.

“Probably the piece that causes me concern is that people might



Three “Better Together” forums in 2017 gave Mearns and Ball State leaders an opportunity to listen and learn on the topics of schools and neighborhoods, arts and culture, and economic development.

believe we can have a significant positive impact in a relatively short period of time. That two, three or four years into it, it doesn’t look as if enrollment is growing as rapidly as we thought. Or that test scores and outcomes aren’t improving.

“What I would say to those folks,” he continues, “is please reserve judgement, give this plan an opportunity to demonstrate that progress. It’s going to take a substantial amount of time to get to a place where we all want this school system to be – where’s it’s not just surviving, but it’s thriving. I’m hopeful our community stakeholders will continue to contribute their ideas, but will also be both patient and persistent as we continue down this path.”

Others agree.

“In any challenge of that type of scale, it took a long time to dig the hole and it will take a sustained, focused and broad effort to dig out of the hole,” Stanley confides.

Julian adds that enhanced accountability standards and other lessons learned will eventually emerge. In the long run, he believes “MCS will be better coming out of this than they were going in.”

Mearns agrees, given the proper amount of teamwork.

“We need the investment of ideas, of teachers, of the staff in the school system, parents, religious and community leaders. This has to be a community effort and it has to be a community plan. It’s community investment, support and engagement.”