



**BALL STATE
UNIVERSITY**

PLACING LEARNERS FIRST: The MCS-Ball State University Partnership



AFFIRMATION OF MCS BELIEFS

Muncie Community Schools' Vision—Placing Learners First

Everyone has the capacity to learn;

Each learner comes to us with exceptional gifts;

Each learner comes to us with unique challenges;

Each learner comes to us with a sense of wonder and infinite curiosity;

Each learner has a right to feel safe, valued, connected, and affirmed for who they are and from where they come;

Each learner will know that we care;

Every learner's family has hopes and dreams for their success, and they deserve our diligence, respect, and partnership in realizing those hopes and dreams.

The future of our community depends on our unyielding commitment to the education of our learners, and those who come to us as Muncie Community Schools' students deserve our very best. We recognize their exceptional gifts, support and empower them to navigate challenges, and nurture their sense of wonder and curiosity. We create safe learning environments where they feel valued, cared for, and connected. We affirm our learners for who they are and from where they come, as we challenge them to learn and enjoy lives full of curiosity and achievement. We do all this and more to equip all of our learners with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to thrive as active citizens in a democratic and global society.

MCS' Partnership with Ball State and Collaboration with the Muncie Community

The opportunity to rethink Muncie Community Schools (MCS) and pursue an aspirational vision to develop Muncie's most precious resource—our children—is a direct result of a special legislative session in May 2018 to address the financial and academic crisis facing the district. The legislation passed by the Indiana General Assembly urges MCS to take advantage of its relationship with Ball State University (Ball State) and grants the district “all administrative and academic flexibility to implement innovative strategies.” As a first step, it requires MCS to submit this Academic Innovation and Financial Viability Plan by June 30, 2020.

That legislative session, and the resulting statute, issued a clarion call for community action—recognizing that thriving public schools enhance our quality of life and economic vitality. In July 2018, MCS and Ball State commenced their historic partnership to transform Muncie's education system into an innovative cradle-to-career, community-based model that will prepare all learners, regardless of background or circumstance, to succeed in college, career, and life.

Our vision relies on close collaboration with local business and professional sectors, nonprofit service providers, community-based foundations, Muncie leaders, MCS families, and the district's nearly 5,000 students, 350 teachers, 10 principals, classroom aides, counselors, and other support staff and volunteers. That collaboration involves the interplay between both the *aspirations* of our community for civic engagement, economic vitality, quality of life and the *assets* of our families, community, and schools. Each is essential to how we develop and incorporate our school improvement processes.

This collaboration also addresses one of the driving tenets of our work: culturally responsive practices that reflect and respect our students and families, leading to their engagement with us. We will transform the culture of our district by ensuring that families and learners who may be struggling are not seen merely as problems or distractions. Instead, we will recognize their strengths—the skills and knowledge they possess but have not been acknowledged—so that our district can best serve them.

Therefore, we are committed to collaborating with our stakeholders as partners to learn about the diverse cultures that make up our community. We believe as the Reform Support Network asserted:



The purpose of community engagement is to ensure that school improvement is done with the community, not to the community. It recognizes how integral schools are to their communities, and how much parents and communities have to offer as partners when fundamental change must occur in schools.

(“Strategies for Community Engagement in School Turnaround,” 2014, p. 3)

To guide this effort, Ball State appointed a diverse and engaged MCS Board of Trustees that works closely with a joint MCS-Ball State Academic Innovation Council (AIC) and a Community Engagement Council (CEC). Collectively, these members of the Muncie and Ball State communities have come together in unprecedented ways to build a foundation for developing one of the nation's most transformational urban public education systems. Over time, our students will thrive in an inclusive, equitable, safe, and effective educational environment that prepares graduates to compete locally and globally.

As a result of this anchoring partnership, MCS has restored fiscal stability, stabilized enrollment, and now operates with a strong governance structure to guide continued progress. Although we have already made incremental improvements, our vision requires ongoing and sustained community-wide commitment. We project that systemic revitalization will take five to seven years. To reach that revitalization, the proposed Innovation Plan is divided into two distinct phases:

- **Part I, or the Baseline Phase:** Projected to occur in years one through three (following plan approval), this phase sets forth our vision to leverage the partnership and collaboration as we rebuild and strengthen MCS academic and financial foundations to achieve baseline performance levels. Academic baseline performance will be obtained when the vast majority of MCS third-grade learners regularly pass ILEARN (or its equivalent) in English and Language Arts, and Mathematics. Though MCS is already making progress on this front, given historic challenges existing at the commencement of the partnership, and the time required to execute new learning and teaching strategies, three years is necessary for this to occur on a system wide basis.
- **Part II, or the Aspirational Phase:** Projected to commence in year four, this phase sets forth the plan to build on the baseline foundation to achieve a sustainable and innovative national model of academic excellence at all levels.

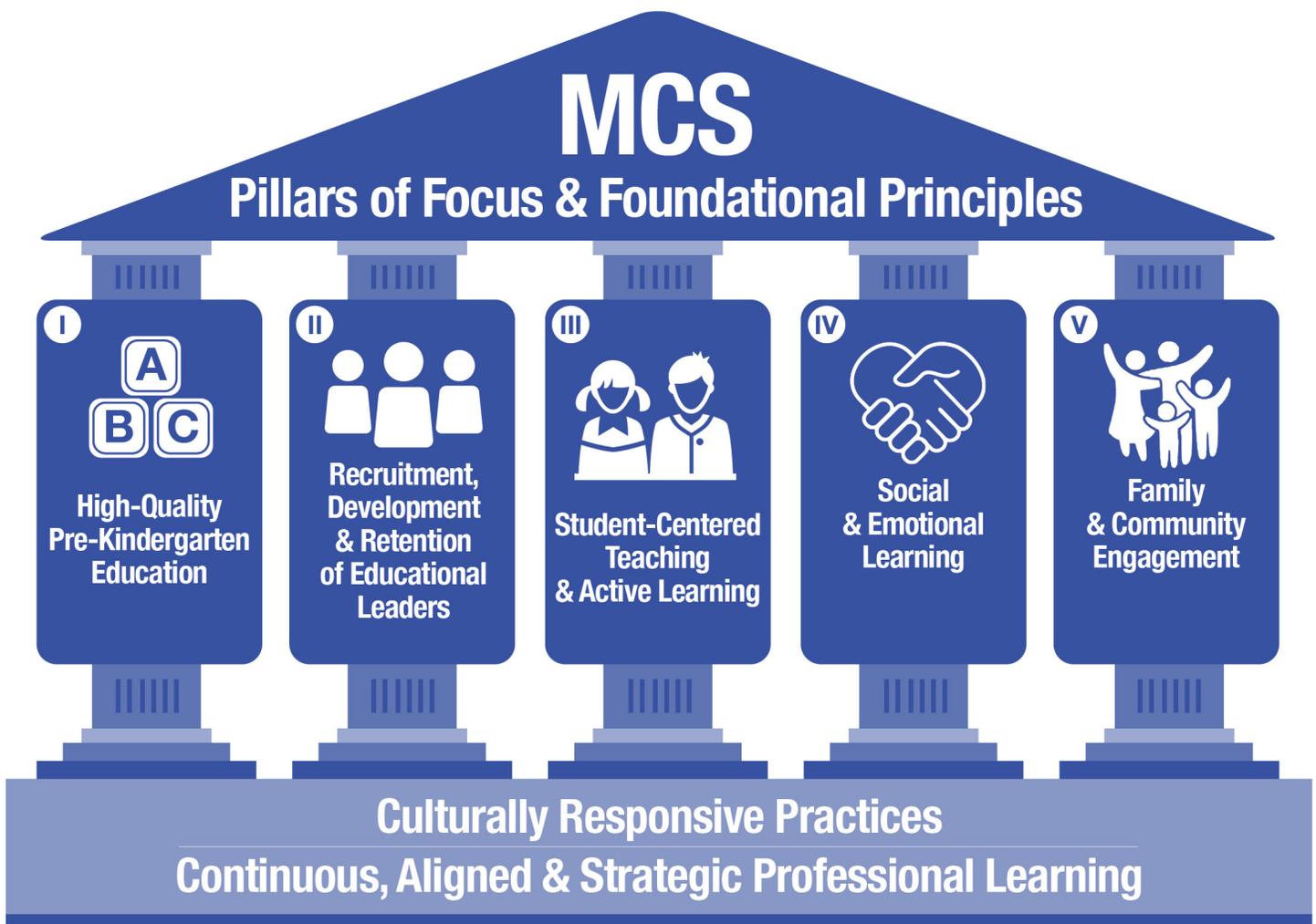
Both phases reflect our service to learners from *cradle*, through our early childhood programs, to *career*, through our K-12 emphasis on partnering with caregivers and the community to prepare students for college and career. Our values, approach, goals, and strategies are based on credible research of what practices have worked in high-performing, high poverty schools.

It is important to recognize that this Innovation Plan is intended to be a living document. It will be subject to periodic amendment and supplementation based on externally-driven developments, evidence-based practices, learners' needs, and available resources.

Foundational Principles and Pillars

Student learning is maximized through engaging curriculum, positive mentorship, and valuable collaborations within the city, university, and school district. Our proposed plan envisions **two universal foundational principles and five operational pillars.**

We know from successful schools that certain key variables lead to student success. At the core, these variables include developing and retaining highly competent school and district leaders and teachers; adopting and implementing comprehensive, engaging, and rigorous curricula; and engaging in a collaborative approach with parents and the community. Underlying these elements are two integrated foundational principles: (1) professional learning for teachers and administrators and (2) culturally responsive practices.



Foundational Principles

Principle #1

Continuous, aligned, and strategic professional learning: Professional development or learning is the terminology for “how” educators and administrators continue to develop their craft. Extensive research informs us of the best practices in professional learning. Our Innovation Plan adopts an approach that follows those elements of effective professional development by noted educational researcher Linda Darling Hammond¹:

Elements of Effective Professional Development

- Content focused
- Incorporates active learning, utilizing adult learning theory
- Supports collaboration—typically is job-embedded
- Uses models and active modeling of effective practices
- Provides coaching and expert support to teachers
- Requires constructive feedback and reflection
- Is of sustained duration

Principle #2

Culturally responsive practices: This foundational principle provides for engagement with learners and families (through relationships, curriculum, instruction, and assessments) that reflects an understanding of the strengths of diverse families gained from their experiences, or funds of knowledge. We are already engaging in three forms of professional learning to build our capacity as culturally responsive educators. First, culturally responsive practices are embedded in all of the training and performance rubrics developed by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET), which has been contracted to work with all MCS schools. Second, we have formed a “culturally responsive cadre” of select administrators, faculty, Ball State professors, and MCS board members who will participate in workshops and training. And third, our schools are undergoing training with Ball State professors or other consultants with expertise in this area on an individual basis based on their specific needs.

1. Darling-Hammond, L., Hyster, M., & Gardner, M. (2017). Effective Teacher Professional Development. Learning Policy Institute: Research Brief. https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Effective_Teacher_Professional_Development_BRIEF.pdf

Operational Pillars

Arising from the two foundational principles, the following five operational pillars provide the infrastructure on which we will develop and implement creative, innovative, and aspirational strategies to support our learners:

Pillar I

High-Quality Pre-Kindergarten Education. Undertake a coordinated push for high-quality early childhood education throughout the district and across the community.

Pillar II

Recruitment, Development, and Retention of Educational Leaders. Expand our professional learning to mirror each of pillars, with a focus on continuous, job-embedded, and mentoring based-approach. Broaden our recruitment to increase diversity at all levels, create an incentive-based hiring and retention model, and ensure a flow of quality, high-potential educators.

Pillar III

Student-Centered Teaching and Active Learning. Develop and implement diverse and relevant-rich curricula that aligns to state standards. Deliver learner-centered instruction that emphasizes active learning and measured by relevant and valid student assessments. Enrich and expand classrooms and courses in literacy, mathematics, STEAM, physical and nutritional health, civics, and history. With the help of community input concerning aspirations and opportunities, align students' learning to and in support of an effective mix of pathways to post-secondary employment, education, and careers.

Pillar IV

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). Develop and implement a comprehensive SEL plan to help students manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy, solve problems, make responsible decisions, and engage in healthy relationships. Infuse these concepts throughout our curricula with professional learning and improved communication with students, families, and community stakeholders.

Pillar V

Family and Community Engagement. Strengthen family and community engagement to maximize student learning through engaging learner-focused curriculum, positive relationships, and school-family-community-university collaboration. Form welcoming schools that are culturally responsive with integrated wrap-around services. Create a school-community based support system for each MCS learner.

For each pillar, extensive thought, ideas, and best practices from multiple sources have informed the development and continue to inform the implementation of the MCS Strategic Plan. That document, found in the appendix, details our initiatives and evidentiary support for specific approaches.²

2. The Innovation Plan will be accompanied by an appendix that details MCS' strategic initiatives being implemented. We have appended a demonstrative diagram to this summary.

Innovation and Best Practices

Innovation

MCS is charged with being innovative, yet what does innovation mean to us, in our community? We view innovation as the application of novel ideas, processes, and technologies to positively impact the world in lasting and meaningful ways. It requires us to think big, take calculated risks, and challenge our assumptions about people and systems. At the same time, it requires that we identify and adopt proven best practices from other high-performing, high-poverty schools with similarly situated student populations. Finally, it requires us to overcome traditional barriers to innovation such as “we can’t,” “we’ve never done it that way,” “we are too busy,” or “that won’t work.”

In short, our efforts focus on the following three forms of innovation: (1) revolutionary ideas, or transformational approaches or inventions never done before; (2) new-to-us ideas, which are proven best practices yet to be implemented at MCS; and (3) operational innovations that streamline processes, policies, and procedures to remove barriers to improvement and innovation. MCS will start moving forward with (2) and (3) while being vigilant and bold in our search, adoption, and implementation of big ideas that will serve our learners.

Best Practices

We began by identifying best practices as well as potential innovations necessary to create enhanced positive outcomes for our students. We have defined best practices as those measures high-performing schools implement and systemically sustain. Unquestionably, these include engaging students through active instruction, by aligning curriculum, through our two foundational principles and the five operational pillars, and through our contemplated system-wide approach to instruction, curricula, and assessments as visualized below.

Instruction: learner-centered, engaging, cognitively demanding, differentiated, culturally responsive, and life-relevant

Curricula: aligned to standards within and across grades, rigorous, engaging, culturally relevant, and aspirationally aligned

Formative Assessments: aligned to the curricula leading to data-based decisions by educators for daily instruction and additional student support

- **Values, Mission, and Goals of Schools and District:** high expectations for all students and teachers; students are known, students are cared for, and students know that they are known and cared for, and that instructional methods are student centered.
- **Leadership:** shared, instructionally focused, highly effective, and adaptive.
- **Professional Learning:** high quality, ongoing, focused on instruction, curriculum, and assessment data to guide student centered instruction.
- **Parents, Family, and Community:** engagement paired with consistent, effective communication and parent education.
- **Cultural Responsiveness:** engaging and welcoming relationships, and diverse curriculum that values diverse experiences and students' interests.

MCS will continually examine best practices of similarly situated high-performing, high-poverty districts to inform our innovation roadmap. At times, the innovation will be implemented alongside a standard best practice; while at other times, the standard best practice will serve as a foundation for future innovation. We are introducing needed change in an incremental manner as research shows that profound change within a limited time frame is not effective or sustainable. Thus, MCS is adopting and implementing a long-term, sustainable Innovation Plan that properly sequences innovations within a framework built on proven best practices and data-driven innovation.

Cradle to Career: Mobilizing an Innovative Community Approach to Education

Muncie and Delaware County are resource rich and well-positioned to support our bold educational transformation. The primary MCS-Ball State partnership, Indiana University Health Ball Memorial Hospital, Meridian Health Services, Open Door Community Health Services, Purdue Polytechnic, Ivy Tech, and numerous high-quality pre-K programs provide Muncie with a healthy foundation. Our city possesses a healthy spirit of philanthropy, with Delaware County residents among the state's most generous per capita. Vibrant, well-run charitable foundations model that beneficence, contributing more than \$5 million (to date) to provide MCS with margin of excellence funding. Our dedicated nonprofit sector addresses the city's complex web of social, economic, educational, and health care needs. And committed employers support local families, yet need even more capable employees now and in the future.

Evidence-based practices will guide these alliances and help us measure social and educational variables and outcomes from the cradle-to-career approach. This approach will help us achieve accountability and efficiency within multifaceted collaborations, will help to eliminate overlap, and will help to fill gaps in available services. It will also help us identify learners with educational challenges, and how best to address their needs while informing our assessment of today's job market and exploration of tomorrow's workforce. Our commitment to ongoing, evidence-driven assessments and actions will ensure the partnership delivers impactful educational and social services from cradle to career, now and into the future.

Indiana estimates that its modern economy will require 60% of Hoosiers to possess some postsecondary training: bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, and/or professional certifications and trainings. Approximately 30% of Delaware County's citizens currently meet these criteria. This demonstrates the importance of our work to prepare all MCS learners to meet existing and potential economic demands. If we fail to support our learners from cradle to career, we will continue to consign too many of our graduates to lives of poverty and hopelessness.³

These practices thus will inform our assessment of today's job market and exploration of tomorrow's workforce, including the developing shifts and increasingly digital aspects of all sectors of the economy. Our commitment to ongoing evidence-driven awareness, content, actions, and assessments will ensure the partnership delivers impactful educational and social services from cradle to career, now and into the future.

At each elementary school, this support from MCS will start with high-quality, state-certified Level 4 pre-K programs. In grades K-5, we will concentrate on providing an intensive literacy program with extended professional learning for educators. We will extend our Project Lead the Way (PLW) program to elevate instruction in mathematics, science, and technology.

For middle school, we will continue our focus on fundamental needs—literacy, math, and science—to increase students' knowledge, and to expose them to various careers. Our high schoolers will be afforded additional college and career courses and pathways, including AP, dual credit, and internship opportunities. In recognition of the whole child, our innovative initiatives will also include physical and nutritional programs, fine arts, and summer programs to pique learners' interests and widen their experiences.

³ A number of collaborative efforts have been launched in the past year as part of the MCS-Ball State partnership. Examples include high-quality preschools at several elementary schools in collaboration with the George and Frances Ball Foundation and Huffer Childcare. In collaboration with Meridian Health Services, a comprehensive Federal Qualified Health Clinic at Southside Middle School will offer MCS students and staff a full range of mental and physical health care services.

Pillars

Five operational pillars will support and deliver our rigorous and holistic cradle-to-career approach. The plan's two foundational principles are embedded in the pillars, which, together, create a strong, synergistic foundation for our schools.

Pillar I: Universal, High-Quality Pre-K Programs for All Children in the MCS District

The highest return on investment of education dollars comes from early childhood education programs. Early investment in MCS families, particularly those who are disadvantaged, is vital to their child's educational success. Critical brain development occurs between birth to age 5. As infants grow into toddlers and then into preschoolers, their brains develop essential neural connections that serve them as adults. Interruptions in brain development of these neural connections are difficult to remedy. These interruptions can occur as the result of trauma, poverty, lack of enrichment or socialization—to name just a few possible causes. Adults who experienced environmental brain development delays as children are less likely to hold a full-time job or to finish high school or college. They are statistically more likely to live in or near poverty and to struggle socially.

Muncie and Delaware County have been at the forefront of this educational imperative for at least a decade. As part of this effort, the By5 Early Childhood Initiative was formed in 2013 to coordinate programming designed to prepare all Delaware County children for kindergarten. According to By5, more than 70% of entering MCS students are not prepared for kindergarten.

Therefore, it is MCS' goal to offer high-quality Level 4 pre-K to all 3- and 4-year-old children in Muncie. Working with community partners, we will expand our preschools to all of our elementary schools. We will strive to elevate all of preschool programs to Level Four (the state's highest Paths to Quality rating). Because our school-based preschool sites are often at capacity, we will also seek to expand programming through partnerships with established and highly rated preschool programs. Further, as we develop our pre-K offerings, we will seek to ensure high quality preschool teachers, and design a transition program for our learners from pre-K to kindergarten.

Pillar II: Recruit, Develop, and Retain Educational Leaders

Teachers are the single most powerful influence on student achievement⁴, producing positive effects on students' daily lives and nurturing their curiosity and career aspirations⁵. Therefore, we must find and hire teachers who reflect the diversity of our students and community, who understand cultural assets and can contribute to the cultural responsiveness of our schools, and who are committed to our community. We, in turn, must provide for them through compensation incentives and meaningful opportunities for advancement. As it develops, Pillar II will provide a comprehensive approach to professionalizing MCS teachers, staff, and administrators.

Recruitment will be redesigned to correspond to various requirements and the needs of our district and learners. We will begin the recruitment process earlier each year and will broaden our search, specifically to increase staff diversity

⁴ <https://www.rand.org/education-and-labor/projects/measuring-teacher-effectiveness/teachers-matter.html>

⁵ <https://www.rand.org/education-and-labor/projects/measuring-teacher-effectiveness/teachers-matter.html>

to correspond to our student demographics. We will use our partnerships with Ball State and community stakeholders to identify and recruit administrators and teachers with demonstrated talent in building and classroom leadership⁶.

Development of teachers and principals occurs through professional learning. When observing classrooms and meeting with principals, we determined that many classrooms employ “learning-by-worksheet” rather than cognitive approaches to higher-level critical thinking through discussions, argumentation, debates, and explanations. In our Theory of Action, we define high-quality instruction as learner-centered, engaging, cognitively demanding, differentiated, culturally-responsive, and life-relevant. Creating active, innovative classrooms requires a strong commitment to professional learning, which MCS will do by allocating time, money, and resources to instructional development and support. Our vision is to outfit teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to be leaders in their classrooms, departments, and schools. This approach provides a broader base of responsibility for effective teachers to work toward well-defined goals in concert with district objectives and building administrators’ leadership and guidance.

Because the district has limited capacity to provide professional learning internally, MCS sought an established and well-proven partner—the National Institute of Excellence in Teaching (NIET). With a research-proven national track record, the institute’s System for Teacher and Student Advancement (formerly known as the Teacher Advancement Program, or TAP), provides a comprehensive approach to professional learning, designed to strengthen teachers’ instruction by building their knowledge and skills. This program empowers teacher leaders as masters and mentors to complement the professional training and development of their peers. This approach has improved classroom instruction and inspired teachers to promote and maintain growth in schools (demonstrating a greater impact than “one-and-done” training workshops). Teacher leaders are the foundation for strong, consistent, and sustained high-quality instruction that leads to student success. This shift requires the following research-proven methods of professional development: job-embedded, consistent, connected to classroom work, and conducted in collaboration with peers. NIET’s training reflects research-based professional learning practices through following the “Four Core Elements,” which broaden and deepen our prior efforts in professional learning:

1. Teacher leadership roles and career paths
2. Weekly professional learning
3. Classroom observations and coaching
4. Performance-based compensation

Support from Professional Development School Liaisons

An additional unique avenue for professional learning occurs through our partnership with Ball State and its Teachers College faculty. Prior to formation of the official MCS-Ball State partnership, the district and university maintained a longstanding, mutually beneficial relationship through research, projects, and programs within the district. Last year, more than 150 MCS teachers and administrators supported Ball State student-teachers in nearly 100 different courses for a total of 20,249 hours in the classroom. In fall 2019, the district welcomed 72% of Ball State’s student-teachers in thousands of hours of pre-service student teaching field experiences.

In addition, Ball State faculty serve as Professional Development School (PDS) liaisons within each MCS building. PDS liaisons facilitate professional development, place teacher candidates in clinical field experiences, and identify opportunities to meet school improvement goals. Last year, PDS liaisons guided more than 10 professional learning communities in seven schools and held nine distinct training sessions for 183 MCS teachers and more than 3,000 Ball State students.

⁶ This networked approach to recruiting has already resulted in MCS identifying and hiring a diverse group of highly competent educators.

Without doubt, these relationships are valuable. They help Ball State faculty refine teacher preparation programs to reflect real-world demands, expose MCS teachers to leading theories and strategies, contribute to leading educational research, and connect MCS students with additional mentors.

As these relationships evolve, we will evaluate them regularly to ensure continuous improvement. Considering the PDS liaison role, for instance, we have identified opportunities to increase efficiency and consistency across the district. We will review the PDS liaison structure and processes to confirm they maximize our investment of resources and time, and we will assess the role to ensure expectations are clear and liaisons provide the same level of support and engagement at each building.

Retention of educators is a critical need throughout the United States, and Muncie is no different. Through the MCS-Ball State partnership, we provide incentives such as reduced tuition and fees at the university as well as opportunities for career advancement and leadership. Moreover, through responsible financial stewardship over the past two years, teacher compensation has been increased to a more competitive level.

We established the goal of recruiting, developing, and retaining our excellent educators and leaders as we know this is critical to student success through student-centered teaching and learning.

Pillar III: Student-Centered Teaching and Active Learning

Student-centered teaching and active learning focuses on the needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles of the students above adult conveniences. When implemented properly, it leads to increased student participation, knowledge retention, and problem-solving skills, and it fosters collaboration and cooperation—markers of social and emotional growth. Where possible, MCS will transition from prior practice of teacher-centered classrooms of lecture and teachers doing most of the talking to the desired practice of a mix of teacher-provided content and student-led discussions, group problem-solving and brainstorming, that exemplifies hands-on, real-world experiential and active learning.

To prepare to implement Pillar III, the first step is to examine and improve our curriculum. As presented in our Theory of Action, curricula must be aligned to state standards and within and across grades, be rigorous and engaging, be culturally relevant, and (in later years) be aspirationally aligned. In addition, the formative assessments must be an integrated aspect (not a stand-alone) that emphasizes a culture of assessing for learning support. Consequently, assessments will directly align to the curriculum and inform student- and class-level adjustments needed to meet targets and supports as determined through the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) in the social and emotional learning pillar of the plan.

Curriculum establishes a common set of districtwide skills and knowledge for learners, from the foundation curriculum to those elements in later years specific to various learning pathways. It is the content, methods, processes, and materials that guide instruction and student learning. Research shows that quality teaching and learning occur when the curriculum is aligned to standards across and within grade levels, is learner-centered, engaging, rigorous, is taught (as opposed to sitting on a shelf, in a binder), includes culturally-responsive practices, and in later years of school is aligned to student interests and aspirations.

MCS has a collection of curriculum maps for English/language arts and mathematics that were intended to correspond to state standards. To determine the quality of these maps, as an initial step in improving our curricula, MCS obtained two external reviews to indicate areas of strength and weakness. Opportunities for improvement included significant gaps in covering standards, missing standards completely in certain grade levels or domains, and considerable variance in adherence to those maps across schools. MCS is actively addressing deficiencies and misalignments through districtwide remedial action, which is detailed in the MCS Strategic Plan.

In addition, our curriculum must actively integrate the wealth of knowledge that our students bring to the classroom. As such, MCS will be culturally responsive and create a practical, realistic context for learning that reflects the values and diversity of the community we serve.

Learning to Read and Reading to Learn

Literacy curriculum underlies all other curricula and thus is at the heart of our attention to learning. Although the NIET's TAP system will lead to improved instruction in all subjects across grade levels, MCS' initial focus must be to **improve early grade reading and comprehension to advance active learning in other subjects**. Therefore, in 2019, MCS adopted a proven instructional program and curriculum for literacy, *Fountas & Pinnell Classroom*, for grades pre-K-5. This comprehensive literacy system is based on responsive teaching that uses an inquiry-rich, multi-text approach across various instructional contexts. Specific to reading instruction, the program provides grade-level training in the following context areas: read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, phonics, spelling, and vocabulary. Teacher professional learning and accompanying materials are extensive and provide a variety of resources that demonstrate how to teach reading in classrooms, small groups, and independently. The program also includes an extensive library of student texts to shift MCS' classroom focus from fiction to nonfiction, which will fill a prior standards gap. Since literacy is a foundation for achievement across academic areas, MCS is doubling its support, with NIET trained master teachers and mentors working alongside elementary teachers and multiple days of professional learning to implement this new reading and comprehension program with fidelity⁷.

Innovations in the Mathematics Curriculum and STEAM

Improvement in math achievement is our strong secondary goal with a vision for effective mathematics teaching and learning. Based on guiding principles and research-informed actions from the National Council for Teaching Mathematics (NCTM), we will reframe our teaching and learning of mathematics through professional learning for teachers, coaches, and school and district administrators. We will base improvements on the following six guiding principles detailed in NCTM's landmark publication, *Principles to Actions*: (1) teaching and collaborative learning, (2) access and equity, (3) curriculum along coherent learning progressions, (4) tools and technologies, (5) assessment, and (6) accountable professionalism.

Building on that foundation in mathematics, we will expand our emphasis and offerings in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) to develop a coherent K-12 program. For example, several MCS schools are piloting the STEM program, PLTW, a nationally recognized program that provides educational pathways and curriculum in computer science, engineering, and biomedical science. PLTW adheres to student-centered learning through hands-on classroom experiences that promote problem solving, communication, and collaboration. The MCS pilot schools report significant improvements in student interest, engagement, and achievement.

Our goal is to continue to build students' interest in PLTW from each elementary school through high school. MCS and Ball State worked closely with PLTW to create the PLTW-Launch Pre-Service Teacher Training Program. Upon completion of the training, Ball State elementary education majors earn PLTW Launch Classroom Teacher certification. As the majority of MCS hires graduate from Ball State, this training ensures new teachers arrive fully prepared to implement PLTW, and the district will prioritize hiring teachers with PLTW certification.

Though we are focusing initially on STEM subjects, we aspire to move from STEM to STEAM, recognizing that scientific excellence cannot be fully achieved without the humanities and the arts. It is the latter that provides a rounded development of our students to become critical thinkers and consumers of information, collaborative partners, empathetic leaders, and innovative leaders in our global society⁸.

⁷ MCS is creating a summer literacy camp in partnership with Ball State and other collaborators. The 3-to 5-week camp will pair literacy instruction with physical and fine arts activities for students in grades K-5.

⁸ One of the educational jewels at MCS has been its music, band, and fine arts programs. This continues as the result of our dedicated faculty leadership in this area.

Innovations to Instructional Use of Classroom Space: Learner-Centered Classrooms and Schools

STEAM subjects represent new classes that require different furniture in varied arrangements and spacing. During the past 50 years, research has demonstrated that learning spaces impact student performance. Effective learning spaces come in all shapes and sizes, but most MCS classrooms conform to the traditional lecture set-up, consisting of rows of desks with students facing forward. We have commenced professional development this year that will facilitate transitions to active learner and collaborative classroom models. These transitions will result in more student-centered, learning-focused intentional instruction. Consequently, it is essential that MCS administrators and teachers are sensitive to effective uses of available physical space to leverage multiple modes of learning. MCS will engage in a space audit to inform decisions in this area.

Preparing for College and Careers

Recognizing the need to provide our learners with knowledge and skills to be successful in college, careers, and life, MCS will have students: (a) participate in career pathways and (b) understand and learn about postsecondary careers through various modes.

- a. Connectivity to the Future: Career Pathways.** MCS will provide high-quality college and career education to equip graduates with the ability to demonstrate use of Indiana's Employability Skills of career mindset, self-management, learning strategies, and social and workplace skills. We will provide coursework, guidance, and experiences such as internships to identify career fields and specific jobs of interest. Learners will develop a postsecondary training or training plan to prepare for the future and will have many new opportunities as we add many new courses, often in partnership with local businesses, such as CTE Engineering Technology and Industrial Automation and Robotics for grades 11 and 12⁹.
- b. College and Career Pathways for Grades K-12.** Educated choices bridge equity gaps and prepare students academically, socially, and financially for success after high school. We are driven to provide both families and students with clear college and career pathway options to inform their choices as they plan for life after graduation. Our model starts with an introduction to career awareness in grades K-5, followed by identifying learners' interests and skills in grades 6-8. In high school, learners explore college and future employment options and experience career preparation through workplace visits, internships, and even employment.

Innovations to Health and Wellness

A healthy diet and regular physical activity have a pronounced positive impact on childhood cognitive function and performance. Evidence has further demonstrated that diet and activity, or the lack thereof, have a proximate effect on students' classroom behaviors and learning. Pediatricians recommend children engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity for 60 minutes each day, which is more than our learners currently receive.

Available data indicate that a high percentage of MCS students are food insecure. To address this troubling finding, MCS implemented universal free breakfast (served in classrooms) and lunch in 2019. Several schools support food pantries, and the district is taking steps to provide students with access to nutritious meals when not at school.

To encourage increased physical activity and healthy lifestyle choices, MCS, Ball State, and IU Health Ball Memorial Hospital are creating an innovative active school concept, which MCS will pilot at one elementary school in fall 2020. The program is a combination of strategies that include physical health and nutritional education, structured and unstructured physical activity during the day, and before and after school programs that address diet and exercise. We anticipate the program will include students' parents or caregivers whenever possible.

⁹ Significant steps were taken in 2019 to implement this plan. We are working closely with community partners and local employers, including Ivy Tech, Purdue Polytechnic, Magna Manufacturing, and Mursix Manufacturing, to design and offer these courses and career paths to our students. Additional details are set forth in the Appendix.

Pillar IV: Social and Emotional Learning

Learners' cognitive development and academic learning are strongly linked to social and emotional development and learning. More than two decades of research demonstrates the positive effects of SEL: improved academic performance and classroom behaviors, increased ability to manage stress and depression, and enhanced self-image. As such, this programming has a long-term positive impact up on academics, personal conduct, and mitigation of emotional distress. As adults, learners exposed to SEL are less likely to reside in public housing, receive public assistance, or engage in criminal activity. Given what we know, it is imperative that MCS attend to this crucial area of our learners' development. Therefore, we will develop SEL programming for all grade levels based on the five core skill areas, according to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL):

1. Self-awareness
2. Self-management
3. Social awareness
4. Relationship skills
5. Responsible decision-making

We know that some of our MCS learners struggle in the five areas due to their experiences living in poverty, witnessing traumatic events, and lacking stable and safe living environments. This, in turn, affects their ability to concentrate, respond appropriately, and ultimately, to learn. MCS will infuse SEL into academic curriculum with extensive professional learning for teachers and other adults in our buildings. We will collaborate with the community, nonprofit agencies, and service providers to share knowledge and learn alongside one another.

Our efforts to increase SEL understanding by our teachers and caregivers, and SEL learning by our students incorporates a consistent, systematic multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework. MTSS is based on examining student data to determine academic and behavior abilities and gaps and implementing a process—not a program—to meet the learners' needs. MCS will develop MTSS processes in all schools, integrating the best practices/research-based tiered-intervention approach:

Tier 1: Universal, research-based instruction for all learners

Tier 2: Whole class; specialized groups of vulnerable students

Tier 3: Intensive individualized instruction, which may also include community, family, and health services in addition to school-based supports¹⁰

MCS will work closely with Ball State, including consultation with interdisciplinary teams of mental health and instructional experts to identify and serve learners who need targeted interventions and supports. In addressing the social and emotional learning of younger children, we will provide educators with professional learning about developmentally appropriate methodology and implement home-school connections and communications about SEL.

Academics and highly competent teaching alone will not guarantee our learners' success. We must attend to our learners' social and emotional development through all of the grades and across all of the contexts. SEL is philosophically grounded and emphasizes belonging and engagement along with "justice-oriented citizenship,"

¹⁰ National Center on Intensive Intervention. <https://intensiveintervention.org/sites/default/files/ConsiderationsTieredBehaviorSupports.pdf>.

where equity, culture, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, identity, exceptionalities, intersectionality of abilities, and language are considered. The MCS-Ball State partnership is committed to implementing a comprehensive SEL program that creates developmentally appropriate opportunities for students—from preschool through high school—to obtain the skills needed to recognize and manage their emotions, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Emphasizing SEL in professional development will provide teachers and staff with the tools to model and create learning environments that are culturally sensitive, inclusive, and respectful of diversity¹¹.

Pillar V: Family and Community Engagement

The benefits of schools partnering with families to improve student achievement are well-documented. For this to occur, we will create both welcoming schools and a variety of opportunities for student voice, parent involvement, and advocacy that contribute to transformed educational experiences. Fortunately, MCS has a history of involving the community in many of the district’s successful programs. We will continue to build on these successes as we identify additional opportunities to engage (current, future, and former) families of students and our community. Among those supporting this vital effort, is the Community Engagement Council (CEC), a team of parents and community stakeholders who support MCS through fundraising, advocacy, and volunteerism. The MCS-Ball State partnership’s focus is on the following opportunities:

1. Supporting and engaging families
2. Community-wide mentorship
3. Schools as community hubs

Supporting and Engaging Families

Muncie has embraced the opportunity this partnership presents, and the Innovation Plan reflects the hopes and dreams of the more than 500 community members and MCS families, parents, and students who participated in dozens of listening sessions and other opportunities to provide insight. The following themes related to family and community engagement emerged from those discussions: (1) foster culturally responsive, welcoming schools that support a range of opportunities that accommodate different schedules and desired levels of involvement; (2) listen well to, and provide clear, consistent communication with MCS families; and (3) broaden engagement beyond traditional notions of involvement.

Our focus on creating a culturally responsive climate acknowledges our embrace of the differences among us. We will create ongoing opportunities to interact with and learn from each other’s backgrounds and experiences with the hope they inspire empathy and deepen connections within our community of lifelong learners. As a result, our faculty and staff will create welcoming schools by treating all families with dignity and respect and making them feel valued as important members of the school community.

Research has documented that listening to and maintaining dialogue with our learners and their families contribute to student retention and success. As such, the district is collaborating with external partners to enhance its communication with MCS students and families. We hired a chief communications officer who will oversee and guide a systematic approach to districtwide communication with our stakeholders and community. Without question, improved and

¹¹ MCS and Ball State have formed a joint SEL working group that is drafting an SEL programming plan to be implemented in the fall of 2020.

sustained communication will increase participation in new programming and revive participation in existing opportunities that have been historically underutilized due to a lack of awareness. One example is Camp Adventure—a day and summer camp that serves children in the surrounding communities. During the recent past, few MCS students participated in the camp’s range of children’s programming, but we are driven to promote the camp and other rewarding opportunities for students and families beyond school grounds.

The district will continue to dialogue with and learn from MCS parents, caregivers, and students to ensure opportunities for engagement are varied to accommodate a range of schedules and desired levels of commitment. The district will also plan activities with increased intention to ensure they are inclusive and enhance relationships, learning, and collaboration among students, parents, teachers, and community members. Our practices will reflect the incorporation of our learning from our diverse students and families.

Community-wide Mentorship: Web of Support

During community listening sessions, MCS heard requests from families and teachers to provide students with greater mentoring and support. We asked our best performing teachers, “What factor is most predictive of student success?” The overwhelming response was that students with supportive adults or mentors achieve the greatest success. Among other factors driving recognition of this profound need, Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Delaware County ceased operations in early 2019. In collaboration with the United Way and George and Frances Ball Foundation, the district is working with the Institute for Community & Adolescent Resiliency (ICAR) to create a “web of support” in Muncie. This community-based approach, called Integrative Youth Development, aims to connect every child to at least five positive, caring adults (community anchors) who set expectations, model good behavior and character development, and provide grace and support. These research-based supports build the strings in the web of support that lifts up our children and youth.

ICAR founder Dr. Derek Peterson facilitated training in late January 2020. The sessions included 20 MCS teachers, 50 MCS high school students, and 30 Muncie leaders. Districts and communities that have engaged in these trainings have demonstrated powerful, positive results related to student achievement and well-being. Specific outcomes reported as a result of these trainings, include:

1. Increased graduation rates, student achievement, and racial tolerance
2. Reduced risk behaviors
3. Improved student proficiency and growth
4. Greater shared responsibility for educating children and youth

Schools as Community Hubs

Community input also indicated the need for schools to provide wrap-around services for students and families¹². The integration of such services transforms school buildings into community hubs, where community partners provide students and families with access to education and resources related to health, well-being, college and career readiness, and school engagement (Coalition for Community Schools, National Center for Community Schools). In sum, MCS will be innovative by opening its buildings for community partners to provide physical and mental health services, early childhood education, food security services, tutors/mentors, college and career development, and adult education.

¹² An example of wrap-around services being implemented is the comprehensive health clinic located at Southside Middle School, which will support a projected university-district-community collaboration to address dietary needs and support physical activity.

Financial Viability

For reasons that have been exhaustively addressed over the past several years, MCS did not exercise prudent financial practices for an extended period of time prior to the state takeover of the district in early 2018. Moving forward, MCS is committed to living within its means, exercising prudent financial management, and adopting balanced budgets on an annual basis. Thus far, MCS has adopted balanced budgets for 2018-2019, 2019-2020, and 2020-2021. The MCS Board and executive leadership are committed to ongoing financial viability, understanding that this will not be without its challenges. In this regard, MCS commissioned a five-year projection from BakerTilly providing for a comprehensive financial plan extending until 2025. While this plan makes certain conservative assumptions, MCS will manage its revenue and expenditures in a manner consistent with the plan, and be aggressively adaptable in the event any of the assumptions prove to be inaccurate¹³. In order to guide us in these uncertain times, we have included baseline and recession projections in the appendix.

We understand that our Education Fund revenue is dependent on enrollment. Therefore, we are aggressively seeking to retain our existing students and attract students in Muncie and Delaware County who have previously made other educational choices. The cornerstone of retaining and attracting students, thereby growing enrollment and revenue, will be the consistent delivery of a first-rate cradle-to-career education that is second to none in our region. Other revenue and margin of excellence funding will be obtained from a number of sources, including the State of Indiana, maximization of federal grants and Title funding, additional philanthropy from both foundations and individuals, and national grants¹⁴. This latter effort will be critical to providing the MCS margin of excellence in our fulfillment of the Academic Innovation Plan goals.

Conclusion

This Academic Innovation and Financial Viability Plan is intended to be a living document that contains two distinct parts: (1) the Innovation Plan that sets forth the collaborative MCS-Ball State partnership to reimagine Muncie's public schools, and (2) the MCS Strategic Plan. The appendix will provide detailed outlines of and a timeline for implementation of the best practices initiatives to achieve our goals. Further, it is anticipated that this document will be reviewed, supplemented and modified on an annual basis at a minimum.

¹³ The Comprehensive Financial Plan for MCS is included within the attached Appendix.

¹⁴ By way of example, to date, MCS has been the recipient of nearly \$4,200,000 in funding from local sources. Additionally, within the past few months, the district has been awarded \$1,321,853 in grant funding from the federal and state government to support school improvement.