WHAT’S GOING ON WITH BALL STATE AND MCS?

That headline is the reason this newsletter exists. It’s the answer to that question, often asked on campus, at Muncie’s schools, and in our community. Representatives from Ball State University and Muncie Community Schools gathered in August 2023 (and again in January 2024; more on Page 3) at the BSU Alumni Center to discuss the MCS-BSU partnership. Convened by the Office of Community Engagement at BSU, it was a wonderful opportunity to share updates on just a few of the many ways the university partners with all of the MCS buildings. And it was clear there were so many stories to tell. If only there was a way to do that. ...

Enter this “Better Together” newsletter. Created early in the partnership by Sari Harris for MCS administrators, faculty and staff, the newsletter shared information about immersive learning projects, clinical practice opportunities and more. This new “Better Together” newsletter is designed for anyone who would like to know more about the partnership - from all perspectives.

We want to hear from you! Send us information about the projects you are working on, the cool partnership stories we should know about, even photos of activities and events.

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In many ways, we’ve discovered that we are, indeed, “better together”! The opening of six writing centers in the greater Muncie area is just one way that our collaboration pays off in Muncie Community Schools and around Delaware County.

Over the past three years, in partnership with Ball State faculty and students, six area schools have launched writing centers. Starting with Burris Laboratory School and Yorktown High School in 2021, Northside Middle School, Southside Middle School and Inspire Academy in 2022 and more recent (and future) grand openings: Muncie Central High School (2023) and Delta High School (spring 2024), these centers follow a similar model but are each unique in their implementation as they work with writers across the spectrum of interest and ability. The launch of the centers has been funded by a grant received and coordinated by Dr. Kendra Lowery (Teachers College) through the Indiana Department of Education. This funding helped to provide funds for training and staffing at each of the centers.

Dr. Susanna Benko, who has spear-headed the project in her role as secondary Language Arts PDS liaison to Muncie Community Schools, describes the confluence of factors that led to the work. As she works weekly with teachers in each of the secondary schools, provides leadership to other local language arts instructors under the Indiana Writing Project banner and worked with other BSU faculty in the English Department—she recognized the value of bringing the idea to local P12 schools. Working with Dr. Jackie Grutsch-McKinney, a world renowned scholar in Writing Center work, they were able to see this dream take shape with funding from the IDOE grant.

“Through this partnership, we are bringing real-world opportunities for reading and writing and building communities where students truly are at the center of literacy work, said Benko. “The energy around these centers is contagious and I hope will support our secondary schools to continue building positive, literacy-rich learning environments for all students!”

So, what IS a writing center? These centers are places where writers can gather and gain feedback; they aim to both normalize and promote writing. Writing centers as an idea grew popular in US colleges and universities in the 1970s and 1980s (Ball State was an early adopter as they started their writing center in 1959!). Since then, the idea has spread to universities across the globe, to secondary schools, to businesses, and to communities. Most centers use peer tutors, as research indicates it is much less intimidating for writers to get feedback from peers and the tutors gain skills needed as they enter college or move into the workforce and beyond.

These writing centers across Muncie and Delaware County are unique: one of just three areas in the country with writing centers connected to one another and working under a hallmark of peer tutoring which brings together writers and leaders in a mini-conference—this year to be held on February 9th on Ball State’s campus. One myth leadership would like to dispel: that the writing centers are designed for struggling writers. While there is certainly help available for those who are struggling, the centers offer so much more: a community for writers to work individually and together, providing feedback for one another. Each writing center offers different hours of operation (some school day hours and some after school hours) and is staffed by teachers of English/Language Arts in each building.

• Dr. Kat Greene, Associate Director The Writing Center
All the way from Seoul, South Korea to Muncie Indiana’s Longfellow Elementary School…introducing, Youn Hong!

This is Dr. Youn Hong’s second year in the Elementary Education department of Ball State University’s Teachers College and her first year as a PDS Liaison at Longfellow Elementary School. Prior to her work on Ball State’s campus, Youn was an elementary school teacher in Seoul, where she participated in educational activist work and was a member of a teachers’ and national workers’ union.

On campus, Dr. Hong teaches courses in social justice education and elementary mathematics education. During her first year at Ball State University, her colleagues introduced her to Longfellow Elementary School. She was impressed by the school’s welcoming students, passionate and dedicated staff, and community-based practice. Youn was particularly intrigued by how Longfellow Elementary School works in collaboration with community and family assets and its willingness to develop curriculum and instructional practices that best suit the students’ and communities’ needs.

Dr. Hong and her colleagues, Dr. Li and Dr. Fisher, implemented three workshops with teachers focusing on developing culturally relevant mathematics education and learning games. During the workshops, teachers explored ways to make their daily math instruction more culturally relevant and responsive to the students and community context. Then, teachers developed story lines and culturally relevant learning game ideas for math designed to motivate and inspire students in learning math and seeing themselves as capable mathematicians. Her team is currently in the process of developing a digital mathematics learning game based on ideas co-developed with teachers at Longfellow Elementary School.

In her ongoing work at Longfellow Elementary School, Dr. Hong is passionate about supporting teachers in utilizing curriculum that best suits their classroom context and students, as well as empowering students to develop a stronger foundation to establish voice and agency in mathematics learning.

WINTER CONVENING PACKED WITH INFO

On January 25, a Winter Convening was held at the Ball State University Alumni Center. It was the second in a series of convenings to share updates on the BSU-MCS partnership. This time, MCS took the lead and offered several updates on its programs and partnerships making a difference in the schools.

Topics included the “Science of Reading,” “Family Navigators and City Connects,” “Social and Emotional Learning,” and “Project Lead the Way.”

(Look for more on these programs and the partnerships that help make them happen in future issues of this newsletter.)