



# Report on Gary Teacher/School Staff Survey and Parent/Community Focus Groups

**It is time to return schools to local control. It is time for district administrators to collaborate with the local teachers union to support educators and provide the schools that students and communities need.**

## Introduction

Controlling the governance of school districts continues to be a tactic used by statehouses to appear concerned about schools and school communities. As of 2018, 20 states had adopted legislation that allows the state to appoint an emergency manager to control and/or supervise the administration and restructuring of municipal finances. Once a municipality is deemed in financial distress, the state can intervene in its finances and operations. For a school district, this means that the elected school board and superintendent are replaced with a state-appointed emergency manager to oversee operations related to budget and procurement, transportation, pupil accounting, staffing and academic programming.

The Gary Teachers Union, among others within the community, has argued that five years after the state's takeover of the Gary Community School Corp., schools are performing worse than ever, with volatile graduation rates, a significant decrease in student enrollment, and the state's worst standardized test scores—all measures that would alarm school administrators in any state. But now union leaders, community leaders and local officials believe it's time to gain back local control of the schools by giving a voice to teachers, principals, parents and families, and community members; retaining collective bargaining rights; locally electing a school board; increasing teacher engagement; recruiting and retaining quality teachers; and building collaborative structures throughout the Gary community to improve students' academic performance and the well-being of students and their families.

### State Takeover

The Gary Community School Corp. has been under state control since 2017, when Indiana legislators transferred control of the district from a locally elected board to a state-hired emergency manager and an appointed Distressed Unit Appeal Board.

The Gary Teachers Union, in partnership with the American Federation of Teachers ([www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org)) and the Schlechty Center ([www.slechtycenter.org](http://www.slechtycenter.org)), has been working with GTU President GlenEva Dunham and a team of teacher leaders (“design team”) to design a process for collecting teacher, school staff, parent and community voices. The design team created an online survey for teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff, which was open from Nov. 8 to Dec. 2, 2022. The purpose of the survey was to gain a better understanding of how teachers and support staff view their profession, how the state takeover has affected teaching and learning, what types of professional development educators need to grow and learn, and their vision for the Gary school community. In addition to the survey, members of the GTU Executive Committee had the opportunity to share their input about the future of Gary schools. Approximately 10 building representatives were interviewed through a series of virtual focus groups, and their input is also included in this report.

The design team also developed a focus group protocol to gain a deeper understanding of parents’ and community members’ current views of the Gary school community and to help envision a future focused on uniting parents and teachers to deliver what students need and build a better life for everyone in the Gary community ([Gary Parent and Community Focus Group Protocol](#)). Parents and community members were invited to participate in the focus groups, which were held Dec. 7, 2022. This report includes a summary of the focus group discussions with 26 parents and members of the Gary community conducted by Monica Solomon of the Schlechty Center at the Gary Teachers Union.

### **About Survey Respondents**

Of the 86 educators who responded, 83.7 percent were teachers; nearly 5 percent were paraprofessionals; and the remaining respondents included IEP coordinators, speech pathologists, library media specialists, behavioral specialists, instructional coaches and social workers. More than half (51.2 percent) of the respondents have worked for the GCSC for more than 20 years, followed by 10.5 percent for 13-20 years, 4.5 percent for 6-12 years, and 33.7 percent for 0-5 years. Nearly 55 percent of respondents teach or provide support to elementary students, followed by 24.4 percent who work with middle school students and nearly 20 percent who work with high school students.

This report highlights the voices of Gary educators, school staff, parents and community members who believe that the future of Gary schools requires a strong investment in the schools and a return to local school governance.

## I. Voice and Local Control

The primary topic of discussion in the parent and community focus groups centered on the need for the GCSC to get out from under state control and to transition back, as a community, to local control of the schools.

The educators who responded to the survey also addressed this issue. Most (84 percent) were aware that the GCSC is under the control of the Distressed Unit Appeal Board. When asked, **“What is your understanding as to why Gary Community School Corporation is under state control?”** 85 percent said they believe that “fiscal mismanagement” was the reason, followed by “poor academic achievement” (68.6 percent) and then “administrative mismanagement” (49 percent).

Parents and community members in the focus groups acknowledged the initial need for state intervention five years ago when the district was in a state of financial emergency. However, they said, the situation has changed, and, for the most part, they agreed it’s time to restore local control to the citizens of Gary. “The state takeover is an experiment that has failed,” one participant said.

Several themes emerged for how restoring local control of Gary schools could lead to vastly improving the lives of students and their families, including establishing trust and creating transparency, restoring democracy, and unifying the community. As one parent said, “You can’t take power away from people and see results.”

### Establishing Trust and Creating Transparency

Parents and community members in the focus groups consistently mentioned the need for the school board and administration to build trust among and between parents, students, teachers and the community. The primary means for building trust is open and honest communication; this is especially true for communicating with parents. “There is not enough communication with parents,” a parent said. “I work with my child, but so many kids in the classroom do not have that at home.” Several participants acknowledged that parents must be more involved but also said that the schools could create more open and welcoming environments. Participants’ comments included:

- “We must create an environment to let parent and community voice grow.”
- “There is intimidation, and everyone is worried about their job.”
- “Parent involvement is key. And getting them involved to feed into a plan for the schools is what needs to happen.”
- “We have rules at the schools about parents coming into the school. Why make it so hard? I understand we need a process and protocols, but parents get discouraged.”
- “The top dribbles it down. It’s all about power and control.”
- “We have to get past intimidation and fear.”

Initially, parents and community members were hopeful that when the state took over, it would support them and provide a road map for academic improvement and financial solvency. But when communication and transparency is lacking, trust erodes: “Five years ago, the state said we are going to help you, but it doesn’t feel like they have plan as there is no communication,” a community member said. Several participants acknowledged the Gary Teachers Union for engaging families and community: “The union is the organizing unit and the key for involving parents and the community. This focus group is a good example of that.”

When trust is established, transparency occurs throughout the system. Several parents and community members shared their frustration with the lack of structures in place that encourage dialogue and transparent analysis and assessment of what’s happening at the central office and throughout the schools. For example, the advisory board appointed by the current administration and school board lacks decision-making power and is not authorized speak on behalf of the community. “I was on the advisory board, and I still did not know what was really going on,” a parent and community member said.

- “The advisory board has no decision-making power.”
- “The advisory board is not allowed in the schools.”
- “We have no idea how they are spending the money. There is no communication.”
- “The DUAB meets in Indianapolis and they don’t listen to us up here.”

## Restoring Democracy

Nearly every focus group participant referenced the state takeover of the GCSC as a civil rights issue and an issue that is damaging to democracy itself. “State control of our schools is a civil rights issue,” a community member said. “They tax our citizens, yet we have no control.”

- “What happened to Gary [the state takeover] is damaging to democracy.”
- “The Black community as a whole is disenfranchised. The state takeover is an infringement of our voting rights.”
- “All of this [state control] makes us reactive and not proactive.”

An elected school board, one elected by the citizens of Gary, would restore democracy, boost accountability and re-establish social capital within the community. While some parents and community members said they wanted an elected school board with some members appointed by the governor, most agreed that school board members should have a vested interested in Gary and the citizens of Gary. “There is a lack of accountability because our school board is appointed. We are groveling to get our voice back,” a community member said.

- “We should have representatives from the parents and teachers, those who have a vested interested in the community.”

- “Not one person who is over our children lives in our community and has a real interest in their well-being.”
- “Why is someone from Valparaiso running our schools?”
- “The governor does not want an elected school board, but the community does.”
- “We should have some elected and some appointed.”
- “Why can’t Gary have the same operating structures [elected school board] as surrounding communities?”
- “They change the laws and governance to get what they want, but we can’t change anything to get what we want and deserve.”
- “We don’t have a school board ... in the true sense ... and the administration has no checks and balances.”
- “When they did what they did with the school board, it made me discouraged.”
- “Those in charge in Indianapolis do what they want to do.”
- “Management does a lot of PR and smoke and mirrors. It’s profit over education.”

## Unifying the Community

Parents and community members overwhelmingly said that the state takeover of the GCSC has caused a disconnect between those running the schools and the broader Gary community. They acknowledged that Gary is, in many ways, “a microcosm of other communities,” reflecting factors such as a diminishing tax base, white flight, middle-class abandonment, racism, poverty and inequities that have left indelible marks on the community. Yet most agreed that the schools themselves should be the unifying force that regenerates the Gary community. “Somehow the community feels that they are not capable or prepared, but we are,” a community member said. “It cannot be that one group holds on to power at the expense of the other. It keeps the community disjointed.”

- “The failure is not just on Gary schools but the system.”
- “When U.S. Steel pulled out of Gary, we were without 66 percent of our tax base. Property taxes will never meet that gap.”

**Charter schools** have created even more division. While parents and community members said that some charter schools are acceptable, most agreed that charter schools have created more division and strain on an already burdened system. “We became a target of private charter schools,” a parent said. “This put a wedge in the community, especially among parents.”

- “Charter schools kick students out; they come back to Gary schools yet the money from the state does not follow the student.”
- “Charter schools hire teachers with emergency permits. ... You don’t even have to have a college degree.”

- “When Roosevelt High School was taken over by Edison, they failed and walked away and dropped it back to us.”
- “The charter schools make money as for-profit schools. It’s not about academics, it’s about the money. We should not be experimenting with students’ lives.”
- “Charter schools use public money. Why are we paying for an 8 percent graduate rate?”
- “What does it say about a community where none of the schools are run by people in Gary? It’s all corporations and charter schools.”

Parents and community members spoke of the need to “speak out” as a community, to stand up and step out on behalf of young people in the community. One parent said, “We can stand in line for Jordans, we have to stand in line to speak up. We have to step up.” Over and over, parents and community members stressed the need to educate, engage and nurture the growth and development of Black youth, especially males.

- “We are doing injustice to our children [takeover], especially our Black boys.”
- “We are losing our Black educators because many of them won’t cower, they feel disrespected.”
- “We have to speak up as a community.”
- “It’s a morale issue, especially for our Black and Brown students.”
- “It’s not just about my son, but the whole classroom, school and community.”
- “Because of DUAB, we are losing a generation of students.”

## **II. Academic Achievement, Teaching and Learning, and Equity**

Although the research on the effects of state takeovers on educational outcomes is mixed and inconclusive, school governance changes—such as when a school superintendent or school board is appointed or when educators are removed from the decision-making process—expose a failure to acknowledge educators and school staff as valued professionals and shifts the focus from supporting teaching and learning to only correcting the fiscal condition of a school district.

All parents and community members in the focus groups stressed the need to improve academic achievement and design specific programs, services and supports to address and meet the needs of Gary students and their families. Suggestions included creating career paths for students beginning in elementary school; reducing class size; providing extracurricular activities such as band, choirs and clubs; employing targeted support for students with special needs; and providing access to current technologies.

- “We need more academic rigor, including career paths for students beginning in elementary school.”
- “We have to create environments where students want to be in school.”

- “They say they have a mission and vision, but look at the data and test scores, the absenteeism and truancy. Gary remains below average. In the five years since Gary has been under state control, we have seen no improvement and the environment is chaotic.”
- “I thought the outside company was to restore GCSC. But their goal was to tear the schools up. Now we have no bands, no choir, no new instruments, no swimming facilities, and our great programs have been destroyed.”

Parents and community members mentioned that the past and current problems plaguing the schools—chronic absenteeism, unwelcoming school environments, disengaged students and low graduation rates—are crippling but solvable.

“Successful schools are dependent on adults who address students and their needs every day,” a focus group participant said. Another said, “Poverty is a barrier but not an excuse. They would not be able to get away with this in Merrillville ... what they are doing here.”

- “Education has gotten worse since the state takeover—learning loss, high absenteeism, lower graduation rates.”
- “Many students feel there is no reason to be in school.”
- “When kids get in trouble, they just suspend them.”
- “Chronic absenteeism is a problem. We need truant officers and not false counts of students.”
- “Gary schools are run like prisons.”
- “Our principals and teachers are under a lot of stress.”
- “We need educators in this system who look like me. We still have predominantly African American teachers, which is good because they understand our students.”

One recent graduate said she is concerned about equity and the quality of education in Gary. “I’m a product of Gary schools and a 2022 valedictorian. I am disappointed with the state of academics,” she said. “There are disparities in technology. The education is not based on what’s best for students, but on what’s cheapest, like Chromebooks and not iPads. Our children do not get what others get in the state.”

Several parents and community members discussed the need to improve, support and fund **career and technical** programs, relevant programming than can equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need for career and life. Some suggested that such curriculum would help restore Gary to a vibrant community where people want to live, work and stay. “We should offer interesting pathways like urban farming, medical careers, aeronautics, design and the arts,” a community member said. “We can create artist and engineers while modeling discipline and empathy.”

- “We have uniqueness here in Gary; we have to build upon it.”
- “We have intelligent students, but we need something new to meet their needs.”

- “We need an Afro-centric curriculum and STEM programs.”
- “We used to have a Gary Career Center. At this point, we have nobody to rebuild our city because we aren’t educating or training our students.”

Five students were briefly interviewed. High school students are interested in having more clubs and after-school activities, better in-school security, an active student council with voice and agency, more school spirit, improved school lunches, up-to-date restroom facilities, and restorative justice practices for students who are disciplined.

A few parents interviewed said that they like the activities offered in school, including Gear Up and the garden club. Lack of after-school transportation remains a challenge for students and families, limiting students’ opportunity to participate.

Educators are also aware of the challenges facing students in the schools. When asked, **“What are some of the challenges and barriers you are facing at this time?”** student behavior and discipline were ranked first and second, respectively, followed by teacher and/or staff shortages, the uncertainty of being under state control, class size, identifying and meeting student needs, and lack of materials and technology. Other challenges for educators included participating in meaningful and valuable professional development, and lack of time to collaborate with colleagues.

Most parents and community members are in favor of providing more autonomy to teachers, allowing them freedom and flexibility to design engaging experiences based on student needs, interests and motives. Administrative support—providing time, space, professional development and technology—is essential to successful schools.

- “Teachers must have autonomy to teach our kids so that they can make progress.”
- “Teachers know what to do, but we have these outsiders that keep telling them what to do.”
- “Every class is different; you can’t just use a set program. We need different kinds of professional development depending on student needs.”
- “One school has had five principals in a short time. It creates instability in the system where nobody can get attached to anyone for long-term gains.”
- “I grew up in Gary. I know our teachers want students to graduate, go to college or work, and be productive.”
- “My son wants to be a doctor. But the curriculum and science labs are lacking. ... How will he compete in corporate America?”

Nearly half (48 percent) of educators who responded to the survey answered no to the question, **“Do you believe that you have a strong voice within your profession?”** Twenty-eight percent said maybe, while 24 percent said yes.



Educators were asked a series of questions about their professional day-to-day work. When asked if they “have the freedom and flexibility to make decisions,” 43.6 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed, while 31 percent agreed or strongly agreed. Less than 27 percent of educators agreed or strongly agreed that they “have the freedom and flexibility to meet students’ needs and interests”; 35 percent somewhat agreed, while 38 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. A majority disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements **“I have time during the day to plan and prepare for instruction and other duties”** (62 percent); **“I have time and space to collaborate with my colleagues”** (55.3 percent, with 30 percent somewhat agreeing); and **“I have time and space to collaborate with my colleague,”** (55.3 percent, with only 30 percent somewhat agreeing).

Another majority (54 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement **“I have adequate time and resources to assess student work and their needs,”** while only 16 percent agreed or strongly agreed. And only 17 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement **“I have the tools and resources to do my work well without being overburdened with paperwork”** 52 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed.

## Professional Development that Supports Teaching and Learning

Teachers were asked to describe the type of professional development that would be most useful and relevant to them at this time. Consistent with their top-rated challenges and barriers, they said they want professional development that addresses student behavior and discipline, support for classroom management, trauma informed and restorative practices, and behavior plans. “We also need a better way to deal with supporting teachers with students who are major disruptors in the classroom setting,” a survey responded noted.

They would also like profession development that is targeted to working with special populations, including students with dyslexia and autism and that addresses speech pathology, social and emotional learning, differentiation, tracking student learning, and current trends and pedagogy to engage students. “I need to understand how to teach thirty (30) plus students that are on five different grade levels and achieve success with all,” a teacher said. “[We need] better methods to engage students in learning,” another commented.

Additionally, several teachers and staff mentioned needing professional development related to their content or grade levels. One teacher requested “professional development so I could grow as an English teacher. I would like to attend writing workshops, reading, station rotation.” Other suggestions included providing technical assistance on programs

### Top responses to “What would make professional learning engaging, applicable, and relevant?”

- “time to implement what I learned” ranked highest (66.3%)
- “content determined with teacher/para input” (60%)
- “aligned and customized to meet teacher/para needs” (60%)

and applications such as Skyward, Zoom and PowerPoint, as well as on employing technology in the classroom to engage students.

The relevance of professional development is also important. Some educators indicated that there are “too many PDs” and said what is needed is time to collaborate with colleagues and support to implement what has been learned. Additionally, more than half of Gary educators said they are in favor of professional learning that is designed and led by teachers.

#### **IV. Envisioning a Future**

For the most part, the parents and community members in the focus groups agreed that local control of Gary schools would allow multiple voices to be heard, enabling schools to meet the needs of students, families and the broader community. They want schools to invest in initiatives that focus on culturally relevant pedagogy; restorative justice practices; recruiting and retaining educators, particularly teachers of color; and meeting the health and well-being needs of students, staff and families. In essence, there is a growing cry to foster community engagement by helping parents and teachers find new ways to work together.

There was considerable interest in the community schools model, in which services are provided beyond the normal confines of the schools through partnerships with local community organizations. Focus group participants identified a number of characteristics of community schools they believed would benefit Gary, including tutoring, enrichment activities, medical services (primary, vision, dental, mental health), adult education, social and emotional learning support, workshops for parents and career-oriented offerings for youth. As one participant said, “Our schools should be the heartbeat of the community.” Another said, “Schools should be the places to go to get support, places where others have an understanding of what parents and community need.”

- “Community schools are a great model, and we have organizations that would want to work with us.”
- “I like the idea of community schools, especially for mental health. It’s such a stigma in our community.”
- “It would be good because we have some connections to organizations.”
- “We lack those things that make schools part of the community—afterschool programs, clubs, food choices for the students, extra support for families.”
- “There are federal programs students can participate in, but our students don’t know about them or have a way to get there to participate.”

Despite frustration and uncertainty, parents and community members interviewed were confident that there is enough civic capacity and social capital to envision a new future, one with a results-oriented shared vision and mission. “Schools are part of the community here in Gary; it’s a network,” a participant said.

A shared vision and mission will require communitywide commitment, far-reaching collaboration, and a common understanding of what education should look like in Gary, focus group participants said. “It’s more than getting out of state control, we need a written plan as to what education could and should look like in Gary,” a community member said. “Ultimately, the residents should have the final say. We have to decide what we want as a community, public schools and charter schools.” A parent said, “No one wanted state takeover. We want to make sure that as parents we are ready. We have to make sure we have an identified a plan.”

- “We must be prepared once we resume control.”
- “We need to be respected and trusted as parents and community members.”
- “We have to be able to work together and collaborate.”
- “When you have so much taken away from you, you have to figure out how to reconstruct so that we repair and restore as a community.”
- “We do not need any more outsiders telling us what to do.”
- “We have to step up more and help others to step up.”
- “I’ve been here my whole life, and I’m going to keep fighting the fight to get our schools back.”
- “Nobody wanted a state takeover. We want to make sure that as parents, we are ready and have an identified plan.”
- “We need a solid plan and not just complaints. Come with possible solutions.”
- “We could revamp our schools and rethink new ways of delivering quality education.”
- “I would like to see that Gary Community School Corp. have comparable instruction as the schools in the surrounding area.”

Most citizens interviewed see the Gary Teachers Union’s role as central to healing and thriving once the state relinquishes state control. “We need a period of reconstruction, and we think the union can help us,” a community member said. “We have people right here in Gary that can take this and turn it around,” another said.

## **Conclusion**

The Gary Community School Corp., like other school districts across the country, has declining enrollment, fiscal shortfalls and a desire for stronger academic achievement. Like other school communities, Gary schools have dedicated educators, parents and community members who want more for students and their future—but leadership is important. Student success and achievement in schools is connected to the retention of educators, school staff and leadership, all of which are directly linked to the governance of the school system. The educators, parents and community of Gary will continue to fight for local control of their schools for the improved future of Gary’s students, its schools and the community.

See how the survey of teachers and support staff aligns with the AFT's report, "[Here Today, Gone Tomorrow?](#)"



*A Union of Professionals*

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The **Schlechy Center** is a private, nonprofit organization committed to partnering with education leaders who are interested in nurturing a culture of engagement in their organizations, with the goal of increasing profound learning for students. Since its founding in 1987, the Schlechy Center has provided strategic consultation, targeted advice, and technical assistance to district and school leaders at all levels. The center supports leaders in creating engagement-focused schools and districts that result in better outcomes for students, their families and the communities in which they live.