

**Benton Community School Corporation**  
**Community Meetings Report**  
January 2020





## Executive Summary

Nearly 400 community members attended community meetings about Benton Community School Corporation's financial situation at four schools over four weeks in January 2020. While this participation is excellent, results are not statistically valid, and are not representative of the opinions of any larger group. Results are, however, valuable to the school board in helping it to make a decision about how to manage the current financial situation when used alongside data from the summer 2019 survey.

### General conclusions:

- This is a challenging situation with no easy way out
- A referendum is supported
- Additional actions, including some budget reductions, fee increases, other means of raising revenue also have some support
- Community members have many good questions. Before the community can accept any proposed solution, they would like more information

### Meeting goal

The primary goal of the meetings was to inform community members of the Benton Community School Corporation's current financial situation and to gather input on community priorities for the school corporation and reaction to proposed solutions.

### Who attended

A variety of community members attended, including senior citizens, farmers, county employees, district employees, parents, newer residents, and long-time residents (many of whom just wrote "life" when asked how long they have been a resident). Of those who provided email addresses, several indicated that they were employed by Purdue University, while others were business owners or district employees. Attendees represented all of the communities in Benton County, with the most being from Fowler and Boswell.

### Meeting attendance:

Boswell – Headcount 130, Signed in 96

Prairie Crossing – Headcount 100, Signed in 76

Otterbein – Headcount 70, Signed in 56

Benton Central – Headcount 80, Signed in 62

TOTAL – Headcount 380, Signed in 290

### Key findings

- Attendees were eager to hear about the schools and clearly had pride in the number of programs offered and what the school district brings to the area.
- There is a strong sense of community.



## Community Meetings

January 8, January 15, January 22, January 29

- Attendees recognized the importance of the district being competitive and stressed the need for programs that emphasized trade, as well as, the AP courses that offer college credit opportunities to students.
- The community is proud of small class sizes and knows it has work to do to retain good teachers and keep programs.
- People are interested in a full range of opportunities that result in students being prepared for college, trade schools and/or the workforce.
- A large majority are in favor of an operating levy referendum. Of those whose votes were recorded, 134 Yes to 39 No. Some attendees said they knew taxes were low and that an increase would be helpful to the district, while others were very resistant and looked elsewhere for options.
- Attendees were split on where to make cuts if needed. Many attendees avoided ranking the options to make cuts saying it was too difficult to choose.
- They want more information - more about the situation, how the district spends money, stories, budget transparency, and to know how exactly the district got in this situation.
- There is some distrust of administration, especially in budgetary issues with many community members noting that “admin cuts” or “admin support staff” were not among the options for cuts and that they should be considered.
- A variety of funding questions came up including the windmill money, rainy day fund, and having students pay to play sports and take part in other activities.

### Recommendations

- Communicate the need, the process, the plan.
  - People want to trust that the school corporation is doing the right thing. Take steps to be more transparent in both district finances and processes in addressing issues to show community members what is going on at the administrative level to continue to keep the district on what many described as “the right track”.
  - People want to know how money is spent, about student enrollment, state funding, district priorities, if administration is right-sized, etc.
  - People want to know how the district is attracting, serving, and retaining students as well as knowing where students are going when they leave the district.
- Recruit ambassadors.
  - Communication with core supporters, key communicators.
- Identify and meet with opinion leaders.
  - Some community members may not be supportive of the proposed solutions, but need special treatment to ensure they are informed.
- Tell your story.
  - Highlight the value of current programs through stories of student, staff, school successes.



## Summary of Data

We combined data from all four nights on demographics notes from table leaders and table scribes to look for trends. Please note that sign-in data is only as good as what residents chose to fill in – many left spaces incomplete; notes from facilitators or scribes at each table varied significantly depending on their style.

### Attendance

#### **Number of attendees, each meeting, and total**

Jan. 8, Boswell – Headcount 130, Signed in 96  
Jan. 15, Prairie Crossing – Headcount 100, Signed in 76  
Jan. 22, Otterbein – Headcount 70, Signed in 56  
Jan. 29, Benton Central – Headcount 80, Signed in 62  
TOTAL – Headcount 380, Signed in 290

#### **Number of residents from each community**

Ambria – 9  
Boswell – 66  
Fowler – 80  
Otterbein – 30  
Oxford – 39  
Pine Village – 2  
Templeton – 3  
West Lafayette – 32  
Blanks - 5

#### **Number of residents who have lived in the community between:**

2014-2019 (5 years) - 10  
2009-2013 (10 years) - 11  
2004-2009 (15 years) - 12  
Prior to 2004 (more than 15 years) – 112  
X – 19  
“Life” - 30  
Blanks – 60

### Table Leader Sheets

#### **List issues that came up at the table that you had a hard time answering**

#### Top Two Questions:

- Wind Turbine money – how much do we still receive if any?
- What about year 9, 10, and beyond? What is the long term plan?



Similar questions:

- How do we prepare for when this gets worse?
- What if \$2M isn't enough?
- Have they planned ahead?

About a referendum:

- What is the time table to run out?
- How much money would the referendum bring in?
- Can there be more transparency of how money would be spent?
- What about farmers? Is there an unfair tax burden?
- Are there opportunities through a county income tax?
- Where is the money going?
- How much will it really cost landowners?
- Is the money going to just go to administration?
- If money from a referendum won't come in until June 2021, will there be cuts made in the 2020-2021 school year?
- How do we get a referendum passed?
- How have past corporations passed a referendum?
- Can we be absolutely certain that property tax will go to BCSC?
- Can there be a differential between impact on land vs. residential?
- Why will farmers take the brunt of the impact?
- What is the plan for the money if the referendum happened and passes?

About budget reductions:

- Why wasn't admin part of the cut list?
- What are other cuts in cost savings that will not impact education?
- Where are the plans for earmarked savings to prevent in the future?
- What are all the associated costs or broad budget reductions?

Other solutions:

- Can we redistrict or consolidate schools?
- How long will Boswell stay open if the referendum passes?
- Where will students go if we close a school?
- Why aren't we using the rainy day fund?
- What is the plan for retaining/getting more students?
- Can we reduce costs by reducing number of days and expanded operating hours each day?
- Can we do pay to play in extracurriculars?
- Can we petition the county for more funding?
- Do AP courses get paid for in student book fees?
- What are other options to help funding?



- Why does BC not have small busses?

About enrollment:

- How will they address declining enrollment?
- How can we analyze the demographics of eastern Benton County (Shelby Township) and attract those students to our school corp?
- Had we not had a decline in enrollment, would we be in this situation?
- Where are the students going?

Other issues:

- How much do we get for vouchers coming in and how many go out?
- Do we get money for AP classes?
- How can we retain students and teachers?
- Why are raises so low over 10 years?
- Why aren't school finances transparent?
- What has our money been used for?
- Where can we get more information?
- What were the costs of recent capital projects?

## Scribe Sheet Questions

### Discussion 1

1. In the presentation it was noted that the BCSC graduation rate is 95%, that 40% of students earn Honors or Technical Honors diplomas, that BCSC offers 35 AP and Dual Credit courses, and offers 19 Varsity Sports, 14 Junior High Sports and 34 active Clubs and Student Organizations.

If you have visited any schools in other school corporations, how do they compare to the programs BCSC offers?

Is BCSC on the right track with the types of programs it offers?

What is the impact of this level of programming on the Benton County community as a whole?

Responses varied across meetings and tables quite a bit, but a number of similar items came up. Discussion ranged quite a bit and meeting facilitators used this sheet to list questions as well as mark responses. The themes below show some of the top responses. (Number of times mentioned is not listed because of the variety of ways scribes/facilitators used the space.)

Ranked responses



## Community Meetings

January 8, January 15, January 22, January 29

1. FFA/Ag/Trade Programs are important
2. We offer a great variety of programs
3. Windmill money
4. Hard to compare to other districts
5. We are on the right track (good but could improve)
6. Stats (including 95% graduation rate and program offerings) seem misleading or incorrect
7. Need to keep programs in order to keep students (if programs go, kids will go)
8. Feel we are providing a great education

Other topics:

- What else are we doing to attract students?
- AP/Dual Credits are important and impressive
- College is not for everyone

2. A bar chart in the presentation showed when expenses began exceeding revenues, and the explanation is that state revenue is stagnant, student enrollment is declining, and staff salaries were increased to remain competitive, among other factors.

Does this information surprise you?

How do you feel about the deficit?

Does the explanation of how this occurred make sense? What questions do you have?

Ranked responses

1. No surprises x15
2. Sad we are in this situation x5
3. Where are students going? X4
4. Need to keep salaries up to keep teachers x4
5. State funding is the biggest problem x3

Other topics

- Need more revenue
- Frustrated with deficit
- Could consolidate schools
- Consider admin cuts
- Problem is with enrollment
- If we make more cuts, enrollment will continue decrease
- Windmills
- How can we prepare?



## Community Meetings

January 8, January 15, January 22, January 29

3. The statement was made, “Without new revenue, we will have to make \$2 million in budget reductions over the next two years starting with the 2020-2021 school year.”

Knowing that the total school corporation budget is approximately \$15 million, and reductions would be about 13% of the budget, how does this make you feel?

**What impacts to students would you anticipate?**

**What impacts to the community would you anticipate?**

Responses to this question varied widely with much of the written comments being questions from the table. A collection of these comments is in the table below:

Prairie Crossing	Otterbein	Boswell	Benton Central
<p><u>Impact</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difference between class of 22 and 32 might have kids left out, not able to help all with needs</li> <li>• Kids are future community leaders</li> <li>• Negative impact to community</li> <li>• More reductions, larger class sizes</li> <li>• Trend in wrong direction</li> <li>• Sad, we need to do something</li> <li>• Students not prepared</li> <li>• Certified staff leave</li> </ul>	<p><u>Feelings</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scary, nervous</li> <li>• Sad</li> <li>• People would be upset</li> </ul> <p><u>Impact</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No positives</li> </ul> <p>Enrollment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued loss in enrollment</li> <li>• Students will leave</li> <li>• More families taking students to other schools</li> </ul>	<p><u>Feelings</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confusing – where do you even start?</li> </ul> <p><u>Impact</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People moving away, lose community unity</li> <li>• Closing school – losing business opportunities, losing residents</li> <li>• Property value</li> <li>• Boswell will close – Transportation/length of time on bus</li> </ul>	<p><u>Feelings</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not right</li> <li>• Not fair to kids – not getting as high quality as a corporation that could provide more</li> <li>• Love the way our school is currently, don’t want change, would rather pay higher taxes to keep the same</li> <li>• Disservice to community</li> <li>• A lot of money to cut</li> <li>• Already been making cuts</li> </ul>





## Community Meetings

January 8, January 15, January 22, January 29

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impacts community with staff turnover</li> <li>• Families will shop for other schools if good teachers leave</li> <li>• More business to come in if schools are strong</li> <li>• Depends on where they make the cuts</li> <li>• If Boswell closed, would lose Warren County students</li> <li>• Will graduation rate be affected?</li> <li>• Concerned we are losing good teachers?</li> <li>• More students leaving – dying out community.</li> </ul> <p><u>Questions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What can we do to increase numbers?</li> <li>• How much money was saved when oxford and fowler combined?</li> <li>• Is there room for consolidation?</li> <li>• What would consolidation look like?</li> <li>• Would we have to redistrict?</li> <li>• Not enough info shared yet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May push other community members out</li> <li>• Lose kids to WL</li> </ul> <p>Staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decrease morale</li> <li>• Less support staff</li> <li>• More teacher turnover</li> </ul> <p>Program/class size</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exaggerate the problem if cuts are made to programs</li> <li>• Students wouldn't get well rounded education if more cuts are made</li> <li>• Large class sizes</li> <li>• Class size go up</li> <li>• More cuts will deprive students</li> <li>• Not just effecting salaries, which impacts students</li> <li>• Big programs removed, sports cuts, hurt our students</li> <li>• AP/Dual credits cut</li> <li>• Bigger classes, less special</li> <li>• Program cuts</li> <li>• Impact quality of education</li> </ul> <p><u>Questions</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overcrowding</li> <li>• Art/music/PE</li> </ul> <p>Staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worry about students losing good teachers</li> <li>• Lose good teachers due to stress</li> <li>• Fear of teacher/para cuts</li> <li>• Loss of counselors/would be negative</li> </ul> <p>Program/class size</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Larger classes per teacher (2)</li> <li>• Less specialized classes</li> </ul> <p>Solutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referendum and cuts both</li> <li>• People will move away if tax increase</li> <li>• Referendum for operating costs not building</li> <li>• Sports first (private funded)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concerned of closing 1 or two elementary schools</li> </ul> <p><u>Impact</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worry of community learning</li> <li>• Bigger class sizes could scare people away</li> <li>• Lose students to other schools with desirable programs</li> <li>• Lose people qualified/good</li> <li>• Smaller numbers</li> <li>• Programming would be cut</li> <li>• Bring morale down</li> <li>• Lose opportunities, less competitive in all areas</li> <li>• Continue to decrease enrollment because if school cannot offer programming, the families will look elsewhere</li> </ul> <p><u>Solutions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Redistricting -with local schools</li> <li>• Add students in our district</li> <li>• Move 6<sup>th</sup> grade to BC?</li> <li>• Need to look at positions</li> </ul>
--	--	--	---



## Community Meetings

January 8, January 15, January 22, January 29

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can investment occur?</li> <li>• How would classes grow?</li> <li>• Break down where the money is going</li> <li>• Taxes may not be the answer</li> <li>• What kind of buses/quality we are purchasing?</li> <li>• Need to supplement the rainy-day fund</li> <li>• Can we tap into income tax revenue?</li> <li>• Concerned about class sizes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where else do you have to cut?</li> <li>• Open enrollment – why are they moving?</li> </ul> <p><u>Solutions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrating things that we doing well</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Windmill money – commissioners, need to ask (2)</li> <li>• Look at tax increases and spend money appropriately</li> </ul> <p><u>Issues</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to keep people here</li> <li>• Aging community</li> <li>• No empty houses</li> <li>• School letter</li> <li>• We did not have to refinance, pay off the debt</li> </ul> <p><u>Questions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cutting teachers?</li> <li>• Cutting Bilingual education?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bigger class sizes, less teachers needed (2 mil = 36 teachers)</li> </ul> <p><u>Issues</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nothing to attract new families</li> <li>• School combinations and closers</li> </ul> <p><u>Questions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where will students go if we close a school?</li> <li>• Could bc absorb that money?</li> <li>• Why aren't we taxing the wind companies to make up the deficit?</li> </ul>
--	--	--	---



## Discussion 2

1. The community survey indicated that 66% of residents would support an increase of \$100 per year to their property taxes to support the school corporation and students. Knowing that an increase of \$100 per year on a \$93,000 home (average home value in Benton County) would be enough to stabilize finances, would you support asking voters to approve an operating levy referendum?

How would you feel about this?

(hash mark next to yes or no)

\*Note – not all groups did hashmarks or voted on the question and asked questions or made notes instead.

Yes – 134

No – 39

Notes section was again used for a variety of questions but the most common themes were:

1. We need transparency/honesty
2. How can we make it more balanced between residential and land owners? Unequal burden.
3. When are we going to run out of money?
4. The smaller the levy, the better of chance
5. Many would lean towards yes even though don't like it
6. Appreciate the solution but what happens 8 years from now?

2. The school corporation has continuously found ways to increase efficiency. It has also increased teacher salaries to bring them up to average in the area in an attempt to retain good teachers. Is BCSC on the right track for managing its finances and its educational programs?

Should BCSC make cuts in addition to increasing revenue?

Do you have suggestions of where the school corporation could be more efficient?

This question was again answered with a variety of statements, questions, and other insights and the most common themes are:

1. Not enough information
2. Bus Routes are poorly planned
3. Need to plan ahead
4. No additional cuts, just find a balance
5. Make cuts and increase revenue



## Community Meetings

January 8, January 15, January 22, January 29

6. Reduce Administration
  7. Should have seen this coming
3. The community opinion survey showed support for these programs. Which is most important to you? What would be your second most important?  
(hash mark next to each)

Many did not do hashmarks, but instead ranked the options or voted on either. Some did not do that at all. The numbers below indicate the total rankings throughout the meetings. Note that since most did not do a tally of votes, there is not an actual count to go along with the ranking.

- Band, Music and Choir Programs- 6
- Classroom materials and supplies -5
- Extracurriculars and athletics in junior and senior high school –4
- Emotional and mental health support – 3
- Academic support for students needing extra help -2
- Science, Technology, Engineering and Math courses -1

Different tables treated this question differently with some doing the actual ranking but most having a discussion about options resulting in a series of notes listed below:

- Can't rank because not all children are the same
- Cut some from each
- Keep all
- High support for mental health and STEM
- Reduce number of aides
- How many voucher kids do we take?
- How many do we lose?
- Too hard to cut!
- Share the pain
- Still have need for trades
- Pay to play
- Cuts for administration
- Share across districts
- No vocational courses listed here
- Nickel and dime across the board – across 10%
- Each thing is important to an individual student depending on their needs and passions



- Can't be numbered in importance. Community has such a vast interest in all that's offered. Depends: 1 number of kids in it 2 what is the cost
- College isn't for everyone – trades

4. If you had to make budget reductions, what would your first choice be? What would your second choice be?  
(Hash mark next to each)

Just like in the previous question, tables treated this question differently from each other. While most didn't have hash marks, the number of comments and votes/rankings for each category has been summarized in the following order

- Reduce number of teachers at all grade levels - 5
- Eliminate elementary art and music programs - 4
- Reduce social and emotional support services - 3
- Close one or more elementary schools - 2
- Reduce number of electives - 1

#### Notes

- Cut Admin (most mentions)
- Look at transportation/bus to save money
- How much money spent on the computers?
- Referendum – use for operating costs
- No winner
- They don't even like any of these. No! Terrible!
- Close elementary and reduce electives
- Possible use building for another use/resource – potential for income?
- Hope it doesn't come to this
- Reduce upper grade levels, NOT elementary
- None of these are viable options
- Need to pass the referendum
- Take what it takes to get students to thrive
- Multiple layers
- What about transportation
- Sell ads
- 4 day week, longer days
- Cut classroom aides
- No consensus
- Too difficult to decide