



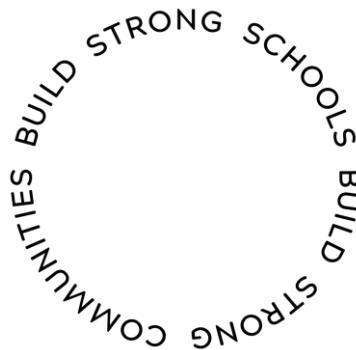
Community  
Foundation of  
Wabash County

*We're here for giving. We're here for good.*

# **Studies for Advancement**

**SUMMARY REPORT**

**September 2017**



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## Acknowledgements

America's public schools are facing unprecedented scrutiny. Never have they been so challenged to defend their role in a democratic society; been so doubted concerning their academic and social effectiveness; and been so maligned regarding their capability to care for children and youth on an ongoing basis. Not surprisingly, the primary purpose of public schools – providing educational and nurturing services for children and youth – is being questioned for its continued benefit in light of new formats for delivering education.

By law, Indiana's public school districts are required to produce high-quality, quantifiable results despite a decreasing availability of the resources needed to achieve those results. Consequently, school districts across the state are examining their practices in order to determine effective and cost efficient ways of preparing all students to live successful, fulfilling lives throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Within this context, the leadership of the Community Foundation of Wabash County and the county's three public school districts boldly committed to researching available resources so that visionary action can be taken, either individually or collectively, in order to maximize educational experiences and outcomes for their students.

It has been my privilege to work with Community Foundation of Wabash County representatives Patty Grant, Julie Garber, and Jan Fahs; Scott Baumgartner, Mike Pettibone, and Steve Flack of the Manchester Community Schools; Mike Keaffaber and Kevin Bowman of MSD of Wabash County; and Jason Callahan and Kim Pinkerton of the Wabash City Schools in coordinating the eleven separate research projects that compose STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT. It is hoped that the information and ideas contained in this document will inspire and enlighten community conversations, thus resulting in the discovery of new opportunities that will enable the students of Wabash County to flourish in every possible way because, in the face of challenge, creative people of good will come together with the unwavering conviction that they will prevail.

Carol Lindquist, Ed.D.  
September 20, 2017

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In early 2017, the Community Foundation of Wabash County invited the county public school districts to study the potential of shared interests with the goal of increasing educational opportunities available to current and future students while also fostering efficiency in the use of increasingly limited resources. All three districts - Manchester Community Schools, Metropolitan School District of Wabash County, and Wabash City Schools - accepted the invitation to participate in STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT, an initiative designed to provide data of importance to conversations within and between districts as they explore future educational opportunities.

The **Demographic Study**, focusing on 2010 - 2026, examined multiple factors that influence the number and age of persons residing in Wabash County. The study identified the increasing median age in Wabash County as the primary factor in the decreasing number of county residents. As the county's median age exceeds 40 years, fewer births will occur, thereby reducing the number of children who will attend school. It is forecast that enrollment in the three county public school districts will decline by 6.1% (311) students over the next ten years. Moreover, current transfer students in the three districts are composed primarily of Wabash County residents rather than students from outside the county, thereby not offsetting any county enrollment decline.

The **Workforce Development Profile** examined current factors influencing employment in northeast Indiana, projected occupations and rates for the next ten years, and related implications for county public school districts. The study found that Wabash County's projected employment needs differ from those found in the state and region. Specifically, the occupations projected for Wabash County alone included a higher proportion of low skilled, low wage positions than were included on the regional and state projections. The predominance of low skill, low wage positions projected for Wabash County has serious implications for schools as students of poverty often struggle academically and as they rely on non-academic services such as the federal free/reduced meal program.

The **Academic Audit** examined three essential structural functions that enable a school district to deliver high quality educational programs in an efficient and effective manner. The capacity of each district was assessed by examining its attention to identified mission and goals, its instructional framework, the financial support provided for instructional endeavors, and its sense of academic urgency in assuring that all students learn at high levels. Access of all students to appropriate educational opportunities and services was assessed by the availability of a standard curriculum, special programs, and qualified teachers. The equity of education provided was assessed through an examination of publicly available student achievement data for each district as a whole and for subgroups of students. While data from each district identified areas for future attention, each district was recognized as providing an appropriate education for students as a whole. It was noted, however, that strained financial resources limit the availability of educational opportunities, especially for secondary students.

The **Analysis of Financial Strength** examined all funding sources and expenditure categories for each district using multiple sources of data. The study noted that Indiana public school districts struggle to fulfill their educational obligations due to funding policies. It further noted that as

financial support for schools is based primarily on official enrollment numbers, districts will experience increased financial challenges if enrollments continue to decline.

The **Facilities Study** examined each school building in the county, assessing structural quality, flexibility in accommodating new and existing educational programs, and possibilities for modification that would increase educational opportunities for students in a cost-effective manner. The assessment found that all buildings are safe and well maintained. It was noted, however, that building designs popular at the time of original construction tend to serve as a significant factor in the configuration and placement of students. In addition, projected enrollment declines will reduce the cost effectiveness of buildings over time.

**Findings of STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT:**

1. County population will continue to decline, resulting in decreased student enrollment.
2. Current student transfers are primarily between county schools, thereby not increasing total enrollment numbers.
3. State funding for schools is currently less than adequate to offer strong, comprehensive educational programs and will decrease as student enrollment declines.
4. State funding for Indiana schools is not keeping pace with the educational expectations enacted by state and federal laws. Districts are being asked to do more with limited funds, a trend that is expected to continue.
5. Projected county jobs are overrepresented by low skill, low wage positions that threaten self-sufficiency and family economic security.
6. Current school facilities are well maintained but limited in the flexibility needed to meet today's needs.
7. Junior high school students have unique developmental needs that are not distinguished from what is generally provided to high school students.

**Recommendation from STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT:**

1. Advocate for the viability of the public schools in Wabash County.
2. Establish a definition of "success" for each school district and identify reachable targets for academic, fiscal, operational and community-based services desired by their respective school districts.
3. Utilize existing community-based efforts to help build coalitions in support of current and future educational efforts.
4. Enhance the desirability of Wabash County educational programs as a means of attracting families seeking educational opportunities for their children.

**Assets available for expanding educational opportunities:**

- Wabash County is home to strong public school districts whose educators are both skilled and deeply committed to helping every student succeed.
- Wabash County is home to two distinct, readily identifiable population centers that should be honored for their individuality and the diverse gifts they bring to the county.
- Wabash County is home to multiple expanding efforts to collaborate around social, cultural, and economic stimulations.
- Wabash County is home to a visionary Community Foundation that provides leadership in initiating public discussion on the very topics that can enhance the quality of life for all residents.

## **HISTORY AND PURPOSE OF THE INITIATIVE**

The Community Foundation of Wabash County is dedicated to serving the county's citizens by providing grants, by assisting individuals and organizations in safeguarding charitable assets needed for the fulfillment of their charitable aspirations, and by linking citizens to resources in order to address issues confronting their shared lives. Fulfillment of this commitment is evident in the Foundation's role as a community leader, convener, and collaborator, thus initiating public debate and discussion regarding important community matters so that diverse parties can work toward unified problem assessment and resolution for the betterment of the community.

Adopted in 2012, the Foundation's strategic plan identifies advancing educational attainment in the county as the principal driver of future economic growth and opportunity, thereby providing a means of raising the county's residents to new levels of prosperity. In January, 2017, the Foundation invited the county's three public school districts to submit joint proposals to fund and coordinate feasibility studies and research regarding the districts' shared interests. In February, all three districts agreed to participate in an initiative titled STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT. Dr. Carol Lindquist, retired educator with experience in educational administration at both the K-12 and higher education levels, was contracted to serve as the coordinator of the initiative.

Recognizing the link between educational attainment and economic security that contributes to the role of the United States as a global leader, federal and state educational policies place the burden of educating children and youth directly on school districts and their communities. In assuming this burden and opportunity, Wabash County, like many Midwestern rural counties, lives with the tension that exists between providing opportunities for change and the desire to retain the best qualities that have made rural America a good place to live. The economic landscape that has been in place for the last 30 years has created an atmosphere of increased educational expectation for all students, and as a result, learning expectations are no longer defined by county lines; instead, students must be prepared to compete regionally, nationally, and internationally. Whether the county's students remain close to home or choose to live elsewhere, it is vital that they must be well prepared to thrive in an ever changing, increasingly complex world. The future of Wabash County rests largely on the education of its children and youth. For this reason, the inherent need to examine today's educational efforts with an understanding that those efforts impact tomorrow's quality of life is central to the focus of STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT.

Local schools have limited influence on federal and state educational requirements affecting their students and have only slightly more influence on acquiring the resources necessary to meet those requirements. Current academic standards, measured by complex and lengthy annual examinations, serve as the basis for assigning labels of quality to teachers, schools, and school districts. Whether or not these labels accurately reflect performance quality, they do influence perceptions held by persons or businesses when they determine their

future participation in the life of a community. At the same time that Indiana has elevated accountability measures, the state legislature has reduced educational financial resources associated with providing all students with various relevant and rigorous experiences that are needed so that all students reach intended levels of learning. Within this context, the three public schools of Wabash County (Manchester Community Schools, Metropolitan School District of Wabash County, and Wabash City Schools) strive daily to meet the educational challenges posed by changing needs and expanding expectations.

To encourage discussion regarding the challenges facing Wabash County and to foster consideration of ways to address them individually and collectively, STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT was created to gather information for district use in planning educational opportunities to meet the needs of current and future students. Throughout this process, the Community Foundation of Wabash County has served as a neutral convener and grant maker without any expectations or advocacy for a particular outcome. The Foundation trusts that the use of the information gleaned from the studies will enrich and expand understanding of educational demands and possibilities within the county.

It is hoped, however, that this initiative compels robust community discourse about the shared futures of the county schools as it moves discussion beyond prior assumptions about the motives, outcomes, or impact of such considerations. Individual reports provided to the school districts and summarized in this report to the Foundation represent the findings and opinions of their authors and were not guided by any opinions or actions of the Community Foundation. Additionally, the language of this report and the presentation of its content in public settings includes terms such as reorganization, reconfiguration, consolidation and merger. None of these terms carries a predetermined meaning other than to represent the act or process of changing the way something is organized. Until any such a change is defined, the terms are used for a general reference and not as part of a specific plan.

## **STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT REPORTS**

STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT includes five topical studies designed to develop a common set of metrics that can be disaggregated by each school district while also providing meaningful data when used to examine existing and future patterns that cross district lines. A set of five reports personalized for each district was developed and shared with each superintendent and a board representative in a meeting held in early August. The reported findings were intended to encourage meaningful conversations within and between school districts according to their expressed needs. Used together, the five studies span the critical elements of services provided by each of the school districts, including:

- Demographic Study for Wabash County
- Workforce Development Profile for Wabash County
- Academic Audit for each School District
- Analysis of Financial Strength for each School District
- Facilities Study for each School District

The first four studies connect the critical functions of a school district by examining the number of students enrolled, what they are learning, how their learning experiences prepare them for adult lives, and the cost implications involved in providing appropriate learning experiences. These studies are closely connected because the current state formula for determining the tax allocation in the district's general fund is based on student enrollment. As a result, the course and program offerings provided by a district are dependent on the funding level provided by the state and by any local revenue approved by community action.

The fifth study examines the physical spaces available to host such learning and considers the size, quality, flexible use, and safety of each district's physical plants. In a process such as STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT, questions raised immediately by constituents quite naturally concern the possible effects of any outcomes on individuals, groups of individuals, organizations, and institutions. For example, a parent might ask "Where will my 4<sup>th</sup> grader attend junior high school three years from now?" or "How much time will my 2<sup>nd</sup> grader spend on the school bus each day?" A group of families living in one part of the county may be concerned about forming new relationships with families from another part of the county. Members of various organizations may voice concerns about the effect of possible changes on athletic teams, staff configurations, and community identity. While such questions become essential considerations that must be included in discernment processes and answered over time, these important details cannot be answered fully until broader issues of financial viability and needed educational programs are addressed. In reality, any determination of the use of facilities (e.g., grade level configurations, number of schools at various grade levels, student enrollment in each building) should be the final consideration undertaken in response to the other four studies conducted as part of the initiative.

This report presents a county-wide summary of each of the five topical reports presented to the three school districts. Seven findings that relate to all districts suggest areas for additional consideration because of their impact on current and future students. These findings are followed by four recommendations for additional action within and between the three school communities. The report concludes by identifying Wabash County assets through which desired, cost-effective educational services may be determined and adopted. In the final analysis, the responsibility and the opportunity to build the future of Wabash County rests with its residents.

**Note:** Language taken directly from the original reports to the school districts appears in italics and is credited to the author of the report.



## Demographic Study for Wabash County

A reliable forecast of the number of children and youth residing in the district and the number of students likely to enroll in each school is an essential factor in effective district planning for several reasons. Most importantly, the distribution of state tax monies to the general fund of each district is based primarily on the average daily members of enrolled students (ADM), thereby linking demographic forecasting to financial predictions. Understanding Wabash County's demographic characteristics informs the school districts about where residents are likely to locate, thereby linking the demographic study to all aspects of planning academic services and the resources that support them.

Dr. Jerome McKibben, president of nationally recognized McKibben Demographics, developed a population and enrollment forecast through 2026 for each of the three school districts in Wabash County. An introduction to the report distinguishes between terms used throughout the study and identifies the assumptions upon which the forecasts are based.

*By demographic principle, distinctions are made between projections and forecasts. A projection extrapolates the past (and present) into the future with little or no attempt to take into account any factors that may impact the extrapolation (e.g., changes in fertility rates, housing patterns or migration patterns) while a forecast results when a projection is modified by reasoning to take into account the aforementioned factors.*

*The manifest purpose of these forecasts is to ascertain the demographic factors that will ultimately influence the enrollment levels in the district's schools. There are of course, other non-demographic factors that affect enrollment levels over time. These factors include, but are not limited to transfer policies within the district, student transfers to and from neighboring districts, placement of 'special programs' within school facilities that may serve students from outside the attendance area, state or federal mandates that dictate the movement of students from one facility to another (No Child Left Behind was an excellent example of this factor), the development of charter schools in the district, the prevalence of home schooling in the area, and the dynamics of local private schools.*

Data used for the forecasts were provided through multiple sources including each of the Wabash County school districts, Indiana Department of Education grade and attendance center reports, Indiana Department of Health birth and death reports, Internal Revenue Service migration reports, and reports from the United States Bureau of the Census.

In developing the forecasts, several assumptions were made, including:

- County fertility and mortality rates will stay fairly constant.
- Current economic, political, social, and environmental factors in the county will remain fairly constant, with no major expansions or contractions expected.
- National, state, and regional economic conditions will remain fairly constant, notably:
  - No deep recession will be experienced during the time of the forecast;

- Interest rates will fluctuate less than one percentage point in the short term;
- Restrictions affecting mortgage lending, foreclosures, and housing newbuilds, turnover rates, and home sales will remain constant;
- The county unemployment rate will remain below 7.0%; and
- Wabash County businesses will remain viable.
- The rate of students transferring into and out of the Wabash County school districts will remain at the 2011-12 to 2015-16 average. This factor is especially important because the majority of transfers have come from within the county rather than from non-county school districts. The average number of transfers among districts was determined over a three-year period in order to provide a stable reference number for future forecasts.
- State guidelines for school vouchers and/or inter-district transfers will remain substantially constant. Currently, Indiana is the only state that allows for inter-district transfers while also providing a generous voucher program.
- Private school and home school attendance rates remain fairly constant.

Findings and Explanations/Implications (See Appendix A)

1. *The resident total fertility rate for Wabash County School districts over the life of the forecasts are below replacement level. (1.62 for Manchester Community Schools, 1.98 for Wabash City Schools, and 1.84 for MSD of Wabash County versus the replacement level of 2.1.)*

The replacement level generally required for a population to remain constant is 2.1. It is forecast that the number of births in Wabash County (2017-2026) will fall below the number of deaths during that same period. Increases in the number of deaths are due to the general aging of the population, especially an increase in the number of residents 65 years of age and older.

2. *The local 18-24 year old population continues to leave the districts, going to college or moving to other urbanized areas. This population group accounts for the largest segment of the three district's out-migration flows.*

Young adults in this age range frequently leave home for the first time as they seek educational or employment opportunities that may not be available locally. In addition, first-time independent living arrangements are usually located in rental units. Rental housing is generally available in Wabash and North Manchester but is very limited in rural areas of Wabash County.

3. *Most in-migration to the districts continues to occur in the 0-to-9 age and 25-to-39 year old age groups.*

Most of the people moving into Wabash County are likely to be younger adults and their elementary aged children. When young adults in this age range leave the area, the decision of whether or not to return to the area is usually based on

the availability of starter homes that may be purchased, educational opportunities for their children, and meaningful jobs that fulfill career interests and align with post-secondary training that has been completed.

- 4. *The median age of the Manchester Community Schools’ attendance area population will increase from 37.9 in 2010 to 39.6 in 2025.  
The median age of the Wabash City Schools’ attendance area population will increase from 39.8 in 2010 to 42.3 in 2025.  
The median age of the MSD of Wabash County’s attendance area population will increase from 43.9 in 2010 to 46.6 in 2025.*

The current median age in each of the three district attendance areas is approaching or exceeds 40, the age after which the number of children born drops dramatically. As evidenced by the increasing median age, residents of Wabash County are getting older as a total population and, therefore, will produce fewer children who will attend school in the county.

- 5. *The primary factors causing all three districts’ enrollment to decrease over the next 10 years are the increase in the number of empty nest households, and a modest rate of in-migration of young families.*

The population of Wabash County is aging. Schools can expect that their enrollments will decline because of a decrease in the number of children and youth who live in the county. This loss will not be offset by the number of school-aged children moving into the county.

- 6. *Even if each district continues to have some annual new home construction, the rate, magnitude and price of existing home sales will become the increasingly dominant factor affecting the amount of population and enrollment change.*

Future sales trends for new and existing homes do not generally represent an increase in population. They are directly related to the availability of homes and the income levels of current or future residents who may be potential home buyers.

- 7. Total district enrollment for county schools is forecast to decline a total of 311 students by 2026-2027 as reflected in the following table.

District	# change between 2016-17 and 2021-22	% change between 2016-17 and 2021-22	# change between 2021-22 and 2026-27	% change between 2021-22 and 2026-27
Manchester	-64	-4.1%	-113	-7.5%
Wabash City	+102	+6.8%	-9	-0.6%
MSD Wabash County	-186	-9.1%	-41	-2.2%

## Summary

Based on recent data for births, deaths, in-migration, and out-migration, the resident population of Wabash County declined from 32,631 to 32,420 during 2010-2015, a loss of 211 people (0.6 %). A further decline is forecasted for 2015-2020, when the population is expected to decline from 32,420 to 32,030, a loss of an additional 390 residents (a 1.2 % decrease from 2015 or a 1.8% decrease from 2010). This ongoing trend is forecast to accelerate from 2020-2025, when a further decline of 630 residents (a 2.0 % decline from 2020; 3.1 % from 2015; and 3.8 % from 2010) is anticipated.

Additionally, by 2026 the county's median age is forecast to be more than 40, the age at which the childbearing rate decreases dramatically. Because there will be fewer persons in the county and fewer persons of childbearing age, fewer children who will eventually enroll in the county's school systems will be born.

Given these factors, it is forecast that total enrollment in the Wabash County school districts will decrease by 148 students from 2016-2017 to 2021-2022 and by an additional 163 students from 2021-2022 to 2026-2027. This total loss of 311 students will represent a decrease of 6.1 % from total enrollment over a ten year period. Because of the increased median age in the county and the corresponding decrease in the number of children born, it is likely that this trend will continue (and, perhaps, accelerate further) after 2027.

It should be noted that each of the districts experienced a sizeable number of transfer students enrolling in its schools. Enrollment data show that these students are not from districts outside the county; instead, the majority of transfer students moved from district to district within the county. As a result, the transfer process does not offset decreases in the number of resident children in each district, and overall enrollment in the three districts has not increased due to transfers. Unless the population of Wabash County (including school-aged children) increases, schools will sustain current enrollment levels only if non-county students transfer into their districts. Analysis of area populations surrounding Wabash County do not reflect sufficient numbers of school-aged children to offset the decline forecast for the three county school districts.

## **Workforce Development Profile**

Since its beginning in the mid-1600s, American public education has focused on the time honored 3 R's. Over time, other components have been added to school curricula in response to changing cultural, social, economic, and political factors. Within that evolving context, a dramatic change occurred with the publication of *A Nation At Risk* (1983). That document contended that the country's economic future and, hence, its security was in jeopardy because far too many students were graduating from high school without the personal and academic skills necessary to be college and/or career ready. In response, demands for substantial changes

in both the “what” and the “how” of American education became and continue to be part of the public discourse on education.

The contemporary standards movement was the result as politicians, business people, educators, and the public-at-large demanding that schools do three things: 1) establish specific standards that define in detail what students should know and should be able to do (especially with reference to skills in using English and mathematics); 2) teach to the standards with considerable specificity and, in some cases, rigidity; and 3) test students to determine if they had, indeed, developed sufficient, standards-based proficiency in the subjects that were being tested. Given this focus and simultaneous changes in workplace needs, workforce development on the national, state, and local levels became the subject of intense scrutiny.

Within that context, Dr. Carol Lindquist generated a Workforce Development Profile utilizing the guidance of personnel from WorkOne and information available through the Indiana Department of Workforce Development. Not intended as a detailed analysis of future labor patterns, this report examines general employment trends in Economic Growth Region 3 (EGR 3, Northeast Indiana) and implications for public schools in Wabash County that are contained in those trends. The report establishes a link between the technical and employability skills required for successful participation in the area labor force and the development of those skills in the public school setting. It then presents an overview statistical analysis of employment trends on state, regional (EGR 3), and Wabash County levels. The report concludes by suggesting ways to align public school learning experiences with regional economic and workforce development efforts.

### Regional Conditions and Challenges

Two overriding themes emerged when evaluating regional economic conditions. First, Indiana and neighboring states are located in the heart of the Midwest Rust Belt. As such, many well-documented and well-known challenges facing large and small communities in the Midwest have also been identified as affecting the region and the county. Second, in response to the Rust Belt phenomenon, regional and local organizations have initiated efforts to reverse the declining trend that impacts the area. Following the example established by the Lumina Foundation, the Northeast Regional Partnership adopted *The Big Goal*, a collaborative program designed to ensure that 60% of adults in EGR 3 will hold high quality college degrees and/or credentials by 2025. Similarly, Local Economic Development Organizations (LEDOs) have attempted to attract businesses that can provide meaningful employment for current and future residents to each county. The work of the Community Foundation is aligned with these efforts.

Several critical factors complicate the process of growing the region’s economic base. First, as the region’s population ages, so does its labor force as approximately 20% of the current labor force nears the age of retirement. Second, educational levels in Wabash County show that approximately 55% of adults over age 25 hold a high school diploma or less while approximately 25% of that same population holds a post-secondary degree. This factor is significant because lesser-skilled workers are challenged to attract businesses that require

highly-skilled workers as defined by degrees or industry credentials. Third, the nature of work is changing as single-skill positions are being replaced by work that demands multi-skilled approaches along with high levels of competence in mathematics and communications. Fourth, rapid increases in the use of technology in the workplace have redefined work requirements, allocating repetitive work tasks to programmed technology and innovative problem-solving tasks to human workers. Fifth, the public in general and educators in particular may not be aware of changes in current work tasks or the conditions in which work occurs. This lack of accurate information in areas such as advanced manufacturing, entrepreneurship, or specialization in the sciences can negatively affect career planning conversations between youth and those who guide their career planning.

### Labor Force Profile

The Labor Force Profile compares and contrasts projected occupational levels for the state, region, and Wabash County using the following metrics: 1) “2017 Hoosier Hot 50 Jobs”; 2) “Region 3 Hot 50 Jobs”; and 3) “Top 40” employment data specific to the county. For each occupation listed, three data points (i.e., occupational title as assigned by the United States Department of Labor, representative earnings for the occupation, and required level of educational attainment necessary for employment in the given occupation) were provided. Educational levels identified were on the job training, a high school diploma or an equivalent measure, certification, an associate’s degree, a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and a doctorate or equivalent professional degree. In the various projections, each occupation was given a numerical ranking associated with future employment trends and related measures.

In comparing the “Hoosiers Hot 50” and “Region 3 Hot 50”, the seven (7) highest ranked occupations statewide were also the seven (7) highest ranked for Region 3, although not in the same order. Eighteen (18) of the “Region 3 Hot 50” occupations did not appear on the statewide list, but nine (9) of those eighteen (18) occupations appeared on the county list.

Eight (8) of the top 10 occupations for Wabash County were included on the statewide list, with four (4) of them being in the top 10 statewide ranking. However, eight (8) of the “Top 40” county occupations did not appear on either the state or the regional lists.

A different pattern emerged when second tier “Hoosier Hot 50” occupations were analyzed. Within the list of state occupations ranked in the 11-20 level, five (5) were also on the county “Top 40” list. However, none of the other five (5) state-ranked occupations appeared on the listing of “Top 40” occupations found in the county. This means that occupations projected for Wabash County differ from the occupations projected for other parts of the state.

Similar differences that distinguish the statewide rankings from the county lists were found when comparing educational attainment levels required for job entry positions. Of the “Top 40” occupations projected for Wabash County alone, 13 required a post-secondary degree, 8 required industry certifications, while 18 or 45% of them required a high school diploma or less education. Occupations that require a higher skill level, whether measured by degree or credential, generally earn significantly more income over a lifetime of work than those requiring only a general skill level. The predominance of low skill, low wage positions

projected for Wabash County has serious implications for schools as students of poverty often struggle academically and as they rely on non-academic services.

While these projections change over time, these analyses provide a picture that is important as all future employment trends are considered because they show that expectations for employment and required corresponding educational levels in Wabash County differ significantly from expectations for employment found in EGR 3 and throughout the state. Two consequences may be the result if these projections become reality.

- It is probable that a high percentage of graduates from the county's high schools who earn bachelor's degrees (or higher) will not live and work in the county after graduation from college due to the limited number of employment opportunities in the county that require a college degree. If realized, this pattern could diminish efforts to improve the economic circumstances of the county and potentially inhibit the in-migration of businesses and/or new families.
- Specific reference to the representative earnings for various occupations should be a matter of concern, especially as that data point affects future quality of life issues for county residents. For example, nine (9) occupations that appear on the county "Top 40" list do not appear on either the state or regional "Top 50" lists. Of those nine occupations, the representative earnings for seven (7) would qualify children from a family of four for reduced price school lunches; one (1) would qualify the same family's children for free school lunches; and the representative earnings from the ninth occupation would exceed the reduced lunch benchmark for a family of four by less than \$ 100.00 annually. (n.b., Qualifying for reduced price or free school lunches, which is based on family size and income, is one of the statistics used most frequently in defining poverty.)

It is important to note that projections do not represent inevitable outcomes; rather, they suggest future trends based on past and current situations. Thus, current efforts to increase the skills found in the county labor force and efforts to bring higher-skilled employment opportunities to the county represent a momentum for change.

Beyond knowledge and quantifiable skills, candidates for meaningful employment must also demonstrate personal attributes that are necessary for success in the work place. According to the United States Department of Labor, examples of these employability skills include: 1) communication skills; 2) enthusiasm and attitude; 3) teamwork; 4) networking; 5) problem solving and critical thinking; and 6) professionalism. A comprehensive review of job postings from Wabash County employers over the course of a full year showed a high correlation between desired competencies and the personal attributes listed above. Given the importance of these approaches to the work place, schools (especially those serving the 14-21 year-old age group) need to include discussions about and training of these attributes as part of school curricula.

## Implications for Schools

While preparing individuals for the work force is a shared responsibility involving families, schools, and communities, schools fulfill a particular role in the process. They are expected to build a foundation of knowledge and skills in every student through which advanced understanding and application of understanding can be developed. They are also expected to enhance the employability skills that enable a worker to function independently and in a group while seeking and completing tasks in a timely fashion. Finally, schools are required to guide students through the exploration of career options while making academic decisions that will enable them to enter their careers of choice. Four suggestions can enhance the effectiveness of schools in these areas.

1. School counselors must know how to access and interpret vast amounts of information on county, regional, state, national, and international employment trends. Training, technology, and time within their work schedules is essential if counselors are to be aware of current information available and needed to guide student career planning.
2. It is essential that opportunities for teachers and school counselors to participate in externships in which they experience business and industry environments that enable them to assist more effectively with student career planning are provided. Such background knowledge also enables educators to use career-specific examples and vocabulary during instruction, which helps students to see relationships between educational concepts of the classroom and the world of work.
3. Schools would be well served by exploring Indiana Workforce Development opportunities, including the Governor's Work Ethic Certification and Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs.
4. Heartland Career Center (HCC) remains a critical resource for both schools and the county at large as it addresses constantly changing work demands in the region. Continued efforts to support visionary leadership at HCC and to provide equipment and financial support for program expansion are important to the ongoing impact of services provided through Heartland.
5. Schools could partner with local business and industry in hosting opportunities for families of students to observe work production, to talk with workers about the job expectations, and to observe the work environment. Such information would enhance understanding of the labor process, creation of work products, and working conditions

## Summary

Future employment trends for Wabash County reflect a struggle to balance the provision of skilled workers with the availability of meaningful job opportunities. Widespread efforts to attract high wage positions to the county require the availability of a skilled workforce, but skilled workers want to be assured that work commensurate with their skills awaits them should they remain in or relocate to Wabash County. This Workforce Profile identifies a gap between the educational demands of projected jobs for the state and region



and the educational demand of projected jobs for Wabash County. Current trends show that Wabash County jobs will require less formal education and training than jobs outside the county. As a result, the income provided from this less skilled employment is projected to be less than the income levels of more highly skilled jobs outside the county. Deeper analysis of this projection can serve as support for economic development efforts already underway as a means of leveraging new relationships to change projected trends.

Schools must do their part in providing a comprehensive education for each and every student; this training must include employability skills that are critical to success in the workplace. In support of this effort, school personnel are strongly encouraged to learn techniques for accessing, interpreting, and communicating information about the contemporary world of work. Furthermore, the schools are encouraged to build strong relationships with county businesses and industries so that students, teachers, and their families are able to connect educational experiences with the future work lives of students. The anticipated workplace needs of Wabash County, outlined in this report, provide a powerful opportunity to engage in immediate efforts to offset undesired outcomes. When used in cooperation with other efforts to ensure that county high school graduates are well prepared for additional education, immediate meaningful employment, or military service after high school, considerable potential awaits schools and communities that jointly investigate new ways to offer existing services or to create new services that prepare students for a prosperous future.

## **Academic Audit**

As established by the Indiana state constitution, expectations for K-12 academic programs are enacted through laws and are regulated by the Indiana Department of Education (IDOE). Regularly required reports filed by the individual school districts monitor compliance with state expectations, and the IDOE may intervene when compliance varies from designated expectations. As of September 1, 2017, the academic performance of all three Wabash County public school districts falls within the range of acceptable compliance in all areas monitored by the state.

Conducted by Dr. Carol Lindquist, an Academic Audit was developed for each county public school district in order to analyze each district's sufficiency of current resources and practices for preparing students for successful lives during their formative years and after high school. The findings were shared with the school districts independently to encourage reflection on each district's academic trajectory based on current resources and practices. Three major educational concepts – Capacity, Adequacy, and Equity – served as the filters for this analysis, and specific suggestions for each district as well as a common set of considerations important to any conversations about sharing academically-related services were developed.

## Capacity

Capacity is defined as *the policies, organizational structures, practices, capabilities, and willingness of a school district to provide each student with an appropriate education as identified by the district. It is the critical factor that allows a school district to accomplish what its wishes and is required to accomplish. Capacity reflects the district's organizational structure as well as the systems of interaction and accountability that unify components of that structure. Examination of each district's capacity focused on each district's: 1) identified mission, priorities, and goals; 2) instructional framework; 3) financial support for instructional endeavors; and 4) academic urgency.*

The Board of School Trustees of each district has adopted some form of mission, vision, or goal statement; these statements may be found on their respective district websites. The importance of this function cannot be overstated as the language and content in such statements provide direction and parameters for all decisions made in a district. Regularly measured, updated, and communicated mission, vision, and goals statements serve as internal drivers of intended outcomes while also demonstrating accountability for performance to the school community that entrusts its children to the district's care. As such, districts are encouraged to examine their processes for routinely using mission, vision, and goals statements to monitor and share information regarding academic performance and the use of district resources that support academic achievement.

Each district demonstrated some form of instructional framework that identifies and clarifies the expectations placed on educators as part of the instructional process. These expectations include: 1) to teach content knowledge and skills; 2) to review student progress toward intended outcomes using designated measures of learning; and 3) to modify instructional practices or resources, as needed, to ensure that all students meet required levels of learning while also challenging those students who exceed required levels. Clarity of district expectations for educator practice, from principal to classroom assistant, enhances the flow of communication and accountability for professional responsibility. Each district is encouraged to examine the clarity of its two-way accountability model through which professional expectations are identified to persons who are designated to implement them and, concurrently, those persons are able to request needed support for the professional challenges they encounter.

The availability of financial resources to hire appropriately credentialed teachers and to provide the instructional resources required for students to learn and practice academic skill development is critical to the success of each district's academic program. IDOE policies compel school districts to focus their financial resources on classroom instruction and to share publicly the percentage of their budgets that are devoted to the classroom. Data released by the districts show considerable variation in the amounts of money going to individual students for purposes of instruction and the percentage of the budget that such expenditures represent. For each of the Wabash County public school districts, the per pupil cost is below the state average. (Data for White's Junior-Senior High School are not included in the MSD of Wabash County expenditures.) These lower averages also represent a larger percent of each district's budget

than the state average, an indication that each district is struggling to have sufficient funding to meet both state expectations and local needs.

The last element of district Capacity is academic urgency, a concept that involves moving past the idea that “What we have is good enough,” thus demonstrating a willingness to pose tough, complex, and sometimes uncomfortable questions that lead to meaningful consideration of what is best for contemporary students. Of necessity, that consideration includes both an appreciation for what has been and a willingness to examine new options as board members, district personnel, and the community in general research, evaluate, debate, determine, and adopt programs and practices that will serve current and future students. Participation in STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT and the adoption of promising practices such as realigning high school courses for students so that they can transition smoothly into post-secondary training or the creation of unique and meaningful elementary programs to build student engagement in learning are evidence of each district’s recognition that what is provided to its students must grow and change to meet new demands. With increased community dialogue about potential future options, as suggested through the work of the Community Foundation, the motivation for building academic urgency can readily shift from fearing what the future might hold to taking bold steps that will help create a future that reflects the spirit and desires of the residents of Wabash County.

#### Access

*Access is the availability of all educational opportunities and services to all students, regardless of personal characteristics, socio-economic level, past performance or geographical location. Examination of each district’s capacity focused on each district’s: 1) availability of the standard curriculum; 2) availability of special programs; and 3) staffing of qualified teachers.*

State law prescribes minimal academic requirements for each accredited school; in addition to the content knowledge and skills normally associated with state academic standards, these requirements mandate instruction on such topics as citizenship, bullying prevention, basic civics, personal financial responsibility, and career awareness.

Designated courses must be offered to fulfill the requirements of each of the four state-approved high school diplomas (Honors Academic, Honors Technical, Core 40, and General). Each of the Wabash County public school districts complies with all aspects of required state curricula, and each district offers learning opportunities that reflect local preferences for world languages, the arts, sciences, and career development at all levels.

Programs that address students’ specialized needs or interests are offered in all three districts, and each district complies with all legal requirements for state or federally regulated programs (i.e., Title I, Special Education). Each district is encouraged to update its practices regularly and in tandem with training and program opportunities made available by the state. Of special note is each district’s commitment to embed technology into the instructional process as devices that expand student opportunities beyond traditional resources, textbooks, maps, and field experiences are used frequently. Efforts to build teacher skills in using computers in the classroom and on days when students do not meet in the school facility are to

be commended. The importance of this focus should be stressed because of technology's role as the "disruptive innovation" that is redefining "knowledge" so that students may develop thinking skills that will one day solve the significant, real-world problems that threaten the lives of all people. As the districts and their communities embrace technology for learning and the production of thought outcomes, the county is well positioned to be a model of learning throughout the region. However, the technological foresight of the school districts necessarily involves a financial cost that has implications for the funding sources through which technology devices are acquired and maintained.

The IDOE requires that public school educators hold specific credentials. All three Wabash County districts have developed strong teams of educators, blending a mixture of licensing areas, past experiences, and teaching methodologies to ensure that students experience a broad range of personal and academic interactions that will serve them well as they leave the educational setting and participate in adult community life.

While each district meets state expectations for courses offered and for staffing classrooms with properly credentialed teachers, it is important to note that all three districts identify significant challenges in meeting these two requirements. Specifically, as students progress through the elementary grades, their interests and needs broaden beyond those addressed in the self-contained classrooms of the lower grades. Similarly, as older students shift to individual courses in various content areas, the need for topical courses and different content levels within various topics develops. In schools with limited enrollment, it is highly unlikely that a consistent number of students (i.e., enough to fill a classroom) will select each of the courses offered by the school. This requires the school to choose between offering a course only if/when sufficient numbers of students request it or allocating teachers to courses with low enrollment while realizing that doing so either forces other teachers to teach overloaded courses or for the district to sacrifice efficiency in the process of assigning students to teachers. Each county school district is to be commended for addressing this challenge creatively, but it is also vital to note that such actions rarely offset the need for sufficient teaching staff to build low-enrolled classes that address specialized interests (i.e., physics, media production, Mandarin Chinese) into the overall academic program. Currently each county school district has a low student/teacher ratio, evidence of commitment to offer low-enrollment courses despite the financial strain of retaining as many teachers as possible. Projected financial limitations are likely to reduce such important opportunities for students even though they are expected to attain increased knowledge and skill required for post-secondary success.

### Equity

Achieving equity in a school district requires *equivalent participation and/or success among all identifiable groups*. Differing from Access, which focuses on what is provided by a school district, Equity examines: 1) overall success of the student body in general; 2) disaggregated data regarding those students who are not successful; and 3) support for students who need special assistance in order to meet district and state academic goals.

The overall success of students within each district is currently represented by the metrics of the state accountability system, an approach that relies upon standardized measures to generate letter grades for schools and districts. Effective arguments can be made that both the tools that generate student achievement data and the algorithm used to create the letter grades are flawed and, likely, they are. Furthermore, the motivation for labeling schools and educators (and the resulting benefits and/or disadvantages that ensue from such labeling) can be questioned. Because state academic standards and the assessment tools that measure them have changed frequently in recent years, the available information should be evaluated within the context of additional data. Meaningful statements of district mission, vision, and goals, when monitored by appropriate measurements, serve to expand understanding of the success of students within the district; therefore, the earlier recommendation that each district should have clearly articulated definitions of success, particularly in the area of student achievement, is reiterated as a means of reflecting all aspects of student success.

The Academic Audit of publicly available student achievement data was disaggregated by student subgroups of sufficient size for their data to be released, while data for subgroups with fewer than ten (10) students were suppressed to protect student identity. In each district, it was found that students of poverty scored lower on standardized assessments than students whose family income exceeds the federal income levels for free/reduced meals. While variations occurred in each district as scores from multiple assessments were analyzed, this trend remained fairly consistent. A particularly interesting pattern emerged in the distribution of poverty/non-poverty students earning each of the four diploma types mentioned above. A general tendency for non-poverty students to earn the higher rated diplomas (i.e., Academic Honors, Technical Honors, and Core 40) and for the students of poverty to earn the less rigorous General diploma did not hold for all three districts. This trend provides clear evidence that when attention is paid to academic programs pursued by students in all subgroups (i.e., income, race, ESL, Special Education), course selection and the provision of academic support, when needed, can result in all graduates meeting the demands of the more rigorous diplomas. All three districts are challenged to maintain or enhance their disaggregated analysis of student achievement data so that all students are counseled into courses that prepare them well for life after high school.

Lastly, the audit examined programs intended to challenge those students who are already performing above minimal levels of achievement and, conversely, programs intended to offset barriers to learning experienced by other students. In both cases, the districts attempted to personalize learning experiences for students so that all students are able to progress in building the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for successful adult lives. All three school districts are encouraged to examine their current mechanisms for offering programmatic support to meet their students' broad and diverse range of needs, examining both the characteristics of those students receiving specialized services and the evidence of the impact of each program.

## Summary

Each of the three public school districts in Wabash County provides services that appear to exceed what should be available given their financial constraints. Such commitment to serving students is a tribute to district leadership and to educators who go beyond what is required contractually as they seek to ensure that students are challenged as fully as possible within an environment that provides physical and emotional safety.

*As the school districts of Wabash County determine the educational opportunities they want to provide to current and future students, they are encouraged to stretch their thinking to include a wide range of possibilities for using currently available resources differently, exploring unfamiliar programs or practices including those that reach beyond familiar affiliations with neighboring districts and entities. Decisions made in response to this study should reflect a broad array of factors which, at times, may seem to compete with each other for time, attention, facilities, or money. The role of district leadership involves both examining each possible option for its impact on all academic components and selecting the option(s) that best prepare(s) students for a lifetime of satisfaction, productivity, and citizenship. A list of suggested criteria is provided below. These criteria could be applied to any options that the respective boards choose to explore.*

- 1. How will the option(s) under consideration impact the district's ability to attract, retain, continually develop, and flexibly use teachers within the district academic programs?*
- 2. How will the option(s) under consideration impact the district's ability to provide all students with meaningful courses and programs that will help them be successful throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*
- 3. How will the option(s) under consideration impact the district's ability to provide athletic and non-athletic extra-curricular activities at all grade levels?*
- 4. How does each option impact the needs and use of technology for educational services and administrative functions?*
- 5. How does this option impact the need for or available amount of funding to support the instructional program?*
- 6. How will the option(s) under consideration affect the availability or quality of personalized and/or differentiated services provided to help children and youth learn what is desired by the district and mandated by the state?*
- 7. In what ways can each option be used to build stronger relationships with businesses and service organizations in the district in order to enhance educational outcomes and community pride?*

## **Analysis of Financial Strength**

The availability and quality of student learning opportunities rest primarily on a school district's financial strength. Currently, two principles – adequacy and oversight – dominate discussions of school finance. The first principle, adequacy, considers the concept that sufficient funding is provided to each school so that the school can teach its students to expected levels of learning. This report addresses the degree to which the funding of Wabash County public schools is adequate and factors that impact that adequacy. The second principle, oversight,

relates to the use of available funding according to state guidelines and community expectations in order to maximize educational opportunities for all students. Both principles are linked directly to the primary purpose of schooling, which is to prepare students to live meaningful and successful lives.

An analysis of the financial strength of each Wabash County school district was conducted by Debra Hineline of the Indianapolis-based Educational Services Company. Sources of information included data compiled from the Indiana School Boards Association, the Indiana Association of School Business Officials, the Indiana Department of Local Government Finance, the Wabash County Auditor's Office, and United States Census Bureau Tables. In addition, each county school district provided data, as requested, to fill information needs or to respond to questions from the researcher. The report establishes the financial framework in which each school corporation must work and identifies areas of financial strength and challenge.

*School Corporations in Wabash County are in the same situation as most corporations around the State of Indiana. Funding is not keeping pace with the educational program requirements enacted by State and Federal Laws or, by the Education Policy makers who pass along what is considered to be "must have or best practices" of a modern educational system. Corporations are being asked to do more with less, and this trend does not appear to be ending anytime soon. Corporations are trying to provide the best education experience possible for their students while reducing expenses as far from the classroom as possible. Meeting the mandate of communities and parents is hard when funding is scarce.*

*The purpose of this review is to determine whether there might be opportunities for the three corporations in Wabash County to share services that would improve the educational programs of each corporation and, at the same time, reduce non-instructional cost through possible economy of scale.*

*Instructional Personnel, Transportation Services, and Food Services are the backbones of any school corporation. In 2006, the Indiana General Assembly passed P.L 191 with the intent to maximize the allocation and use of taxpayer resources for student instruction and learning. The bill was a push for school corporations to look at their resources, and how they were spending the funding received. The hope was that corporations would find ways to develop joint ventures to purchase services such as insurance, natural gas, and other commodities or to develop cooperative agreements for back office services. The bill required that all expenditure for a corporation be divided into four categories:*

- 1. Student academic achievement expenditures*
- 2. Student instructional support expenditures*
- 3. Overhead and operations expenditures*
- 4. Nonoperational expenditures*

*The language was labeled as "the four buckets" or the "85% rule" as it was believed that at least 85% of all expenditures in the General Fund should be linked directly with classroom instruction and fall within the four categories labeled in the bill. The bill language required that the State Board of Education in conjunction with the Department of Education, State Board of*

*Accounts, the Office of Management and Budget and external consultants take action to develop a method to track expenditure across functions, schools, and school corporations. This work became known as FinMARS. The legislation had a sunset provision of December 31, 2009, and did little to change the spending habits or practices of school corporations.*

*In the years since the enactment of P.L. 191, the concept of more money to the classroom has not faded, but has been re-named, re-worked, re-branded and now is being labeled as “the money follows the student.” Even the new federal education re-authorization act, “Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)”, required states to provide expenditure information in more detail. The Department of Education is currently working with vendors and is sampling school data to gear up for the accounting changes that will be required of school corporations in the near future.*

The concept of “the money follows the student” is particularly significant because Indiana is the only state that allows voluntary inter-district student transfers while aggressively funding a voucher system that allows students to attend non-public schools. In other words, while expectations for performance and reporting requirements for all Hoosier public schools have increased, current policies that provide opportunities for students to migrate from their resident public school districts to other educational settings (including parochial, virtual, and home schools) destabilize public school enrollment, resulting in numerous financial uncertainties. For example, when students leave a school district, they rarely leave in numbers that are sufficient to clearly identify an appropriate reduction in staff (e.g., one less third grade teaching position in an elementary building). Instead, student departures tend to be spread across grade levels and schools, making it difficult for the home district to realize any cost savings by reducing services; this factor is particularly relevant with regard to personnel costs, the major expenditure in a school district’s budget. Furthermore, while the overall state budget for education has been increased, the overall funding available for public schools has been decreased due to the impact of monies designated for the payment of school vouchers. These complexities have forced school leaders, including officials in the Wabash County school districts, to make difficult choices regarding the use of ever-shrinking finances. The anticipated decline in enrollment that is forecast in the demographic report will intensify existing pressures that the county’s school leaders are already facing as they seek to address growing financial constraints with creativity and integrity.

The report identified the following key points of analysis. *Educational Services Company has looked at a great amount of documentation for each school corporation. In reviewing these corporations individually and in comparison of corporations across the state, they are no different – they are being squeezed financially on multiple levels.*

- 1. In our opinion there are areas that reduction could be made and review of these areas is encouraged. All corporations have relatively low class sizes and the use of instructional aides was not included in the calculation during this review. Including aides in the calculation would even further lower student teacher ratios.*



2. *Health Insurance Plans should be reviewed to determine if the best plans at the best prices are being made available to the employees of the corporations.*
3. *Debt should be reviewed to determine if cost savings could be found in refinancing bonds thus freeing up additional funds for repairs and maintenance of facilities.*
4. *The cost of transporting students is unavoidable; however, walk radius, door-to-door, and grade level transportation configuration policies should be developed/reviewed/revise as appropriate. County-wide transportation services might be a possibility within Wabash County. If not county wide, M.S.D. Wabash County and Wabash City Schools might be compatible to share these services if calendars and hours of operation are compatible.*
5. *Issues from prior State Board of Accounts Audits should be reviewed and a determination should be made of whether appropriate actions have been taken to alleviate any issues. This is important for future compliance requirements put into legislation during the 2017 General Assembly.*

Two of the districts followed the suggestion (P.L. 191, 2006) that they join insurance consortia as a means of confronting increasing insurance costs. Because it is unclear if such membership has resulted in cost savings, this approach should be evaluated with reference to the quality of insurance coverage provided and the cost of that coverage.

Overall, Educational Services Company cannot identify any one form of shared services that could guarantee savings, especially savings of the magnitude needed to offset anticipated loss of future revenue. Furthermore, the company's reports state that *All three corporations are being run in a fiscally responsible manner and through no fault of management or the school boards, funds continue to decline. Enrollment numbers in rural communities across the state are declining. Employment is the number one factor in this trend. People want to live where the jobs are.*

### Summary

The financial future of each of the three Wabash County school districts is very challenging. Each district is currently stretching its available resources to the limit in order to offer a breadth and depth of learning experiences that will sufficiently prepare graduates to be successful in post-secondary education, meaningful employment, or enlistment in the military. The harsh reality is that the current and projected patterns of county school enrollment and Indiana school funding will probably not be adequate for such preparation.

## **Facilities Study**

When people remember their school experiences, it is not uncommon for them to reflect on the facilities (e.g., physical plants) they attended. That response is a natural one given the peculiarities that have characterized American school buildings for generations and the

amount of time students spend in them over many years. Consequently, it is understandable that students and former students voice concerns when familiar school facilities must be changed or closed so that new programs can be adopted or when existing programs are altered. However, school leadership is charged with locating programs in physical settings that allow programs to be offered in ways that allow them to function successfully and with maximum cost efficiency. Each of the three public school districts in Wabash County has been vigilant in maintaining existing facilities and in adapting them to accommodate new or expanded programs, as needed. The facility analysis portion of STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT provides descriptions of the extent, quality, and potential use of existing facilities as the three county school districts examine opportunities for collaboration and shared services.

Under the direction of Dana Wannemacher, President of Fort Wayne-based Barton · Coe · Vilamaa, each of the buildings in the three districts was examined by representatives from that firm and school district personnel. Following a template that identifies the functions that are most critical to the establishment of safe, productive learning environments, a report was generated for each building. These detailed reports were provided to each district and included suggestions for maintaining, modifying, or repurposing each building, thus outlining a range of possibilities for sharing spaces through district agreements or possibly some type of reorganization. Eleven functions of each building were assessed, as follows:

- Spatial – the arrangement, distribution, and size of internal and external designated spaces for learning activities, resources areas, and administrative functions
- Site – the location, size, and characteristics of the land area on which the building sets
- Structure – the design and construction components of the building
- Envelope – the roof, walls, and windows that encapsulate the building
- Subdivision – the walls or partitions that divide spaces within the building
- Finishes – the flooring, wall coverings, and ceiling composition within the building
- Casework and Equipment – the shelving, lockers, bleachers, chalkboards/whiteboards, table surfaces, and equipment used for delivery of education and supporting services within the building
- Life Safety – factors that influence school security or personal safety in the event of man-made or natural disasters
- Heating, Cooling & Ventilation Systems – factors that influence the quality and comfort provided by air the management system
- Plumbing Systems – lavatories, drinking fountains, and sanitary drainage functions
- Power, Lighting and Technology – sources of electricity, type and extent of artificial lighting, and technology that affects safety and learning within the school setting.

### Findings

School buildings in the county range from 30 to 92 years of age. Each facility was constructed according to the educational practices, construction techniques, and community expectations in place when built, a fact that is evident when visiting the buildings. While they were built collectively to house many more students than are currently enrolled in the county's

schools, changing expectations for services provided to students has caused each of the buildings to incorporate additional uses beyond what was originally designed. Each of the school districts includes skilled staff who have coordinated the maintenance and modification of buildings as various needs have arisen and as funding has allowed. As a result, all buildings meet general expectations regarding safety, general accessibility, and comfort.

When the eleven elements are considered as a whole, however, several themes become apparent. These themes will be important for all three districts to consider whether they continue to function autonomously or if they decide to work cooperatively to offer various educational services.

1. Schools routinely assign classes and programs to the best available spaces. Over time, however, spatial needs change, thus requiring the relocation of services and/or the modification of existing spaces. For example, Indiana's expanded support of Pre-Kindergarten has caused each of the districts to struggle to provide physical spaces that are suitable for the housing of Pre-K programs. Complicating this problem is the fact that Pre-K programs require proportionately sized equipment and facilities, storage, and proximity to exits leading to adjacent playground areas. This problem is present in all three districts.
2. Similarly, each district needs to appropriate learning and supervision spaces for Special Education students. Federal and state expectations for the inclusion of special needs students in general education classrooms and for personalized services within self-contained special education classrooms requires evaluation of Special Education facilities.
3. Two districts house their junior high schools in facilities that are shared with high schools, and one district utilizes a facility that is dedicated to only its junior high school program. However, none of the districts offers an educational setting that reflects the developmental needs of middle school aged students. Under the strong influence of the high school model, current facilities for housing and supporting junior high school students do not reflect established, well researched best practices for enhancing the social and academic development of middle school aged students.
4. Should districts continue to house junior and senior high schools in proximity to one another, consideration should be given to connecting their educational spaces for safety, comfort, and ease of access between the units (as needed).
5. Historic uses of familiar spaces should be reconsidered as instructional changes occur. For example, the traditional view that a library houses books, serves as a gathering area for individual and group instruction, or houses a study hall should be updated to encourage the appropriate use of technology and instructional practices that focus student learning on creative production, group problem solving, and other higher-order thinking skills. For example, as the number of paper-based books needed decreases due to the availability of online information, the shelving systems that hold them can be reduced, thereby creating new spaces for student and teacher use.
6. In all districts, Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs are dated. Before replacing them, the districts are encouraged to determine the best use of the Heartland

Career Center. This analysis should consider what investment may be required if the center is to serve all three school districts appropriately.

### Summary

School buildings age over time as structural components deteriorate and as building designs no longer accommodate contemporary instructional practices. Fortunately, the school buildings in Wabash County have been well maintained and continue to serve as anchors in their communities. As all three districts have experienced declining enrollments, district leadership has taken bold steps, closing some schools and reorganizing grade level configurations in others. Each of these actions has been taken to balance the academic needs of students with available funding for building, equipping, and maintaining learning centers.

Further consideration of facilities will be required if, as forecast, the county continues to experience declining student enrollment. Such consideration should rest on the educational needs of students and the cost savings generated by utilizing fewer and/or more efficient buildings. Knowledge of the physical plants provided to each district should be included as the feasibility and advisability of shared services is explored.

## **FINDINGS AND CALL TO ACTION**

STUDIES FOR ADVANCEMENT identifies current conditions and future trends that impact the availability of resources required to prepare students adequately for meaningful lives that include livable wage employment, post-secondary training, and/or military service. Each report provides detailed, actionable information for use by the individual public school districts of Wabash County while suggesting opportunities for investigating what services might be shared between or among them.

The various issues that generated this initiative, while focused on the schools, are actually community challenges. For example, it is not within the power of a public school to dictate its enrollment numbers or to establish its funding level. Rather, it is critical to remember that the power of public schools is that they belong to the public. It is the citizenry whose children fill classrooms, whose taxes pay for the people and materials that help students learn, and whose support of school teams and projects build lifelong community connections that ultimately decide the fate of public schools and the young people who are educated by them. Thus, education and the economic strength of a community are inextricably linked to each other.

This report does not conclude with suggestions for future reorganizations or mergers, options that are best considered by local school boards and with the extensive involvement of their school communities. Instead, this report concludes by stating current and future conditions affecting the county's schools along with suggestions for how they can be incorporated into conversations within and between school communities.

- Finding One: Wabash County's population has declined in recent years and its median age has risen, a trend that is forecast to accelerate by 2026. As a result, fewer school-aged children will be living in the county, thereby reducing student enrollment numbers.
- Finding Two: While state law allows for out-of-county students to transfer to county public schools, nearly all Wabash County public school student transfers occur between the school districts. As such, the loss of enrollment over time is not expected to be mitigated by the in-migration of out-of-county students.
- Finding Three: Similar to most other districts in the state, funding levels for Wabash County are not keeping pace with the educational programs advocated by policy makers or enacted by state and federal laws. Districts are being asked to do more with limited funds, a trend that is expected to continue. While persistent efforts made by each school district to maintain such programs have resulted in creative ways to offer as many educational advantages as possible, decreased enrollment has reduced state financial support to school accounts that pay for such educational programs, requiring additional reduction or contraction of services.
- Finding Four: Academic programs offered by the three districts meet all minimum requirements of the state, but the districts struggle to offer elective courses that lead to specialized or advanced academic study, career exploration, and the development of personal interests. Low-enrolled courses are offered in response to student requests but are not cost effective financially.
- Finding Five: Future workforce needs in Wabash County differ from those of Economic Growth Region 3 and the state based on occupational projections, the levels of education required for those occupations, and the representative income levels of those occupations. Unlike the region and the state, Wabash County is projected to have a high proportion of occupations that employ less-skilled workers and provide low wages that threaten self-sufficiency and family economic security.
- Finding Six: Multiple, well-maintained educational facilities are located throughout the county, and each building reflects the construction standards, educational designs, and community needs in place when built. Persistent efforts have been made to keep each building functioning fully through modifications to existing spaces, the reorganization of grade level structures, and the closure of several buildings. Nevertheless, some remaining spaces are not usable or do not align with the needs of the programs that occupy them. Future academic needs will require

reconsideration of current facility spaces in order to ensure both the safety and educational utility desired by the school community.

Finding Seven: Junior high school students have unique developmental needs that are not distinguished from what is provided to high school students in the three districts. Researching the development of young adolescents would be valuable in determining grade level configurations as well as the academic needs of this age group as they are supported by instructional practices, configuration of large and small group learning spaces, teacher collaboration, and events that encourage healthy social development. Currently, such practices appear to be limited by factors that include the use of the term “junior high,” some shared spaces with high school programs, and combined handbooks that are heavily oriented toward the needs of high school students.

A recent study commissioned by the Indiana Chamber of Commerce Foundation and conducted by the Ball State University Center for Business and Economic Research examined the question “Does the size of a school district affect the educational outcomes of its students?” The study concluded that small school districts, roughly defined as those with fewer than 2000 students, experience resource limitations that affect student performance negatively on every state required measure of school performance except the End of Course Assessment in English. It also examined the economy of scale offered by districts of more than 2000 students, suggesting that two factors, the financial costs of operating a small school district and the educational limitations they impose, are sufficiently critical to cause small school districts to consider merging with other entities with the goal of increasing total district enrollment to between 3000 and 6000 students.

Criticisms of this study have been swift and consistently target three primary issues. First, the Indiana Chamber of Commerce has long been focused on the efficiency of school operations, often at the expense of other factors that make school meaningful for students. Most certainly, school districts of 2000-3000 students have many more opportunities to find cost savings than their smaller counterparts, but cost savings can reduce options for students by forcing them into large classes or by eliminating low enrollment programs or activities.

Second, representatives of smaller school districts typically note the advantages associated with small learning communities; these advantages include personalization of learning, increased flexibility in meeting student needs, and community investment in the success of each student. A level of community pride and oversight for all students that may be lacking in large districts where student families reside in large or detached areas, can be found in many small school districts.

Third, the argument for district consolidation based on increased financial efficiency appears to contradict the current state policy that does not apply these same expectations to private or charter schools receiving state funding. Therefore, it appears that cost efficiency is politically important to one type of school organization but not to others.

Just as efficiency should not be the sole criteria for determining the structure of a school district, neither should the familiarity found in a small district supersede the need to examine the economy of scale associated with increased learning outcomes. As smaller districts like those found in Wabash County prepare for potential reduced funding levels, offering three separate, comprehensive educational programs becomes increasingly difficult and warrants consideration of ways to offset various issues. In support of continued investigation of shared services within the county, the following recommendations are given.

1. **Advocate for the viability of the public schools in Wabash County.** Engage with legislative representatives to convey the impact of current funding levels on the ability of the districts to offer comprehensive educational programs. Invite policymakers to see the positive and negative implications of educational decisions made on behalf of the local communities. Engage compassionate, visionary, strategic thinkers to imagine opportunities for enhancing educational programs, sharing them with policymakers as evidence of local commitment to both educational quality and cost efficiency. Above all, involve the community.
2. **Establish a definition of “success” for each school district and identify reachable targets for academic, fiscal, operational, and community-based services desired by their respective school communities.** Develop appropriate measures of progress for each target, routinely sharing areas in which progress is made and directing resources to areas lagging in performance. Such measures help establish and fulfill accountability expectations that build community confidence in the schools and oversight.
3. **Utilize community-based collaborative efforts to help build coalitions in support of current and future educational efforts.** Groups that have coalesced around a particular community-building endeavor provide networks for connecting people and organizations. Most of them have infrastructures that balance bold vision and pragmatic details, skills that are important as school communities define themselves and their work on behalf of students. Many such civic groups have already examined their shared resources as part of their efforts to enrich their communities. Learning from organizations with experience in transforming familiar settings can ease and accelerate desired changes. Strong schools build strong communities and strong communities build strong schools.
4. **Enhance the desirability of Wabash County educational programs as a means of attracting families that seek exemplary educational opportunities for their children.** Seek the involvement of community partners, innovative efforts by local businesses and industry, and high profile names associated with each community in order to build quality, marketable educational opportunities that enhance both the profile of county schools and the credentials of those students who graduate from them.

While Wabash County faces many challenges found in other rural counties, the county also holds four essential assets that can distinguish its future from that of other counties facing many of the same issues. Effective responses to challenges cited in this report may be built on these strengths.

- Wabash County is home to three strong public school districts whose educators are deeply committed to helping every student succeed. Despite facing economic, educational, and political challenges, they work to use their resources wisely and creatively. As the county builds economic and educational strength, individuals directly engaged in the work of schooling can offer valuable insights into the needs of their students while offering innovative ideas for addressing these challenges.
- Wabash County is home to two distinct and readily identifiable population centers that should be honored for their individuality and the diverse gifts they bring to the county. North Manchester and Wabash celebrate unique histories and geographical locations by engaging in social and cultural events that have broad appeal. Already known for the Honeywell Center and Manchester University, for senior care facilities and long-standing businesses and industries, the whole county benefits when both population centers are vibrant and growing. Thus, great potential exists to utilize the distinguishing elements of each community and adjacent rural areas as the bases for unique educational programs that attract out-of-county transfer students and potential residents.
- Wabash County is home to multiple expanding efforts to collaborate around social, cultural, and economic stimulations. These intentional partnerships create a synergy that is evident in downtown revitalizations that could not have been accomplished in isolation. Service and religious organizations as well as media and cultural groups have developed systems of coordination that enable each representative group to succeed while supporting the overall efforts of the county. Harnessing existing networks and their personnel in service of expanded educational opportunities is a logical and productive step toward addressing the educational issues identified in this report.
- Wabash County is home to a visionary Community Foundation that provides leadership in initiating public discussion on the very topics that can enhance quality of life of all residents. Using the collective resources of neutrality, charitable gifts, community-based leadership, and a demonstrated history of working on behalf of the children and youth, the Foundation can continue to support ongoing efforts that build community conversations on topics related to educational opportunities and the resources needed to fulfill them.

In closing, the future of Wabash County schools is a challenging one to school districts as they project reductions in both enrollment and financial resources that allow each district to offer the quality of education expected by its constituents and required by law. Rather than deny the existence of these challenges, each of the districts with generous support from the Community Foundation, has courageously participated in a study of what can be expected in the future. Armed with this information, they now need the support of the general Wabash County community in order to consider all options available to the school districts, with the belief that good will and wise deliberations can allow them to determine their futures rather than become victims of projected trends. With this courage and the willingness of county residents to assist them, the education and the lives of current and future students look promising!