



The

Challenge

April 2001



An open letter to WV Legislators

The following letter was sent to West Virginia legislators by Carolyn Arritt, Challenge West Virginia fellow from Fayette County

Dear WV Legislators:

Don't favor consolidation until you have ridden miles in the shoes of West Virginia's children. As an analogy to consolidation of rural schools, I would like to give you an idea of what it would be like if you were a student in rural West Virginia and you wished to participate in extra curricular activities.

To make it so you can understand a little better, I would like for you to take a

journey with me. Suppose the students of rural West Virginia have passed a law that the Legislators can no longer stay in Charleston

Express your opposition to long school bus rides and your support for Senate Bill 64 and House Bill 2270 by calling toll-free 1-877-565-3447

during their 60-day legislative session. They now must live in areas which are at least 1 1/2 to 2 hours away from the Capital, which would be 80 to 90 miles away from Charleston (because 40 to 45 mph is the average speed on mountainous roads). The daily bus stops won't be made, but you will travel on WV and US Routes. It is Monday morning when a school bus will pick you up at a designated place at 6 a.m. You

need to get up by at least 5 a.m. because it takes about 15 minutes to get to the bus stop. You do not live on the "main road." Legislators, be sure that you are ready to go because there are no restrooms on the school bus and there is no place to stop for "facilities" along the way.

Upon arrival at the Capitol, you will have ten minutes for breakfast. At 8 a.m. you will begin your committee meetings and sessions until lunch, at which time you would have 30 minutes to eat. After lunch you will have additional meetings and sessions until 3:30 p.m.

The members of the legislature who decide to participate in extra activities must stay beyond 3:30 p.m. to prepare. Preparation lasts for 1 1/2 to 2 hours which means the "Activity" bus will pick you up at 5 to 5:30 p.m. to take you home. You arrive home at 7-7:30 p.m. Time to eat, but guess what, the family has already eaten, so heat up the left overs! At 8 p.m., let's do the home chores and the "homework." It is now 11 p.m., and the family has al-

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Challenge WV members from across the state visited the WV Legislature on Tuesday, March 13, to show support for Senate Bill 64 and House Bill 2270, which would limit the time children can spend on school buses. Counties represented included Fayette, Kanawha, Lincoln, Logan, McDowell, Monongalia, Preston, Putnam and Webster. Challenge WV co-directors Linda Martin and Beth Spence also met with Gov. Bob Wise to discuss education reform issues.

This 'n that from around the state

• Robert Phares of Circleville, a former member of the Pendleton County Board of Education, writes, “For those counties still fighting school consolidation, it may be interesting to look at what happened in Pendleton County in just two years after its two high schools were consolidated.

“Transportation costs, for example, have skyrocketed. In the final 1997-98 school year before consolidation, total transportation cost for the county was a little over \$840,000. In the first year after consolidation, those costs rose to almost \$904,000. By the second year, they reached \$962,000 – a \$122,000 increase in just two years. The average cost for busing during the 1999-2000 school year was \$2.88 per mile, or \$774.65 per student.”

• The good news: The West Virginia Department of Education has received a \$1.2 state challenge grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The bad news: The grant will provide technology training for only superintendents and principals, nothing for teachers or students.

• The West Virginia School Building Authority has distributed more than \$5.7 million for renovation projects. Boone County received \$411,000 to expand Ramage Elementary, which is expected to accept some Logan County students next fall. Other counties receiving funds include Barbour, Berkeley, Grant, Harrison, Jackson, Kanawha, Lincoln, Marion, Mineral, Monongalia, Pleasants, Preston, Putnam and Randolph.

• *Charleston Gazette* education reporter Eric Eyre has won an investigative reporting prize and editorial page editor Dan Radmacher has won an award for commentary from the Education Writers Association for their work in disclosing dubious financial actions by former state Schools Superintendent Hank Marockie.

• Numerous computer errors in the Department of Education resulted in miscalculations of school equity and basic school aid payments to counties, according to a legislative audit. Counties were overfunded \$69,768 for fiscal year 1998 and 1999, according to the Associated Press. The audit found 14 incidents that either underfunded or overfunded various payments to counties. Assistant State Superintendent G.A. McClung blamed an old computer system.



• School systems in all but six counties lost students this year. Statewide enrollment has dropped more than 18,000 since 1997, according to the *Charleston Daily Mail*. Lincoln County Superintendent Bill Grizzell complained that the way the state distributes money is a game counties can't win. “You don't get money based on what your county needs,” Grizzell said. “You get money based on how many students you have. Bottom line. There's no getting around

it.”

• Schools that do well should be rewarded, a consultant told the West Virginia Board of Education in March. Jim Watts, vice president of state services with the Southern Regional Education Board, said, “If you're not recognizing schools that are improving, you've kind of sold people short.” He said North Carolina spent \$149 million last year in rewards for teachers. At schools where test scores increased, teachers received a \$1,500 bonus and teacher aids got \$750.”

The State Office of Education Performance Audits, which evaluates state schools, recommended a reward system at a meeting earlier this year.

• Mercer County voters overwhelmingly rejected a \$21.9 million school bond in March. The unofficial tally showed 8,729 votes against the bond with 1,527 votes for it.

• The Fayette County Board of Education has voted by a 4-1 margin to close two elementary schools, Powellton and Beckwith.

Superintendent Larry Coleman said the county is “in pretty good shape as far as our elementary schools are concerned. Now we need to concentrate on our high schools. We have too many high schools.”

In order to close additional community schools and build consolidated schools, the School Board is asking voters to approve a \$39 million bond issue on May 5. *The Charleston Gazette* has reported widespread opposition to the bond..

• Jefferson County Superintendent David Markoe has resigned effective April 30. One of Markoe's major challenges included a possible budget shortage of about \$600,000. In September voters rejected a \$39 million school bond officials said was necessary to handle projected enrollment increases.

Open letter. . .



Challenge WV kids Kara Larew, Jasmine Freeman and Cody Fauber, shown with Sen. Jon Hunter, served as pages at the Legislature. Skylar and Mariah Freeman also were pages during Challenge WV's day at the Legislature.

ready gone to sleep, so no family time.

On Tuesday it is up at 5 a.m. and the same routine through 3:30 p.m. Today, however, there is an "activity" in Parkersburg after the day's work at the Capitol. Junk food is gotten from the vending machines because the bus does not leave until 4:30 p.m. There is a little time to study for Wednesday's session. At 4:30 p.m., the bus departs for the two-hour trip to Parkersburg via I-77. After the "activity" the bus departs for Charleston at 9:30 p.m. to arrive at the Capitol at 11:30 p.m. Charleston is not home, so another one hour or so trip home. You are able to get to sleep about 1:30 a.m. You did not have time to finish your prepa-

ration for Wednesday's sessions.

The alarm goes off at 5 a.m. to face Wednesday and the two-hour trip to Charleston. Wednesday's routine is the same as Monday's. You will be home by 7:30 p.m. and to sleep by 11 p.m. On Thursday there is a make-up meeting in Bluefield, which means another evening of arriving home at 1 to 1:30 a.m. on Friday morning.

It is Friday and the alarm brings 5 a.m., a two-hour trip, and a full day of work ahead. Tonight there is another meeting, but luckily this one is to be in Charleston, so arrival at home will be about 11 p.m.

Just think, you, the Legislators, have mandated by law that our rural children who want to participate in football, basketball, track, and other activities keep this schedule for most of the school year.

If rural children do not participate in extra curricular activities, they would have about an 11-hour day from the time they leave in the morning until they return home! Then comes the homework!

Is this abuse? Do you realize how many children are being denied opportunities because of consolidation? Just think . . . for every high school that is consolidated, there is one less Valedictorian, one less Salutatorian, ten less top ten students, one less President of the Student Council, three less class presidents, fewer cheerleaders, fewer majorettes, fewer band members, five less first string boys and five less first string girls' basketball players, 11 to 22 less first string football players, fewer wrestlers, fewer students on yearbook and newspaper staffs, fewer students participating in drama productions, etc.

An education is to be an all-around experience for children. Are we truly giving each child in West Virginia an equal opportunity to participate in school life and have a good education? Obviously many students, who live several miles away from the consolidated schools, are not being served well by our educational system.

Recht gives State Department more time

Judge Arthur Recht has agreed to give the state Board of Education more time to meet a March 1 deadline to adopt new school policies.

Last summer Charleston attorney Dan Hedges, who brought the original case that resulted in the Recht Decision, reached an agreement with Department of Education officials that appeared to resolve curriculum and evaluation issues.

The State School Board was to adopt the new policies by March 1, and begin pilot programs with full implementation by July 1.

When the deadline passed, Hedges went back to court to force the state to comply.

Recht said his main concern was why the state failed

to abide by the March 1 deadline and failed to seek an extension until Hedges filed his motion to enforce the order.

"This order was the result of much intensive discussion with a judicially mandated result," Recht said. The plaintiffs are saying despite that agreement and the timetable set forth, it is not being complied with. That is a very serious contention."

Recht said since Hedges and defense attorneys appear to be at odds over portions of the order, they should spend more time conferring. The two parties agreed to meet on a monthly basis to resolve future disputes before bringing Recht in to solve the problem.

Recht did not say when he would rule on any of the motions.

The Challenge

The Challenge is published by Challenge West Virginia, a state-wide organization committed to maintaining and improving small community schools and reforming education policy in West Virginia so that all of our state's children have the opportunity to receive a first-class education and the promise of a bright future.

Challenge members believe state education policy, which has resulted in the closing of a fourth of West Virginia's schools during the past ten years, does not serve the best interest of many children, especially those from low-income families who live in rural areas.

Challenge West Virginia is a program of Covenant House, an independent, non-profit organization in Charleston, WV, which is not connected to any other program by the same name.

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