



The Challenge



April 2006

Taking back our schools, taking back our communities

“Taking Back Our Schools, Taking Back Our Communities,” was the theme of the Rural School and Community Trust working group meeting in April at Olive Branch, Mississippi.

Eight Challenge WV fellows participated in the three-day meeting, attended by representatives from several states, most of which live in rural areas of the USA, all advocating for community-based schools.

Over 40% of the USAs public schools are in rural areas.

Challenge WV coordinator Linda Martin said it is an issue of fairness, but “It speaks about the value of place, communities that matter and giving children a good education.”

“It’s about what is right. What works best,” she said, “This conference brings together many different voices.”

There was a discussion about “breaking the fall” of rural schools with declining enrollment, which is resulting in financial distress using capitated funding mechanisms.

This financial hemorrhage results in deepcutsofprograms,staffsandresources.

Declining enrollment of community-based schools in WV has resulted in wholesale school consolidation, with its promise of a better education, more courses, more opportunity, after the long bus ride.

“There has been little evidence of that ‘promise’ in WV,” said Challenge



Challenge Fellows travel to Mississippi conference (L to R front) Linda Martin, Robin Kelly, Dianne Weaver (L to R rear) Paul Hamrick, Danielle Johnston, Lorelei Scarbro, Thomas Ramey

member Thomas Ramey.

“Lincoln County WV has been a consolidation battle ground, the State Board took over the county system over five years ago, and test scores continue to decline,” he said.

Ramey said students in the southern part of the county are being encouraged by the state department to go to a school in the next county, which is likely to bankrupt the Lincoln school system.

“They’re taking Lincoln taxpayer money, and capitated school funding money to Logan County,” Ramey said, “It is the next generation of consolidation to a regional level, away from the community and county.”

It will likely be sold to taxpayers as “a matter of choice,” he said.

County school boards have already had most of their constitutional power taken away from

them by the WV legislature.

“This is a long-planned move toward the RESA (regionalized) system to be in control of local school systems,” Ramey said.

Martin said “States and communities must act through grass-root efforts to see that students are offered a good education in their own communities.”

“More often than not, these students are left behind,” she said, “Education cannot be compromised by geography.”

One of the conference workshops was “Consolidation: Carrots, Sticks and Smokescreens,” a discussion on “quiet policies” that put small, rural schools at risk, especially in the poorest communities.

Jerry Johnson of the Rural Trust staff, led a workshop on inequity and achievement in rural schools, illustrating

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Visit Challenge West Virginia at www.challengewv.org

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ing how achievement gaps “mirror” resource gaps.

Johnson said that policymakers set out to close small, rural schools for a variety of reasons - some well intentioned, some bad intentioned, some practical and some ideological.

“They nearly always turn to efficiency, small schools costing too much to operate. Stakeholders need to provide the information (research) that small schools can operate efficiently, and deliver a quality education,” Johnson said, sometimes using

Distance Learning Centers.

Iowa state advocates said their small school districts are an “achievement blessing.” (Study available www.ruraledu.org)

A discussion group, “Plugging the pipeline from the schoolhouse to the jail house,” presented an overview of the Mississippi Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2005.

Marty Strange, policy director for the Rural Schools and Community Trust, said “The geographic and political isolation on rural communities of-

ten means that rural schools are forgotten in the larger debate over education policy.

“Rural kids represent the face of America,” as diverse as an urban population, Strange said. “They work well and they’re cost effective.”

Jana Freeman, longtime WV Challenge member, expressed concern that NCLB has several provisions that leave rural teachers and children behind, making it difficult to report test data and recruiting and retaining teachers.

Action research used to challenge WV's fuzzy numbers

“Getting accurate research that disputes the fuzzy numbers of the WV Department of Education has been part of our project,” said Linda Martin, coordinator of Challenge WV, at the Rural School and Community Trust conference in Olive Branch, Mississippi, held in April.

A workshop - “Research You Can Use” - was conducted by Martin and Challenge WV fellows Jana Freeman and Thomas Ramey. The group focused on “action research.”

Martin spoke about the disparity of the state department’s numbers regarding students on long bus rides.

“The department said in 1996 36,000 students were over the guidelines. Now they’re saying it is less than 20,000, after ten years of consolidation,” Martin said.

A grass-roots effort to halt long bus rides in the WV Legislature was squashed in committee, the legislature asked the state department to come up with new figures by December 2005.

“Never happened,” said Martin, despite the fact they have about 15 PhDs in their office.

Dr. Lorna Jimerson, a professional researcher who continues to do work for Challenge WV, said West Virginia’s “research was fuzzy and flawed, and most likely inaccurate.”

“The long bus rides issue was thrown off-track by Finance Chairman Del.

Harold Michael,” said Martin, with politically motivated research numbers from the state, claiming the busing bill would cost the state millions of dollars.

“Nothing could be further from the truth,” she said, “The state claimed it would cost \$63 million to end consolidation now.”

Challenge fellow Jana Freeman spoke about Preston County, going from nine high schools to one, and the hundreds of students on buses of an hour to one-and-a-half hours each way.

Freeman said the county’s single school has 1,400 students, and has the second highest drop-out rate in the state. She just completed a busing survey on county students that is expected to deliver a “more accurate” view.

Challenge Fellow Thomas Ramey said Challenge WV has made “amazing headway” in providing the public with professional research published in a number of booklets circulated by the group.

Jimerson said educational institutions need direct confrontation with



Challenge WV members lead Mississippi workshop (L to R) Linda Martin, Jana Freeman, Thomas Ramey

reality checks. Citizens need help to understand what is happening,” beyond educational jargon.

She said WV is spending more money on busing kids on long bus rides than any USA state.

“WV continues to ignore the huge amount of research that eliminating community-based schools is not an answer, it is a problem,” Martin said.

“We need valid research, and educational officials that pay attention to it,” she continued. “Virtually all the research shows that school consolidation does not save the taxpayers any money.”

“Place-based learning wins over and over,” she concluded.

CHALLENGE NEEDS YOUR FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Dear Friends of Challenge West Virginia,

In this issue of the Newsletter, we ask our readers to acknowledge the accomplishments of Challenge West Virginia over the past several years.

We are very proud of what we have been able to achieve, but, unfortunately, each year more small schools are slated for consolidation or closure and much remains to be done.

There have been a series of catastrophic events nationally in the past two years that have affected the ability of traditional grant funding foundations to meet the needs of the non-profit agencies that they continue to believe in and strongly support.

Many of these agencies have had to cut the amount they fund existing programs such as ours in order to provide for immediate crisis needs such as flooding and other disasters.

Challenge WV has received notification from some of the agencies that have historically provided the bulk of our funding that they, regrettably, will have to decrease the amount they are able to provide for us this year.

Unfortunately, although Challenge is a volunteer initiative, there are still costs associated with achieving our goal of keeping effective, small, community schools available to educate our children.

We are asking you, as a child advocate and small schools supporter, to make a tax deductible donation to Challenge West Virginia to enable us to continue our work for the children, the communities and the schools of West Virginia.

We thank you in advance and appreciate your support.
Make checks payable to Challenge WV

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All West Virginia kids are above average!

West Virginia student test scores do not line up with national standards.

A recent test of eighth graders in West Virginia showed that 71 per cent of them were proficient or better in math. A federal test showed that only 18 percent of eighth graders were proficient in the same subject.

The federal National Assessment of Educational Progress, the test that found West Virginia eighth-graders lacking, is considered the best measurement of achievement in the U.S.

There is an uneasy feeling that state educational bureaucrats are using smoke

and mirrors about the issue.

We were assured that federal education officials had approved the WESTEST and that it would accurately measure student progress in West Virginia.

Now WESTEST's results don't compare with the federal test.

State education officials are saying you can't compare apples and oranges, and are downplaying the discrepancy that written tests can't measure overall educational success.

The Education Trust, a nonprofit think tank that looks at state compliance with the No Child Left Behind law, un-

covered the disparity.

State officials say the study didn't take into consideration such things as the number of questions asked on each test, question forms used and the subject matter covered. It's the apples and oranges thing.

Charleston newspaper columnist Dave Peyton said "It's the Lake Wobegone Syndrome. All of our kids are above average."

It's not our own WESTEST that's flawed. It's the federal test.

Peyton wrote "If we want to continue to ignore our educational shortcomings by crying "apples and oranges"

The Challenge

The Challenge is published monthly by Challenge West Virginia, a statewide organization, committed to maintaining and improving small community schools.

Challenge West Virginia's goal is to reform education in the Mountain State so that citizens have a voice in policy decisions and every child has the opportunity to receive a first-class education and the promise of a bright future.



Challenge West Virginia

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We Support Small Schools!

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