

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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SBA supporting \$7.5 million CharlesPointe school at "gated" Harrison community



The state's School Building Authority is expected to provide funding for a \$7.5 million school to be built in the \$1.4 billion "master-planned" CharlesPointe development, just off I-79 on WV Route 131 in Harrison County.

The SBA's funding for the CharlesPointe school appears to be about \$5 million with \$2.5 million coming from local taxpayers.

CharlesPointe initially said they were going to donate 40 acres they had set aside for the school, including providing the water, electric and sewage infrastructure.

Since then it appears the Harrison Commission will actually purchase the 40-acre plot for \$32,000 an acre, described as a pass-through, using Tax Increment Financing, which gives long-term tax breaks to the developer.

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) and master planning is new to West Virginia.

The project has been all around the loop, from creating the

CharlesPointe school through consolidation to downsizing the project from 1000 students to 330 students.

The original 1000 student plan did not likely meet the SBA guidelines, that schools should be built based on actual need, not projected need resulting from a

thousand houses proposed to be built at CharlesPointe.

CharlesPointe, described as an upscale community by local residents, may be partially gated in residential sections, and includes a large number of private business developments.

The developers have minimized the gating, but a drawing displayed on their web site indicates a gated or high-security entrance. A CharlesPointe spokesperson said some sections would be "secure."

The CharlesPointe school and a myriad of other building improvements in a \$42 million levy, still hinges on Harrison County voters.

The proposal for the CharlesPointe school sprung from earlier suggestions to close and consolidate several Harrison County community schools, but much of the original plan has been amended by the Harrison school board.

CharlesPointe says it is positioned to become the new economic engine for north central West Virginia, and an

economic boom for the entire state.

Opponents of TIF say the loss of general tax money to the community eventually means other areas of Harrison County could become neglected, while up-scale CharlesPointe thrives with their investors.

Since the Harrison consolidation plan has been amended, Challenge fellow Paul Hamrick said the public participation in the hearings was commendable.

"They listened and participated in the public hearings and the school board listened to those who came to speak. But, for months now, CharlesPointe land has been presented as the 'best available site' as free or donated land," said Hamrick.

Hamrick suggested "If TIF funds are now paying for school land acquisition in a master planned community, then lets create more TIF districts and use TIF funds in some of our blighted longstanding communities."

The CharlesPointe school was originally planned to be filled with students that would come from Bridgeport community schools that would be closed through a consolidation effort.

Public support for their small community schools now has Johnson and Simpson Elementary Schools remaining in Bridgeport, with more than \$5 million combined dollars in additions, improvements and renovations proposed for those facilities.

During public hearings regarding how to spend the \$42 million bond, parents from several community schools complained about the neglect of their local facilities, everything

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from inoperable rest rooms, poor cafeteria facilities and structural problems.

Sports supporters have apparently convinced the school board to spend about \$3 million "left-over money" on sports improvements, including Astro Turf for football fields, averaging about \$750,000 a field, although studies indicate Astro Truf

contributes to sports injuries.

Harrison commission president Frank Angotti expressed concern about the CharlesPointe school, but then joined the other commissioners in approving it. Clarksburg vice-mayor Margaret Bailey asked about the bond "What does this do for my community and what does this do

to my taxes?

Councilwoman Jo Anne McNemar said that school districts across America are moving away from consolidation and keeping community schools, including "walking schools," indicating in West Virginia the SBA favors consolidated schools and long bus rides.

"Nothing has hurt us this bad," more isolation



The elimination of county lines is a threat to county-based school systems, said Preston community-school activist Arvin Harsh.

While allowing students to attend schools-of-choice in nearby counties, the loss of student enrollment could mean the collapse of several county systems.

The Preston County school board, however, is disallowing some transfers to neighboring counties.

Harsh, who spoke at a State Board of Education meeting in Kingwood, said there are other problems directly affecting students. A resident of Aurora, 30 miles from Preston's consolidated high school at Kingwood, Harsh says consolidation has caused more isolation in an already isolated area.

"Consolidation for Aurora and many

West Virginia students has not worked well. Nothing has hurt as bad as this."

Harsh told State Board members about the harm done to students, forced to take long bus rides. Many children in his community travel about an hour-and-one-half each way, across the large rural county.

"Now, students as young as four are being placed on long bus rides in West Virginia," he said, calling it child abuse.

"The state has continued to fudge their numbers, attempting to convince the public that fewer students are on long bus rides," Harsh said.



Challenge WV fellow Jana Freeman told the board that consolidation and the elimination of community schools has adversely affected Preston

County.

Freeman and Harsh discussed further disruptions to the educational life of students, including the inability to participate in extra-curricular activities.

Freeman said "Place matters. Community matters," saying the all-powerful SBA and state education apparatus has continued to ignore parents and taxpayers.

Harsh suggested the Aurora community be declared independent from the rest of Preston County, indicating isolated areas need special consideration, not being a "victim to economies-of-scale," a model that many feel should not be applied to public education.

"The educational establishment in WV needs to be held accountable for poor outcomes," said Freeman, saying the US Chamber of Commerce said WV is not truthful about student proficiency.

"Challenge WV will continue to be a voice for community-based education that virtually all research says works best," she concluded.

WV's long bus ride research independently published

Following years of WV officials creating some of the longest bus rides in America, research done by the Rural School and Community Trust, reports on the price being paid by WV students.

The study is based on four WV counties. Greenbrier and Preston, designated as high consolidated counties, and Fayette and Mason designated as low consolidated counties.

Researcher Lorna Jimerson, Ed.D, says "Over the past decades, WV has closed scores of its small, community schools, mostly high schools ... Most notably, students living in outlying areas are now required to travel much longer distances to reach centralized schools."

Community members have continued to voice their concerns that long bus rides take a toll on students, their homework, their performance and the degree to which they can participate in after-school activities.

West Virginia has continued to ignore its own guidelines about long bus rides, likely having the most expensive transportation system in the US.

Jimerson says the state's bus time override numbers vary dramatically from county to county. Challenge WV has long contended the state's data is inaccurate and poorly founded.

"Conspicuously missing from the state reports is the actual length of bus

rides," Jimerson wrote, "Also missing is any information about the impact of long bus rides," such as decreased academic performance and dropout rates.

The study was based on information received from students in the four counties. Over 63% of the students responded.

Among glaring conclusions, almost one-third of the students in consolidated districts ride the bus for an hour or more.

One of the conclusions of the study was that WV should pass legislation that limits the length of long bus rides.

Bills have failed during the past two years to enact such legislation, the bills are not retroactive.

Lincoln super retires, blaming board for lack of progress

Less than a year after becoming superintendent of the troubled Lincoln County school system, Anne Seaver announced she is retiring.

Seaver said she's sad to leave behind the "excellent teachers and students of Lincoln County," but not what she describes as a contentious school board.

Seaver and State Superintendent Steve Paine have blamed the Lincoln school board for poor outcomes in the school system, although board President Carol Smith says the board has been neutered in making decisions during the seven year take-over by the state.

"I'm at an age where I can choose things, and I choose not to work with a board member like Mrs. Smith," Seaver said, calling her unprofessional.

Smith bristled at that characterization, indicating Seaver maintained a con-

descending attitude that caused rifts.

"She talks down to the staff, down to the teachers, down to the community that comes in with a problem," Smith said. "I'm very pleased about her retirement because I don't think that the county could have stood much more. She was ruining our chances of being successful."

Seaver is the second superintendent to retire from the appointed position since the state Board of Education seized control in 2000.

"Dr. Seaver is leaving Lincoln County a better place," said state superintendent Steve Paine. "Her expertise in school finance and facilities has helped the county improve and move closer to regaining control of its schools."

Billy Frye, who is vice president of the Lincoln school board, said, "They've destroyed our county and they're blaming

the local board," referring to the state board. "The county's failure is not from the local board and Carol Smith. The failure is from the state coming and taking control to build just one high school in the county."

Howard O'Cull, president of the West Virginia School Board Association, said Seaver "has been under incredible fire," indicating that anti state board sentiment has dominated the local board's culture.

O'Cull, in a rambling discourse about the Lincoln school situation, has taken a position essentially against the local school board who he represents.

School board member Thomas Ramey said "It's hard to keep getting blamed for the systems problems, when we're not in charge."

RESA now serving at state's will and pleasure

"If there's any question, there is no question now," says State Board of Education President Lowell Johnson on a policy change involving the eight Regional Education Service Agencies (RESA) in West Virginia.

The State Board of Education approved a policy addressing the issue. The policy makes it clear that RESA employees, those working full time and part time, serve at the will and pleasure of the State Board of Education.

"That means that there is supervi-

sion of those RESAs through the State Superintendent of Schools and the ultimate authority for those positions and for those programs rests with the State Board of Education," Johnson said.

The State Board of Education will hire the RESA directors and give the RESA directors the authority to hire the full time and part time staff, with the approval of the State Board.

The measure removes local control over the RESAs.

Opponents to the RESA system say it has out-lived its mission, and is

no longer necessary since the advent of 21st century technology.

A worker at the RESA I Office in Beckley was accused of embezzling hundreds of thousands of dollars from the agency. The Legislature called for a study of how the RESA offices in West Virginia operate and Johnson says the policy change was the culmination of that study.

Johnson said "All of us are now speaking on the same page," the state is now in charge of RESA.

Challenge members were "lifted up" at Charleston SC meeting

The 6th Annual Rural Education Working Group was held this month in Charleston, South Carolina.

The meeting, sponsored by the Rural School and Community Trust and hosted this year by the South Carolina Rural Education Grassroots Committee, brings together rural education activists from around the country to share and learn from each other.

Several members of Challenge WV attended the meeting, among the 90 advo-

cates for rural children and their schools.

They came from as far away as Maine and South Dakota.

The group discussed the so-called "new economy," and what it likely means to rural communities and for the education of children who live in rural places.

Discussions included organizing for better funding, supporting kids who are learning English for the first time, connecting academic curriculum to local communities, and getting involved with school

facilities processes.

Linda Martin, coordinator of Challenge WV, said "Most of all, we were lifted up by each other and by the common values and commitments we share to protect rural children and the communities they live in."

"We want to make sure our rural children get the great education they deserve," Martin concluded.