



The Challenge



April 2008

GOVERNOR MANCHIN SIGNS BILL TO SLOW LONG BUS RIDES



WV children and Challenge WV fellows meet with Gov. Manchin for the signing of bill that slows long bus rides for state's youngest children

Challenge WV fellows gathered in Charleston with Gov. Joe Manchin to sign a bill that will slow the placing of West Virginia children on long bus rides.

The bill passed the recent legislative session.

Thomas Ramey, coordinator of Challenge WV, said "This is a partial victory" in limiting long bus rides for some of the state's youngest children.

Ramey said thousands of WV kids as young as four are facing bus rides of an hour-and-one-half each way with the closure and consolidation of elementary schools.

"I don't know anyone reasonable that would disagree with not busing kids over one hour," said Ramey. "It's not sensible and it's child abuse."

Ramey said the new busing restrictions will help communities in their fight against closing smaller schools in favor of consolidated facilities.

"This bill gives some power back to communities and local school boards," he said.

Ramey said, "We're also grateful to our Challenge WV volunteers and their grass roots efforts all over the state," also expressing his appreciation to the Governor and the state's legislators for their support.

"Currently the comprehensible educational facility plans call for 120 elementary school closures. This bill will halt most of those closures because those closures, in many cases, will put kids on the bus for over an hour. It shouldn't happen," Ramey said.

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Challenge coordinator Thomas Ramey says "We continue the fight for WV's children and communities"

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WV students say thank you - Jordanne Pritt, 10 (L) and Lucas Tanner, 9 (R) give Gov. Manchin "A special thank you from West Virginia's school kids" for signing bus ride bill

Ramey said the bill is not retroactive, and does nothing to help those children who are currently enduring long trips to and from school.

State school officials have ignored the research that children do better in smaller community-based schools, and that putting children on buses for that length of time creates fatigue that negatively affects the learning process.

School Building Authority head Dr. Mark Manchin says the authority no longer uses "economies of scale" to consolidate state schools and create long bus rides.

Manchin contends school consolidation is strictly a local school board decision.

"We continue the fight for WV's children and communities," Ramey concluded.

EPIDEMIC DROP-OUT RATES, STATE HAS MORE FUZZY NUMBERS

Fewer than three in 100 West Virginia public school students dropped out during the 2005-06 school year or 3%, according to statistics issued by the WV Department of Education

Maybe.

Other sources claim the drop-out rate was about 20% or more.

"Three-percent is laughable," said Thomas Ramey, coordinator of Challenge WV, "It is astonishing the numbers the state issues."

Davin White, a staff writer for the Charleston Gazette, says "West Virginia's calculated rate of high school dropouts varies widely. It all depends on whom you ask."

Officials with the state Department of Education reported a 2.7 percent dropout rate in 2005-06.

Those at the West Virginia Kids Count Fund figured a 17.1 percent rate that year, while other sources claim the rate exceeds 20%.

The Alliance for Excellent Education in Washington, D.C., is a national policy and advocacy organization that works to make every child a high school graduate.

Former West Virginia Gov. Bob Wise currently serves as president.

The alliance says West Virginia graduation rates are misleading, and in part blamed "unreliable dropout data that inflates the graduation rate."

The US Chamber of Commerce, while giving the state F's and D's in most areas of educational achievement, did give the State Department of Education an A in management of data.

Officials with the alliance say that each year more than 6,700 students in West Virginia do not graduate with their peers.

The state department issued a figure cutting that number almost in half.

Nancy Walker, director for the state department's Office of Information Systems, explained how the state calculates the dropout rate, using a system of "corrections."

Margie Hale, director of the Kids Count Fund, said state and federal data "under-reports what's really happening." Hale said she uses the Department of Education's data, but calculates it differently.

CAN'T GET NUMBERS STRAIGHT

U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings announced April 1 that she would

make sure all states use the same formula to calculate how many students graduate high school on time, and how many drop out.

"The State Department of Education certainly can't get at the drop-out problem when they use their fuzzy numbers," said Ramey, stating "Challenge WV has been used to fuzzy numbers, about how many kids are on long bus rides in the Mountain State."

Kenna Seal, director of the state Office of Education Performance Audits, said West Virginia does better than some of the other states at calculating dropout rates.

He said other states just use estimates.

State Superintendent Steve Paine and Seal said that President Bush's, federal No Child Left Behind, law took the emphasis off dropout rates and placed it on graduation.

Educators say dropouts from the class of 2007 will cost the state more than \$1.7 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity over their lifetimes.

Patrick Miller, a research associate affiliated with the study, said, last year West Virginia used a method to count graduation rates in 2004 known as the "Leaver" rate.

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EPIDEMIC...

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It allows states wiggle-room and inflated graduation rates by measuring the number of dropouts as opposed to tracking students who actually finish school.

The US Chamber of Commerce, an advocate of No Child Left Behind, says its' state-by-state education report card shows the U.S. education system is failing and putting America's future competitiveness at risk.

They have been particularly harsh on West Virginia.

West Virginia, despite spending one of the largest amounts per student in the US, is ranked at 43rd in outcome.

The Chamber's Education Report Card gives the state an F for academic

achievement and an F on return on investment.

The state got a D in academic achievement for low-income and minority students.

Their report says the state is not truthful about student proficiency, giving a D.

Other D grades were in post-secondary and workforce readiness and flexibility in management policy.

The state did get a C in rigor of standards and an A in management of data.

SYSTEM FEEDING POVERTY RATES

Outcomes for students in West Virginia schools are less than satisfactory, but they are not alone. The high school drop-out rate is epidemic in America.

Each year almost one-third of all public high school students and nearly half of all black, Hispanic, and Native

Americans fail to graduate, according to the Gates Foundation.

Another third will not graduate ready for college or the modern workplace.

In fact, all across the USA, much of the high dollar educational system is in disarray.

High school grads and drop-outs could once go the blue-collar route and find good paying jobs in manufacturing.

With the globalized economy and millions of jobs already shifted abroad - such opportunity is no longer available.

With America's current unconfirmed recession, less-educated workers who once thrived in the "middle class" and those below that scale, will suffer hard and deep.

The Gates Foundation report warned that drop-outs are much more likely to "be unemployed and living in poverty."

THE "BLOODY HAMMER" STILL AFFECTING MANY WV SCHOOLS

West Virginia had the most expensive transportation system in the nation, even before gasoline prices have spiked to nearly \$4 a gallon, said Challenge WV Coordinator Thomas Ramey.

The problem has increased with the consolidation of hundreds of WV schools, creating some of the longest bus rides in America, according to research done by the Rural School and Community Trust.

While a new bill has been signed into law that slows the consolidation process and slows the trend toward long bus rides, the powerful hammer of consolidation is still at work.

The School Building Authority has approved a new consolidated high school for Mingo County, which will now receive nearly \$16.4 million, plus \$6.3 million in 2009 and 2010.

Mingo school board president Charles "Butch" West says the original cost of the project was estimated at \$73 million, expressing concern from where the rest of money will surface.

"I think Mingo County will not approve any bond levy for the new school," West said.

That project requires five county schools to be closed, with students facing long bus rides to the consolidated school

located on a remote strip site in an area where the King Coal Highway will eventually be built.

The five schools were built in the 1970's and 80's.

The project has been pushed by the local economic development authority.

The Mingo issue has been decided in the courts, based upon legislation giving the state authority, although Mingo county residents and school board members opposed the consolidation measures by the state, which has taken over the Mingo school system twice.

In 2005, Gov. Joe Manchin said he would not use the 'bloody hammer' to close and consolidate rural schools.

Dr. Mark Manchin, SBA executive director, recently said "For the SBA, in every instance, with the exception of the eastern panhandle in places like Berkeley County and Jefferson County, where growth is amazing...we just haven't approved new schools where no children are present."

Manchin is apparently not referring to recent history.

Manchin, who has denied the power of the SBA over county school boards for consolidated projects, continues to say "That's left up to each

individual county."

After years of wholesale school consolidations, Mark Manchin told a Challenge WV conference last fall that the state does not use an economies of scale model to close rural schools.

Manchin said "In fact, we let counties know that we will look at small schools and that we advocate small schools," indicating the entire state won't be painted with a broad brush when it comes to the size of schools.

"We are going to recognize that small schools are very beneficial to children, but we also recognize that sometimes with older facilities and declining enrollment that we may have to close some schools. But that decision is going to be made at the local level, not the School Building Authority level," he said.

Mingo Board president West said the state should return operation of the school system to Mingo County.

He said the reasons for the take-overs have worsened under state control, echoing statements from Lincoln County officials. "Our children's test scores have gone down," he said.

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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