



The West Virginia Challenge

April 1999



Teacher says transfer is political retaliation

A Lincoln County history teacher who led her students to the governor's mansion in a battle to save their community school says she is being punished for her opposition to school consolidation.

Gwen Ramey, a teacher at Harts High School and a member of Challenge West Virginia, received notification in March that her teaching position at Harts will be eliminated at the end of the school year. American history has been cut to a half-year class at the school and two other teachers have more tenure. She is being transferred to Duval High School on the other end of the county, which will require a two-hour commute each day.

County school superintendent Rick Powell maintains that reduction in force letters are being sent out to a number of educators for the simple reason that Lincoln County is operating 20.6 teaching positions over the state funding formula.

But Ramey, who has been at Harts for 15 years, says she is being targeted by school officials and local politicians because she has been an outspoken

critic of state education policy that has resulted in the closure of 26 percent of West Virginia's schools during the 1990s.

"I truly believe this proposed transfer is an attempt to silence me regarding school consolidation in Lincoln County and in Harts in particular," she said, adding that she will quit teaching before she accepts the new assignment because her heart is at Harts, where eight members of her family graduated.

Ramey has the support of a large number of her students, who are circulating a petition which they



Gwen Ramey

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Mason County returns \$14.4 million to state

The Mason County Board of Education is returning \$14.4 million to the state rather than consolidate the county's three high schools into one school. The action came less than a week after the county won a temporary court victory when a Kanawha Circuit judge ruled that the state could not redistribute the money for at least 45 days.

Mason County had had the money since 1996. The State School Building Authority contends that since the county failed to build a consolidated high school within a three-year time limit, the money must be returned to the state.

Jim Lees, attorney for the Mason County board, maintains that the money wasn't the Authority's in

the first place. The Legislature appropriated the money for Mason and three other counties after the Authority did not fund them, he said.

Lees said the issue is constitutional. "The executive branch — the SBA — is, in essence, trying to overrule the legislative branch. The issue is, can the SBA do that?"

Since the money was appropriated, Mason County residents elected two board members who oppose the consolidation, shifting the balance of the board from pro-consolidation to pro-small schools.

Shirley Gue, one of those newly-elected board members, said the decision to return the money will

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Challenge West Virginia

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

Challenge members believe that the policy direction being pursued by education officials in the state, which has involved the closing of many small schools, does not serve the best interest of many children, especially those from low-income

families who live in rural areas.

If you would like to become involved in Challenge WV, please contact one of the fellows listed on page three or Linda Martin or Beth Spence, whose numbers are listed on the back page.

Challenge 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.

Editor of **The West Virginia Challenge** is Beth Spence, rural coordinator for Challenge West Virginia.



This 'n that from around the state

◆ State Schools Superintendent Hank Marockie has announced he plans to resign on June 30, 2000. For many rural West Virginians, that is not soon enough. In small rural communities Marockie's most lasting legacy undoubtedly is the aggressive manner he used in overseeing the closing of 26 percent of the state's public schools. The roughshod disregard for the concerns of parents and residents of small communities throughout the state will not soon be forgotten in rural West Virginia.

◆ The Marockie legacy continues in Fayette County where the Board of Education on March 8 voted to close Pax and Page, two small elementary schools. Parents say the closures will result in overcrowding at Mt. Hope Elementary which has a capacity of 275 students. The new students will put the occupancy at at least 315. Another complaint is that children will have to spend 55 minutes on the bus traveling on dangerous winding roads. The parents say Pax has the most improved test scores in the county while Mt. Hope's test scores have dropped.

◆ In Monongalia County, residents are going to court to try to prevent the closure of four el-

ementary schools – Central, Wiles Hill, Cool Springs and Summer. Morgantown Mayor Frank Scafella implored the board to reconsider the closings saying, "Our elementary schools represent generations of families. The school is often the glue that binds us in community. It is in our interest economically and socially to commit ourselves to help the BOE keep our elementary schools alive."

◆ Mason County School Board member Shirley Gue, who favors small schools, has a website that is linked to a lot of research and information about community schools. The Challenge WV newsletter also can be seen on the site. The address is <http://home.sprynet.com/~sgue/>

◆ The report on transportation prepared by MGT of America for the state of West Virginia states that only about half of all public school employees are teachers. Noting that parents and community members are beginning to question how well money is being spent for education, the report stated that between 1960 and 1984, the number of non-classroom instructional personnel in America's schools grew by 400 percent, nearly seven times the rate of growth of classroom teachers. Public schools operate with five times more non-instructional personnel than parochial.

Ramey . . .

intend to take to the county Board of Education.

In her years at Harts, Ramey has attempted to bring history to life and to find it close to home. Her students have delved into county history, interviewing older people in the community and searching for treasured objects within their own families. Her belief is that history offers many lessons and that many of those lessons can be found in the heritage of the students. She has encouraged her students to become involved in community service and helping others.

Ramey's former principal, David Lucas, in nominating her for a teaching award, praised her for extending herself well beyond the classroom. "Some teachers are very organized and professional. Others are very concerned and caring. Ramey is both. She's a rare type of educator."

Mason . . .

allow Mason County the opportunity "to develop a plan without any excess baggage. Just because Mason County is giving up the \$14.4 million school consolidation grant does not mean it has given up its right to the \$14.4 million legislative appropriation."

In the meantime, a Mason County resident who supports consolidation has filed a suit to block the SBA from distributing the money to other counties.

The Charleston Gazette reported that most residents appeared to support the board's action. "I do not want to be prostituted for \$14 million," one said. "Any board member who wants to pursue consolidation, you will not be elected dog catcher in this county."

The board has hired an Ohio consulting firm to help develop a comprehensive facilities plan. The results are due in June, Gue said.

The Politics of Education

The 100-page Challenge WV study, *The Story of the Politics of Education in West Virginia*, is now available.

The study examines recent education history and policy in the state and raises questions about where West Virginia education policy is headed. For more information, contact Linda Martin or Beth Spence.



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