



The West Virginia Challenge

August 1999



Coaches lament loss of small schools

High school coaches are joining the ranks of those who are beginning to doubt the wisdom of West Virginia's school consolidation policy, which has resulted in the closure of 353 schools since 1989.

A story by assistant sports editor Rick Ryan in the July 6 edition of the *Charleston Daily Mail* quotes a number of coaches saying they long for the days when the state had many, many small high schools, each an extension of its community and each providing the community with an identity.

Jennings Boyd, the legendary coach who led tiny Northfork High School to a national-record eight straight Class AA boys basketball championships, is now a member of the McDowell County Board of Education.

He pointed out to Ryan that while Northfork reached the state basketball tournament 11 times in its final 12 seasons, since the school was merged with Welch and Gary in 1985, the new Mount View High School has never been to the state tournament.

Boyd told Ryan he thinks travel is a major problem for students. "We're not getting the participation that we would be getting if the schools weren't combined," he said.

Boyd said athletes often must travel long distances on treacherous winding roads to get home from practices and games. "It's not necessarily the miles. It's the terrain," he told Ryan. "It takes more time to go 30 miles here than it does 60 miles elsewhere. When you have to go out and hitchhike home, day after day, it's hard."

There are other reasons Boyd opposes consolidation. "I just don't think the consolidation idea has worked anywhere the way people thought ten, twenty years ago that it was going to work," he said. "I don't really have any studies to back it up, but my feeling is that kids in consolidated schools aren't getting as good an education as they did in small schools. I don't see anything backing up the idea that bigger, larger schools are giving us a better product. And that has to be the bottom line – the type of education kids are getting."

He said at Northfork, the 250 to 300 students received a good education and much more. "They learned to get along better with one another in a smaller school. They got along better with teachers and administrators, which is excellent training for going out in the world."

In addition, Jennings Boyd helped pave the way for many of the young men he coached to play ball at Bluefield State College, giving many of them an opportunity to receive college educations.

Mick Price, the boys basketball coach at Ravenswood High School, is another believer in the tradition of small schools. He told Ryan that when he attended Mannington High School in Marion County, the sports programs of the

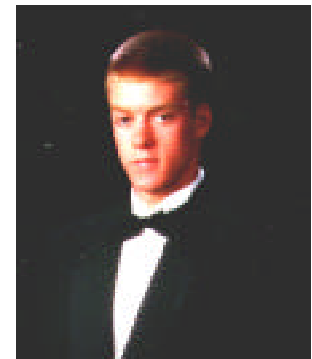
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Who is the little boy that 'this is all about?'

During a recent visit to Ritchie County, we ran into old friend Denny Nelson and learned that the little boy pictured at the top of our newsletter is Andrew Nelson, son of Denny and his wife Kay.

The photograph was taken in 1984 when Denny, Kay, Andrew and other Ritchie Countians came to a rally at the state capitol as part of their attempts to save their county's small high schools.

Andrew, who was three years old at the time, has since grown up into a fine young man. He was graduated from Ritchie County High School this past spring, has a summer job at Ritchie Concrete and will attend Glenville State College in the fall. He has a brother who is in eighth grade and a sister in fifth grade.



Andrew Nelson today

Denny Nelson teaches third grade and Kay Nelson second grade at Ellenboro, one of five elementary schools the Ritchie County Board of Education had proposed merging into one school. Because of strong parent opposition, the plan has been scrapped, at least for the present.

Denny and his family came to that long ago rally to

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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 chil-

dren, 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.



This 'n that

- Last spring, Lincoln County school board members, citing budgetary concerns, eliminated 18 teaching positions and six service workers, placed 91 teachers on a

transfer list, eliminated full-time counselors in elementary schools and cut coaching salaries.

In July the same board created a new \$60,000 administrative position and hired County Commission president Charles McCann to fill the post. As assistant superintendent, McCann will oversee personnel, transportation and maintenance for the school system, according to reports in *The Charleston Gazette*.

The school system is the top employer in Lincoln County. Said Anita Mitter, who represents Lincoln County for the West Virginia Education Association, "Charles McCann controls jobs in Lincoln County. That's a problem." Lincoln County Challenge West Virginia fellow Thomas Ramey observed, "At every board meeting we hear that the school system's in so much debt. We can't do this. We can't do that. We want to know where all this new money is coming from."

- The number of schools closed in West Virginia since 1989 is up to 323, according to a report by Eric Eyre in *The Charleston Gazette*.

- Mingo County's comprehensive school facilities plan proposes replacing the five existing high schools with two consolidated schools. The Associated Press quoted Board member W.C. Totten, who is chairing the facilities planning committee, as saying the county is only large enough for one high school, but "because of the terrain and topography. . . two schools is the least we can get by with." The plan, which has not been officially adopted, would consolidate Burch, Williamson, Matewan, Gilbert and Tug Valley High Schools into South Central and North Central comprehensive high schools.

- In Fayette County, members of the comprehensive facilities planning committee have continued to revise their plan since parents expressed opposition to a proposal to close 12 of the county's 15 elementary schools. The parents said they wanted young children to be in small schools. A proposal currently being considered calls for the closure of four elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools.

- Putnam County's school planning committee will recommend the consolidation of Buffalo and Poca High Schools only if it can be proven that the consolidation will actually improve education. Committee member Will Carter said "there's evidence in West Virginia that consolidation doesn't actually produce" more advanced courses. He said transportation studies would also have to be done to demonstrate that students won't have to ride buses too long.

- Superintendent Ron Duerring recommended that the Kanawha County Board of Education close twenty schools over the next two to six years. Board members, who have indicated they want to close between six and twelve schools by the fall of 2000, say they won't vote for new schools and they won't vote for major renovations to existing schools.

- Lincoln County officials are proposing consolidating the county's four high schools into two schools, a plan which has been proposed twice before and twice has failed to receive backing from voters in bond levy elections.

- The West Virginia KIDS COUNT Fund reports that child poverty in the state has grown by 62.2 percent since 1980. The Fund's 1999 Data Book, says child poverty has grown from 18.5 percent in 1980 to 30 percent in 1995; forty-nine of West Virginia's 55 counties have poverty rates that exceed the national average of 20.8; and only Louisiana, Mississippi and the District of Columbia have higher children poverty rates.

Coaches . . .

local small schools were part of the fabric of the community. In the mines and shops, men and women discussed Mannington, Farmington, Barrackville, Monongah and Fairview.

"We all had rivalries. Regardless of whether they went 0-10 or 10-0, it was our 0-10 or 10-0," he said. "And its not just the games people miss. It's the boy scout functions, the plays. The school was a hub for everybody in the town. It gave them something to do."

One sports legend who came out of Farmington High School was the great New York Giants/Washington Redskins linebacker Sam Huff, who reminisced about his school days with *Charleston Daily Mail* sportswriter Chuck Landon.

"It was so wonderful," he said of his days at Farmington. "The school was small. You knew basically everybody from the seniors down. You knew all the teachers. Those schools belonged to the community.

"In my opinion, that's one of the biggest mistakes this country has ever made - school consolidation. Those schools are now so big, the kids don't know each other and they don't know the teachers. They've lost control. There's no discipline in them and that's why we're having the problems that we're having."

Poca High School athletic director and boys basketball coach Allen Osborne did a graduate-course paper on the effects of extra-curricular activities and found that students who participate in those activi-

ties tend to have a higher grade-point average, he told Ryan.

"I think that, by taking some opportunities away from those kids, if they're not participating, then they're looking for other things to occupy their minds. And not all of them are positive," he said.

And it's not just athletics, Osborne said. Consolidation cuts out potential student body presidents, cheerleaders, homecoming court candidates and members of drama and glee clubs.

"It limits borderline kids who would get a chance to do it," he said. "It eliminates kids who may otherwise feel part of the school."

Andrew . . .

try to save Pennsboro High School.

Although they were not successful in their efforts to keep the school open, Denny believes important things happened as a result of people coming together from around the state.

"Due to the rally, we got laws that said school boards had to have open public hearings before schools could be closed," he said. "Before that, boards held meetings and closed schools without any public input at all."

It's important, he said, for people to remember what they did accomplish at a time when many residents of many communities felt like they were losing a majority of their battles to save schools.

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