



The

Challenge

December 2000



Superintendent proposes funding changes

State Schools Superintendent David Stewart has proposed sweeping changes in the way West Virginia pays for public education, according to a report in *The Charleston Gazette*.

During a hearing on the 26-year-old Recht school funding case, Stewart said the state could raise up to \$49 million more a year in taxes by increasing appraised property values from 60 percent to 100

percent. The tax hike would require a two-thirds vote of both houses of the Legislature

The taxes would replace county excess levies. *The Gazette* said smaller counties might benefit, but larger counties such as Kanawha and Putnam would get less to operate schools.

One problem with the plan is that taxpayers could see a 40 percent boost in

their annual tax bill, according to columnist Tom Miller, who called the plan a "tough sell."

In addition to a "super majority" in the Legislature, the plan would require "consent of the voters and we've already been down that road before a couple of times with no success," Miller wrote, referring to proposals for statewide levies that were defeated twice during the 1980s.

"And it doesn't figure to attract much support from governor-elect Bob Wise who has already said he thinks taxpayers are 'maxed out' in this state," wrote Miller, who said Legislative approval is "so unlikely that Stewart isn't even sure he wants to take his plan there for consideration."

Ohio County Circuit Judge Arthur Recht said the ideas were intriguing. "But can it be done?" the judge asked. "This is going to take a lot of legal analysis."

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Endangered School



Buffalo Grade School, located on Buffalo Creek in southern Logan County, is one of four elementary schools and a junior high school that will be closed if the County Board of Education is able to complete plans to construct a new K-8 Man Middle School. Buffalo serves 197 students in grades PK-3. The one-story building was constructed in 1957 with an addition added in 1985. The County's recently-completed facilities plan says Buffalo Grade can continue to be used as an elementary school.

SBA hears proposals

For two days in November, State School Building Authority members heard requests for facilities improvements from superintendents representing 40 of the state's 55 counties.

The requests totaled \$180 million, but the SBA has only \$28 million to distribute.

"It's a drop in the bucket. \$150 million are solid projects that need to be done," SBA director Clacy

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Challenge West Virginia

The Challenge is published by Challenge West Virginia, a statewide organization committed to maintaining and improving small community schools and reforming education policy in West Virginia so that all of our state's children have the opportunity to receive a first-class education and the promise of a bright future.

Challenge members believe state education policy, which has resulted in the closing of a fourth of West Virginia's schools during the past ten years, does not serve the best interest of many children, especially those from low-income families who live in rural areas.

Challenge West Virginia 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.

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Superintendent proposes . . .

Dan Hedges, attorney for the plaintiffs, rejected the plan during closed-door meetings with Stewart and lawyers last summer, *The Gazette* said.

Hedges said the proposals may alleviate teacher and service worker shortages in some counties, but would not provide more money to fix dilapidated buildings and pay for supplies and equipment.

Stewart also wants to eliminate the funding formula "net enrollment cap" that penalizes counties with a high percentage of special education students. *The Gazette* said the state approved the cap to prevent counties from placing students in special education programs solely to get more money to hire teachers and service workers.

Stewart said the funding formula change could generate up to \$36 million extra a year. The superintendent also proposed providing \$3 million for the most rural counties in the state. Pocahontas, Webster, Pendleton and Randolph counties each would receive more than \$130,000 extra each year.

Hedges criticized state board members and education officials, saying they were ignoring parts of an August agreement that called for changes in the way schools are evaluated.

The agreement includes a list of essential courses that must be offered to students. State officials didn't list those courses – which included pre-calculus, anatomy and physiology and probability and statistics, to the state board in October, Hedges said.

"The Board has to be brought kicking and screaming into any role to improve education in this state," Hedges said. "We have a state board saying, 'We're not going to do anything with this. That it doesn't mean a thing.'"

An attorney with the state board said the board is circulating the proposed changes to county systems for comment and won't vote on the changes until March.

"The board can't be ordered to comply with something that's in process," said attorney Mike Farrell.

Recht denied a request by Hedges to appoint a special commissioner to force state school officials to comply with the August agreement.

SBA . . .

Williams said. "All the projects are exceptionally good projects this year because counties have just completed their ten-year comprehensive plans. None of the projects are fluff."

The projects include new high schools in Jefferson and Lincoln counties, a new middle school in Hancock County and roof and floor replacements in Fayette County schools.

The Charleston Gazette reported that the Lincoln County plan to close four high schools and build another one for \$20 to \$24 million received the best reception.

"It's long overdue," Lincoln County Superintendent William Grizzell said.

But if SBA members agree to pay for the new Lincoln County high school in full – which most observers expect them to do – it will leave other counties fighting over the remaining \$4 to \$8 million.

Putnam County wants \$15.6 million to consolidate Poca and Buffalo high schools. Williams suggested that a greater efficiency could be achieved if another high school also were closed.

The School Building Authority was established by the Legislature in 1988. It has spent \$647 million since 1990. During this time more than a fourth of the state's public schools were closed.

SBA members will discuss the projects and decide which will receive funding at a meeting on December 18.

This 'n that from around the state

• West Virginia's largest school district is losing children, and school board members in Kanawha County are concerned about a corresponding drop in state funding. The 30,000-member school district has lost 818 students this year, according to a report in *The Charleston Gazette*. *The Gazette* reported that a majority of those students enrolled in neighboring Putnam County, which had 63 new students from Kanawha County. Among students who stayed in West Virginia, 30 transferred to Cabell County schools, 18 to Lincoln County schools and 12 to Boone County schools. Of the students who left the state, 34 enrolled in North Carolina schools, 31 in Ohio, 23 in Virginia and 22 in Florida. Another 31 students enrolled in private schools.

Kanawha County stands to lose about \$2 million in state funding because of the enrollment drop. Board members say that may stymie their efforts to improve art, music and physical education programs. They also have ruled out an employee pay raise unless voters remove a \$38 million cap on the county's excess levy, *The Gazette* reported.

• Members of the Fayette County Board of Education want to delay school closings until voters have a say in the matter.

Superintendent Larry Coleman said he proposed closing two county high schools and one elementary school, but no schools will close this year.

School Board President William Arthur said he wants voters to decide if they will support a bond issue in the spring.

Fayette County's comprehensive facilities plan calls for building three high schools to cover the county's three main geographic areas. The construction hinges on a \$35 million bond levy that must be passed by voters.

"I want the people to have a chance to decide," Arthur said.

• Putnam County officials are meeting to discuss where to locate a proposed consolidated high school. In its comprehensive facilities plan, the county proposed constructing a \$20 million high school that would consolidate Buffalo and Poca high schools, according to *The Charleston Gazette*. School officials are asking the School Building Authority for \$15.5 million and the county



will put up the other \$4.9 million.

Superintendent Sam Sentelle said some of the money might come from an insurance settlement from a fire that destroyed George Washington Middle School.

"Closing schools in the fastest growing part of the state makes no sense," said Debi McCoy of Bancroft, an opponent of the consolidation proposal.

• West Virginia's newest state school board member is Williamson attorney Howard Persinger, whose support of former Gov. Cecil Underwood almost cost him the seat. Gov.-elect Bob Wise had targeted Persinger as one of the people he wanted removed from a list of Underwood appointments.

Senate Majority Leader Truman Chafin, Persinger's brother-in-law, intervened and the appointment was confirmed by the WV State Senate.

Linda Hurley, president of the Mingo County Education Association, said she hoped Persinger's appointment will make the state more aware of Mingo County's problems. "For example, the geography of our county does not make large-scale school consolidations feasible," she said.

• West Virginia has a teacher shortage, State Department of Education officials told State School Board members at a meeting in November. Although plunging student enrollments have forced county school boards to lay off teachers, superintendents say they can't find qualified applicants for teaching jobs, especially in the fields of foreign language, special education and advanced math and science.

The officials recommend higher salaries, bonuses and other incentives; streamlined hiring practices; better recruiting; and tuition-free programs to retrain elementary teachers who want to work in higher grades.

A third of West Virginia's teachers are 50 or older; seventy-five percent are older than 40. Approximately 14,000 teachers will be eligible to retire between 2001 and 2013.

• The physical activity coordinator with the state Health Department's cardiovascular program, says today's

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State School Board hosts public forums

Challenge West Virginia was represented at all eight of the State Board of Education's forums to discuss the future of public education in the state.

The forums were held in October in Elkins, Martinsburg, Morgantown, Wheeling, Parkersburg, Huntington, Beckley and Charleston.

Challenge members reported that a majority of the 800 citizens attending the forums were school employees.

However, they were able to make points in support of small schools and against the long bus rides that many students

have to endure.

At each forum, participants were divided into small groups to discuss three questions: What should be the purposes of public education? How can we know if these purposes are being achieved? And what changes need to be made to achieve these purposes?

A Department of Education staff member facilitated each group and another State Department official kept a record of the discussion.

State Department officials will compile the results of all eight forums and present them in a report

to the State Board of Education. State school board members said they plan to use the documents and information to make changes and improve

This 'n that . . .

children spend too much time sitting in front of televisions and computers, a situation which has led to an epidemic of childhood obesity.

"The obesity rate for children and adults in the state has increased from 26 percent in 1984 to 46 percent in 1999," said Cathy Cleland.

education statewide.

Results of the forums can be found on the Department of Education's website at <http://wvde.state.wv.us/>

"We need to find ways to get our children active again," she said. "We've taken recess out of some grade schools and physical education is getting a smaller piece of the pie as schools place more emphasis on purely academic areas and new areas like computer technology."