



# The Challenge



December 2004

## "A Very Good Year" For Challenge WV No Cost Busing Bill Agenda Item



Challenge's grass-roots movement to maintain and improve small community schools has experienced a cardinal year, according to Challenge Coordinator Linda Martin.

"Most citizens of West Virginia are for maintaining small community schools while the state's educational hierarchy has been moving full-steam with closures and consolidation," Martin said.

Martin believes that in some cases, the closing of one-fourth of the state's community schools could stand in violation of constitutional law.

"The reasons for many closings and consolidations in the state just don't hold water," she said, and have little to do with providing children with a quality education. "It has been costly and caused long bus rides that are unacceptable to almost everyone, except

the decision makers."

"Bigger is not better, and it certainly has not saved the taxpayers any money," she said.

Martin said a major initiative in 2005 is the "No Cost Busing Bill," which Challenge WV is presenting to the West Virginia Legislature. The bill could effectively end the closure of community-based schools.

"Our Challenge fellows have done enormous work this year for education in our state, involving parents, educators and community leaders to reverse a destructive trend," said Martin.

"They have tried to represent all West Virginia citizens, including those who have little voice, many living in poor, low-populated rural counties."

Martin gave several highlights of Challenge in 2004:

Published research "A Decade of Consolidation: Where are the Savings?" showing how the state spent education dollars during the 90s. (This is on a PDF file under Resources on our website: [www.challengewv.org](http://www.challengewv.org))

Provided expert testimony in the Lincoln County lawsuit against the State Board of Education's forced consolidation. The case is still pending before the WV Supreme Court.

Governor Wise made legislation support by Challenge West Virginia part of his legislative agenda including the busing bill.

Provided training for local school board members, community members and Challenge WV Fellows on Best Fiscal Management Practices.

Added two new county chapters of Challenge WV bringing the total chapters to 22 while working in 27 counties.

Hosted a fall conference on how "No Child Left Behind" affects WV, comparing education policy nationally and in WV and how it relates to rural schools and the importance of arts in the education of children.

Donated \$375,000 in books to children in 24 counties.

Participated on education panels of the

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### No cost busing billboards raise awareness



Opponents say the busing bill will cost school systems millions of dollars, but "It will actually not cost a dime," said Challenge fellow Thomas Ramey. "At least seven billboards (above) have been placed in the Charleston area to remind legislatures of that fact." Passage will hinge on whether or not politicians agree that it is time to end school closures and consolidations, he said.

### State board violates open meeting law while Mingo board stands firm

Charleston newspapers report that the State School Board went into an hour-and-a-half secret session, then came out and voted unanimously for Mingo County school consolidation.

The school board ignored the Open Meetings Act, which forbids such clandestine sessions, except for limited purposes.

The state board wants the Mingo County School Board to follow through with the consolidation of its high schools.

Such maneuvering will likely give newly hired Mingo School Board attorney Jim Lees an opening to confront the actions of the State Board, which opponents say is a violation of constitutional law.

Lees has said the high-handedness of state officials that are non-elected, needs to be tested in the courts.

The board does not like the state's plan, which includes the use of a strip mining site that is yet to be clear-titled to the school system. Members say the actual costs of a new consolidated high school likely exceeds available funding. The Mingo board says there are just too

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# This 'n that from around the state

• **CITIZENSHIP STUDIES GET A "C"** - Schools are doing a "C" job of preparing students for citizenship, according to Americans who responded to a federally funded survey.

Over 70 percent of those surveyed said civic education should be a "central purpose" of schools, according to the report from Representative Democracy in America, a project funded by an act of Congress.

The report, titled "From Classroom to Citizen: American Attitudes on Civic Education," is to be posted at [www.representativedemocracy.org](http://www.representativedemocracy.org). Nine in 10 people surveyed said civic education programs are "important for maintaining a healthy democracy."



Finland have no worries about "teaching to the test" - they just teach.

"Teachers focus 100 percent on educating and teaching children, rather than preparing them for tests," said a Finnish educator.

American education is really in two worlds. Children in impoverished cities and poor rural areas get abysmal educations compared with peers in affluent suburbs, sometimes a few miles down the road.

The United States is the only major industrialized nation that finances its schools through local property taxes, resulting in a system that becomes unfair.

West Virginia has tried to address this problem in the wake of court cases, but funding is still far from equal. The ones who need the

most help often get the fewest resources.

Challenge WV's Linda Martin and Thomas Ramey traveled recently to Mississippi to a conference whose main theme was trying to close the widening gap between these two worlds.

Until that problem is corrected, poor children and kids in rural schools will continue to receive inferior opportunities. Their performance will pull down the national average.

Wealth without equal opportunity does not make for success.

• **SOUTHERN PARTNERS DIRECTOR DAVIS VISITS CHALLENGE** -



Robyn Davis, a program director from the Southern Partners Fund, a community-based philanthropic enterprise founded in 1998, visited Challenge WV at their December meeting.

The SPF provides general operating and technical assistance grants to rural, community-based organizations in twelve Southern States: Alabama, Arkansas,

Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

• **"MEZZ MESS" STILL A MESS** - The "Mezz Mess" continues with revelations that two House Education Committee employees fielded numerous cell phone calls from Mezzatesta throughout ongoing investigations. Mezzatesta called the women before and after they met with investigators.

Mezzatesta wanted to know what they were telling investigators. He wanted to make sure they were "all right with the story" - that a letter he had used to refute ethical misconduct allegations was authentic, according to statements obtained by the Sunday Gazette-Mail.

Shelda Howard said she received a call on July 13 that most upset her. Mezzatesta complimented her several times and ended up saying "I just want you to know, you're part of my family now." That same day, a news report was published about a letter Howard had typed, a letter that essentially cleared Mezzatesta of any wrongdoing, a letter that ultimately was found to be a fake.

Statements released from House Education office workers indicate that Mezzatesta and his wife were confident, cocky and controlling throughout an investigation last summer. Mary Lou Mezzatesta told House Education legislative assistant Melinda Ryan Swagger that they shouldn't worry about House Speaker Bob Kiss taking disciplinary action against them.

An investigation is continuing regarding Mary Lou Mezzatesta using government computers to operate a gambling business in which she is involved.

Mezzatesta, after being removed as House Education Chairman, was defeated in his re-election bid.

• **US LAGS BEHIND IN MATH SKILLS** - A recent survey of mathematical skills of 15-year-olds around the world showed dismal performance of U.S. students, ranking 28th out of 40 countries. Finnish kids came in first.

What do the Finns do that Americans don't? The answer may surprise some educators. First of all, they don't test their kids. Teachers in

• **BUILDINGS "FULL OF MEMORIES"** - Gauley Bridge School is closing. Patricia Spangler, a Gauley Bridge graduate and member of the Fayette County School Board, says the board failed to give Gauley Bridge what it needed to succeed.

Fayette County Superintendent of Schools Helen Whitehair, another Gauley Bridge graduate, proposed the closure.

Board president Steve Pilato, who voted against closing Gauley Bridge in 2001, said economic constraints caused him to cast a different vote.

Stephanie Adkins, a parent, responded to a letter to a newspaper written by a board member's spouse. She said the letter writer asked if people who want to keep the high school open are simply trying to save "a building full of memories" instead of putting their children's best interests first.

Adkins said if she is able to give her three children good memories, then she has also put her children's best interests first, indicating that low-income children will be the most disadvantaged if they must take the long bus ride to Valley High School in Smithers.

• **MORE PROMISE SCHOLARSHIPS, BUT THERE ARE PROBLEMS** - About 30 percent more high-achieving West Virginia college students will get a full-tuition Promise scholarship this year, while the number of grants for needy students declined.

About \$50 million is dedicated to Promise scholarships, a three-year-old program that pays full tuition and fees for high school seniors with a B average and qualifying test scores.

Standards for the scholarship were stiffened, which kept the number of new Promise scholars from ballooning in 2004. But college tuition in West Virginia is soaring, so the program paid out 48 percent more state money this year for just 30 percent more students.

The need-based Higher Education Grant Program didn't get a multi-million-dollar boost from the Legislature, as Promise did. So its rolls are down by 652 students over this time last year, with qualified students (those with C averages, qualifying test scores and financial need) left out in the cold.

## Challenge members exhibit giving spirit



During the annual Christmas Dinner in Charleston at the Covenant House, Challenge fellows presented gifts to Phil Hainen, Coordinator of the homeless Drop-In Center.

## State teachers dying under paperwork

The West Virginia Education Association says a push to improve student performance, much of it associated with No Child Left Behind is crippling teacher's creativity and burying them in paperwork.

WVEA leaders say some counties are spending up to \$100,000 a year to hire out-of-state consultants. The WVEA has sent Freedom of Information Act requests to the state Department of Education, eight regional education service agencies and 55 county school superintendents. The teachers' organization

hopes to issue a report on its findings in February.

Almost half of the state's 55 county school systems have hired consultants who prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach to learning, says the association. WVEA President Tom Lange says that approach ignores how students learn differently.

Lange says teachers have a problem with the robot-type steps they're required to follow. Much of it is associated with what has been described as teaching to the test.

About 75 Kanawha County teachers told school officials that such guidelines increase paperwork and drain time and energy.

The WVEA has launched a statewide investigation into one-size-fits-all-programs, which includes looking at their costs. The union hopes to learn what programs work and what ones don't.

Schools that don't meet NCLB requirements face state sanctions. About 30 percent of West Virginia schools missed the mark in 2004.

## A very good year *Continued from page 1*

WV School Boards Association, Rotary Clubs, Americorp, Vermont legislature, Grantmakers for Children, Youth and Families, Hugh O'Brien High School Leaders, Vermont Policy Institute and in conferences in Nebraska and Mississippi.

Hosted meeting of the Ford Foundation and the national Rural School and Community Trust.

Helped organize voters in Mingo County to elect small school supporters to the Mingo County Board of Education.

Donated three tractor trailer loads of bottled water and cleaning supplies to counties flooded in West Virginia.

Provided research and information to all candidates who requested it during the primary and general elections.

"Since Challenge began in 1998, there has been a major shift against school consolidation," Martin said. "The issue of busing kids long distances to bigger schools is a non-issue in most of America."

"The proof is in about what works best, but in the Mountain State, it has been hard to change the minds of decision makers," she concluded.

## State board violates *Continued from page 1*

many unanswered questions.

The Mingo board has the consolidation plan on hold and rejected at least \$17.4 million from the state School Building Authority to construct a new school.

State Board member Lowell Johnson used the old "save the taxpayers money" argument. "How can you keep open these schools when you don't have (enough) students to go to them?" he said. "If there aren't any students going to them, it takes a large amount of money just keeping them up."

"Consolidation has not done what it promised," said Mingo board president Bill

Duty. He said bus ride times will get longer and children will be farther away from their families, hospitals, fire and police services.

"I can tell you some good things about consolidation, but not many would stand out in Mingo County," he said.

"In May, people spoke out, and they don't want to lose their schools. We are striving and struggling to meet the demands of students, and do things that would enable us to keep kids close to their homes and give them a quality education."

In the meantime, the state board is threatening to take-over the Mingo County

system again, some say because Mingo board has not been compliant.

The state board has instructed the Office of Performance Audits to conduct a new performance audit of the Mingo school system. The system was under state control for a few years until local control was returned in 2002.

The board instructed state Superintendent Dr. David Stewart to take any immediate action necessary to implement Mingo County's Comprehensive Educational Facilities Plan.

The plan proposes the consolidation of Williamson, Burch and Matewan high schools into a new Mingo South High.

## 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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