



# The Challenge



December 2005

## Powers could be returned to communities over consolidation

While the WV Board of Education is rolling full force over closing community schools, causing bus rides up to one and one-half hours each way for many students, there could be some relief in sight.

The 25-member House of Delegates Education Committee, has approved a bill which will go directly to floor vote, calling for citizens of a county to actually vote on future consolidation proposals.

If passed by the legislature, citizens will have a say on the matter related to the closing of elementary and middle schools.

Linda Martin of Challenge WV said "I'm grateful for the cooperation over this measure. The education committee is looking at doing something better for parents, kids and communities."

After closing more than 300 community schools, there are well over 100 elementary and middle schools still on the chopping block.

State education officials have consistently said the decision to close and consolidate is a local decision, but that has been far from the truth.



Mingo County school board president Bill Duty has said "It's been a bloody hammer," since his county is being forced to close three high schools and build a consolidated school on a Red Jacket mountain.

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## School Building Authority grants themselves second pay raise

A Charleston Daily Mail story says the "School Building Authority just gave one too many," referring to a pay raise they recently granted themselves.

Gov. Joe Manchin was not happy that the SBA granted pay raises to all their agency employees, except the executive director, whose salary is set by the governor.

It was the second pay hike for these fortunate individuals in a matter of weeks, authority employees

pocketing a \$900 increase granted by legislators to all state workers.

The report said "It is unlikely that work done at the authority is of greater value to West Virginians than work done at any other agency." But when others have been asked to "make-do", authority members have hiked their incomes.

The SBA and the WV Board of Education is used to getting their way hammering West Virginia communities to submit to their will over

school consolation, so why not here.

The newspaper said "Authority members cannot grasp the unfairness of their actions, or just don't care."

"The governor has the ability to set the salary of the executive director, but it's our responsibility to set the salaries of the staff," said Barbara Fish.

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# Powers could be returned to communities over consolidation

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Larry Williams (D-Preston), vice-chair of the education committee, said “This measure gives some balance to the problem,” with many WV schools being consolidated.

Williams indicated his constituents are “worn out” with the power executed by state education officials.

Martin says the state’s educational bureaucrats and officials “totally ignore the research that kids do better in small, community schools.”

“They are holding to a model of education that has widely been abandoned,” she said.

Education chair Tom Campbell (D-Greenbrier), called for a vote of his committee after two days of discussion. Only one or two members of the 25-member committee voted “nay” and eleven members immediately signed to sponsor the bill.

Campbell said “The bill recognizes that boards need flexibility to be financially prudent. There seems to be a growing consensus that consolidation affecting our younger children is not a good idea.

Howard O’Cull, executive director of the West Virginia School Boards

Association, spoke against allowing the voters to decide, saying “It just adds another layer to the issue,” and could cause fiscal problems for school boards.

O’Cull, while saying he did not have a consensus from his group, was outspoken against it at the committee

hearing.

He said he is hopeful lawmakers will ask several looming questions about the bill’s implication. He sees it as a problem for local school boards.

Liza Cordeiro, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Education, said “Of course we’ll look closely and review the rationale behind it,” but taking authority away from the State Board of Education and the School Building Authority will not be acceptable.

Thomas Ramey, a Challenge WV Fellow, said those groups with vested interests have lots of input over education with legislators, “But there is rarely a mention of what citizens want for their communities, or what parents want for their kids.”

Ramey said politicians are taking notice. “The public is worn to a frazzle with public policy that destroys their schools and takes education away from their communities.”

“They are not buying the argument that it saves money or improves their children’s education. It does not,” Ramey said. “It just creates a gigantic educational empire, detached from communities and parents.”

O’Cull, speaking to Challenge WV last fall, said the legislature, over a period of time has removed much of the constitutional power from local school boards, passing it to Charleston.

Martin said “The passage of this bill could bring some hope to parents

and voters who are fed up with the state’s high-handed authority. Something needs to happen to reflect the will of parents and what’s best for children, even though it’s a little late for many communities.”

Gov. Joe Manchin has been critical of the actions of the State School Building Authority, the group recently granted themselves an extra pay-raise.

The bill would mandate county elections except when the closure or consolidation was part of a previously approved bond issue.

Counties would also skip elections if the schools at issue averaged less than 13 students per grade level.

The bill also exempts schools that must be rebuilt or repaired following a disaster.

“While there may be rules and regulations for the public to be heard, time after time, in county after county, people gather by the hundreds and tell their school boards not to do this,” Martin said, “They are routinely ignored.”



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## School Building Authority grants themselves second pay raise

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The SBA voted 6 to 5 to give \$26,000 in pay raises to nine office workers, even though Gov. Joe Manchin had asked them to refrain.

Staff members also received a separate \$900 pay raise, along with other state employees.

SBA members who supported the raises said the office workers were hard-working and deserved the pay hikes.

SBA members who opposed the increases said it was unfair for workers to get two pay raises in two months.

“My governor doesn’t want this,” said Robert Holroyd, who opposed the increases. “It’s his administration. He’s got the overall picture.”

School Building Authority Chairman Carte Goodwin said, “It’s a matter of consistency. The rank and file (state employees) don’t have the ability to get these raises.”

# State takes over Hampshire County schools

After a boiling controversy over the employment of former delegate and legislative education chair Jerry Mezzatesta and a superintendent of schools that refused to resign, the WV Board of Education has taken partial control of Hampshire county schools.

The state board said they moved on Hampshire County schools after reviewing an audit report that found the county's board office in turmoil.

An interim Hampshire schools Superintendent Jill Parker was removed and former Tucker County superintendent Cynthia Kolsun has been hired as a temporary replacement.

State board members voted 6-1 to take over the Hampshire school board's financial and personnel decisions.

Candy Canan, vice president of the Hampshire County Education Association, said "This is a huge positive step in the right direction. It's long overdue. The state Board of Education did the right thing by the people of Hampshire County today."

The state board had declared a "state of emergency" in Hampshire and gave county school officials seven months to fix what they called widespread personnel and financial problems.

Auditors said that top Hampshire school administrators hired employees illegally and misspent grants solicited by former House of Delegates Education Chairman Jerry Mezzatesta.

Mezzatesta worked as a "community specialist" for Hampshire schools until he was fired following multiple

state and federal investigations.

Some deficiencies were fixed, but many problems persist, according to an audit report.

The audit says that sometimes the most-qualified applicants weren't hired for jobs and some Hampshire teachers weren't licensed properly.

They were critical that the county employs two treasurers, the only system in WV to do so.

Hampshire schools Superintendent David Friend recently resigned after efforts to fire him. Friend didn't report to work for 15 months, citing health problems.

Hampshire school board members pleaded with state board members to postpone the take-over decision for at least 60 days, wanting time to hire a new superintendent on their own.

Board member Parker broke down in tears while defending Hampshire schools, criticizing the audit report as inaccurate. She gave state board members a seven-page statement.

Hampshire school board office employees reportedly told state auditors that they feared top Hampshire school administrators would retaliate or fire them if they went on record about problems.

The state board views the take-over as a response to the system's cry for help.

There was apparent dissension during the state's takeover meeting.

Members Ron Spencer and Barbara Fish urged their colleagues to give Hampshire board members more time to hire a new superintendent.

Fish abruptly left the meeting during the discussion and did not vote on the takeover.

State schools Superintendent Steve Paine said Hampshire school officials had been given plenty of time to correct problems.

Hampshire is the fourth of West Virginia's 55 county school systems now under state takeover. The state board also runs schools in Mingo, Lincoln and McDowell counties.

Currently, school board members in Lincoln and Mingo County claim the takeover is related to their failure to agree with school consolidation.

In 1992, Logan County became the first county to be seized

by the state, but control has been returned.

The state seized control of Mingo County Schools in February 1998. Following a surprise inspection, a 10-member review team found a total of 172 deficiencies in Mingo County school operations.

Lincoln County was seized in 2000 and McDowell County fell to state control in 2001.

Control was returned to the Mingo board, but was taken over again in February 2005, after board members refused to sign-on to the state's consolidation program.

The executive director of the WV School Boards Association, Howard O'Cull said there have been very few successful takeovers by state administrations around the USA.

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David Sneed, the authority's architectural services chief, received a \$10,000 raise, now receiving \$104,446 a year.

The agency's chief financial officer, Garry Stewart, got a \$3,874 raise to \$83,900.

The lowest paid employee at SBA now makes \$39,900 a year.

Executive Director Clacy Williams makes \$104,758 a year.

State Board of Education members have three seats on the SBA.

State school board President Lowell Johnson, who sits on the SBA, was the only state school board member who opposed the raises.

Goodwin, Holroyd, Nick Preservati and Tom Lange also voted against the raises.

Those voting for the pay raises were Fish, state school board member Sheila Hamilton, and board members Connie Perry, Louis Spatafore, Steve Burton and state schools Superintendent Steve Paine.

# 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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