



The

# Challenge

February 2001



## State schools get D+ for standards

West Virginia's education system scored a D+ for its efforts to raise academic standards and hold schools accountable, according to the most recent report from *Education Week*.

West Virginia also dropped from a C+ to a C in the teacher quality category, while "school climate," which involves class size and safety, rose from a D to a D+.

Former State Schools Superintendent Hank Marockie often cited *Education Week's* "Quality Counts" reports as proof that the state's education system was working well. He went so far as to say *Education Week* ranked West Virginia first in the nation, although the publication never said that.

Challenge West Virginia's Linda Martin said state officials got caught

doing what they really do to children.

"Instead of making real change, they put a Band-Aid on things. Well, they just got the Band-Aid ripped off," she said.

This year *Education Week* changed the way it judges state schools systems, deciding to "shine

a spotlight" on standards-based reform, according to editor Virginia Edwards.

Standards-based reform provides the backdrop for almost all policy efforts, Edwards said, but some states may be "rushing to hold students

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## WV Council of Churches supports Challenge bill

Challenge WV has picked up the support of the West Virginia Council of

Churches for The Better Schools Bill, which would ensure that no child is forced to endure long bus rides to get to school each day.

The Council of Churches has announced that it will lobby the state Legislature in support of Challenge WV's bill to limit school bus rides to 30 minutes one way for elementary students; 45 minutes for junior high student; and one hour for high school students.

The Council of

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### Interesting fact!

West Virginia spends a higher percentage (6.8%) of its total education budget on busing than any other state in the nation. Of a total \$1.9 billion education budget, the state spent a whopping \$129 million on transportation last year.

## Endangered Schools . . .



Putnam County's Buffalo High School, above, with 270 students in grades 9-12, was built in 1951 with additions in 1969, 1982, 1983, 1985 and 1987. The school leads the county in ACT scores in 2000. Poca High School, below, with 565 students in grades 9-12, was built in 1968 with additions made in 1980, 1985, 1989 and 1997. The County Board of Education plans to close both schools and build a new high school for the area.





## 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.

To start a chapter of Challenge WV, to inquire about the fellowship program or for more information, contact:

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## Council of churches . . .

Churches represents about 600,000 Christian residents from 17 denominations throughout the state.

"The Christian community should be active in legislative matters because love for God demands that we love our neighbors, making us voice concerns with and on behalf of those whose voice is not heard," said the Rev. Nathan Wilson, executive director of the council.

The Better Schools Bill is also supported by the West Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church, the West-Marva District Church of the Brethren, the Government Solutions Committee of Community Council of the Kanawha Valley; United Way of the Kanawha Valley and The Conference of Agency Executives.

The Better Schools Bill would improve public schools in West Virginia by amending sections of the state code (sections three, fifteen, and sixteen, article nine-d, chapter eighteen) relating to the award and distribution of grant

moneys from the school building authority.

The bill makes explicit that no one criterion, especially the economies of scale guidelines, may dominate other statutory criteria when decisions are made to award grant money.

The proposed changes would require the school building authority to undergo legislative rule-making review and have its guidelines approved as legislative rules. In addition to travel times, specific changes proposed:

**Economies of scale:** With the amendment, rules governing economies of scale would take into account the fact that in rural areas, population sparsity affects school sizes, transportation times and costs.

**Eligibility for School Building Authority funding:** The amendment would allow any school included in a county-wide facilities plan to be eligible for funding by the school building authority.

## Governor Wise calls for bond sales

Gov. Bob Wise says the State School Building Authority should sell \$100 million in bonds to finance school construction needs across the state.

The SBA recently awarded \$28.6 million for twelve projects. County school boards had submitted more than \$100 million in requests.

"Clearly the need for construction and renovation is not over with," Wise said during a tour of Berkeley, Jefferson and Morgan counties.

In Jefferson County, which is experiencing population growth, officials are upset that the SBA did not fund a \$20 million request for construction of a new high school. Sen. John Unger, D-Berkeley, said he would seek legislation to

include growth as one of the allocation considerations.

SBA Executive Director Clacy Williams said \$1.9 billion is needed to fund building projects. He said the SBA has the ability to sell bonds, but no way to pay for them.

"What would have to happen is the Legislature would have to identify a revenue stream for us in order to make debt service payments," he said.

The last bond issue was in 1990, when \$136 million in bonds was sold. The bonds will be paid off in 2004. The payback is funded through state lottery profits. Since 1990, the SBA has spent \$670 million and another \$350 million has been allocated by local school boards.

# This 'n that from around the state

- **The good news:** students at Buffalo High School in Putnam posted the highest average ACT scores of any public school in the state, according to a study of high school graduates attending public colleges in West Virginia prepared by the American College Testing Service.

- **The bad news:** Buffalo High School has been targeted for closure by the Putnam County Board of Education. The county's comprehensive facilities plan calls for consolidating Buffalo with Poca High School.

Doddridge, Morgan, Pendleton, Calhoun, Mineral, Monongalia and Marion counties posted top county average ACT scores. Bottom county averages were in Mingo, McDowell, Fayette, Upshur, Lewis and Logan.

- State School Board members and Department of Education employees have testified before a federal grand jury that is investigating former State Schools Superintendent Hank Marockie, according to a report in *The Charleston Gazette*. State Board members Sheila Hamilton and Cleo Matthews testified, along with Claudia Jones, a travel accountant with the State Department and Board of Education secretary Virginia Harris.

*The Gazette* said federal authorities also plan to subpoena state school board member Jim MacCallum. MacCallum said, "When I'm asked for information, I'm going to recall the advice of my mother and dad: Always tell the truth. And I'll do that."

- A new study sponsored by the Rural School and Community Trust concludes that small schools OR small districts narrow the achievement test score gap between students from more and less affluent communities.

The study, conducted by Dr. Robert Bickel of Marshall University and Dr. Craig Howley of Ohio University, found that reducing either district size or school size without altering the other narrow the achievement gap. Reducing both district and school size narrows the gap even more. The study was published in the electronic journal Education Policy Analysis Archives (<http://olam.ed.asu.edu/epaa/v8n22/>).

- Kanawha County School Board members are debating closing Clendenin Middle School, the oldest school in the county.

The school has survived for the past ten years because



there has been no room for students at any other facility, according to news reports. The School Board will hold a public hearing on the closing on Feb. 6. Students would be sent to Elkview Middle School, about 9 miles down the road, where officials plan to put eight portable classrooms to house the additional students.

The Kanawha board already has voted to close Staunton Elementary School in South Charleston.

- Sharples Grade School in Logan County received a reprieve when the State Board of Education did not take action on an amended Comprehensive Facilities plan which would have closed the school at the end of this school year. Challenge WV fellow Chris Stratton offered citizens' appeal on behalf of residents of the community. He said the action was ill advised and taken in haste.

- As part of a six-month plan to the state, Lincoln County Superintendent Bill Grizzell has announced plans to build one consolidated high school near the county seat of Hamlin; K-8 schools in Griffithsville, Harts, Hamlin and West Hamlin; and a K-4 school in Alum Creek. Grizzell was appointed by the State Board of Education to run the beleaguered school system.

- The Fayette County Board of Education has dropped a plan to close all seven of the county's high schools. Board President Bill Arthur says he envisions the future closure of four high schools – Mount Hope, Gauley Bridge, Meadow Bridge and Fayetteville. However, there is no time frame for closing the schools. The Board is preparing to hold closure hearings for two elementary schools – Beckwith and Powellton.

- Construction contracts for a new high school in Wyoming County will be rebid without an agreement that would have required union labor be used on the project. The County School Board voted to rebid the contract after initial bids came in more than \$1.5 million over estimates.

Westside High School will consolidate students attending Baileysville and Oceana high schools. The State School Building Authority awarded Wyoming County almost \$6 million last year to build the school, contingent on passage of a bond issue. Voters approved the \$7 million construction bond last February.



# Challenge West Virginia

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## Education Week study gives state low grades

and school accountable without providing sufficient support.”

West Virginia’s grade for standards and accountability dropped from a B+ to a D+. School funding equity dropped from a B+ to a C+.

The downfall, according to the study, is the use of the Stanford Achievement Test, which has been criticized for not being aligned with academic content standards and not using multiple measures to assess students.

More points are given to states that use short answers, essays and portfolios in addition to

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– Linda Martin

multiple-choice answers.

State Schools Superintendent David Steward said West Virginia still outscored most states, finishing in a tie for fourth overall.

That ranking is the average of all four categories: achievement, standards and accountability; efforts to improve teacher quality; school climate; and the adequacy

and equity of resources.

Stewart said he expects the state to abandon the Stanford Nine within two years, saying he supports testing that goes beyond multiple-choice answers.

Dan Hedges, the lawyer who brought the state’s school funding case, accused the state of manipulating data.

“All counties in the state have significant

funding issues that have not been addressed,” Hedges told *The Charleston Gazette*. “And it’s gotten worse since 1990.”

Hedges said a study by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education ranked West Virginia in the bottom ten in terms of preparing students for college.

“The state has long been involved in manipulating data to hide curriculum shortfalls,” Hedges said.

“There’s an overemphasis on standardized tests just to make state officials look good regardless of the funding inadequacies.”