



The

Challenge

February 2002



Residents of Meadow Bridge, Fayette County, are shown in a 2001 meeting at their school, which is targeted for closure.

Students injured in bus wreck

Ten students were injured when a Pendleton County school bus crashed on January 9, trying to avoid a collision with a tractor-trailer on U.S. 33.

Challenge West Virginia has learned that one student suffered a broken arm requiring pins between the elbow and shoulder, another had a cut on the head requiring staples, and others had bruises and cuts.

Reportedly, one entire side of seats came loose during the crash. The bus was carrying about 30 middle and high school students when it ran up an embankment and flipped onto its side, according to State Police in Franklin.

The Circleville area children were being bused over North Mountain to a

consolidated school in Franklin. Circleville residents, who filed a court suit to try to save their

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McDowell Countians urge slow-down

McDowell County residents have been assured by the State Board of Education that their schools will remain open, at least for now.

A committee of municipal and community leaders appeared before the State Board in January to try to slow down reported school consolidation plans by state-appointed Superintendent Mark Manchin.

The McDowell residents are concerned that Manchin, under orders from the state, planned to close

Fayette County school closings put on hold

Fayette County's school consolidation plan was put on hold when Circuit Judge John Hatcher issued a temporary injunction in a lawsuit filed by Meadow Bridge Citizens for Community Schools and Citizens for Mount Hope Community Schools.

A hearing on the matter was set for Feb. 5.

The community groups claim the school board violated the open meetings law by holding a single day of hearings for the closure of five schools on Jan. 12.

Lewisburg lawyer Berry Bruce, who represents the community groups, said the hearings were conducted in a small room, and time constraints were imposed that prevented many people from speaking.

When the board met the following Monday to vote on the school closures, Bruce and others were not allowed to speak. The Board of Education voted 3-2 to close Gauley Bridge High School, Fayetteville

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schools by June. Some of them described him as "arrogant" and said he has "run roughshod" over residents.

Franki Patton Rutherford, director of Big Creek People in Action, said Manchin and the state "are moving way too fast."

"The children in this county deserve getting this right. They deserve adults acting responsibly," Rutherford said.

Tom Hatcher, a former McDowell County school administrator and mayor of

the town of War, said Manchin announced intentions to close schools when he took the job in November.

"We weren't consulted by the previous board or administration," Hatcher said. "And we don't want autocratic decisions being made. We want parent and citizen input."

Manchin told the Bluefield Daily Telegraph no schools will be closed within the next four to six months. But he said

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This 'n that from around the state

- The West Virginia Council of Churches is once more supporting Challenge WV's bill to limit the time students can be on schools buses. Senate Bill 58 and House Bill 2270 would define reasonable transportation times as 30 minutes for students in grades K-5; 45 minutes for grades 6-8 and 60 minutes for grades 9-12.



- House speaker Bob Kiss has called for the end of “perpetual monitoring” of the state’s public school system by the courts. “The court’s prerogative is to determine if the system is constitutional or not, not to design the system,” he said of the case known as the Recht Decision. Judge Arthur Recht determined in 1982 that the state had failed to provide a “thorough and efficient” education for students. The case remains open, with a hearing scheduled for April 19.

- The major factor hindering economic development in southwestern West Virginia is education, according to a “State of the Workforce Report” released by Marshall University professor Michael Hicks. The study says 10 percent of West Virginians over 25 failed to complete ninth grade, compared with 6 percent nationally. Less than 8 percent of West Virginians earned a bachelor’s degree, compared with 12 percent nationally. The study focused on Cabell, Wayne, Putnam, Mingo, Boone, Lincoln and Logan counties.

- School administrators came to Charleston to protest a bill proposed by Gov. Bob Wise that would withhold funding from school districts that hold school for fewer than 180 days. Any county in which a school failed to meet the 180-day standard would see funds drop by 2 percent for each day missed, up to a maximum of 10 percent. Last year the average instructional term was 177 days. Pocahontas County Superintendent James Phares asked the Legislature to change the mandatory school opening and closing dates – Aug. 26 and June 8. “Give us that flexibility and you’ll get your 180 days,” Phares said.

- Northfork Middle School in McDowell County is closed permanently, according to Superintendent Mark Manchin. The school was closed following the floods of July 8, 2001, and students began the school year on the first floor of Mount View High School in Welch. Then Superintendent Kenneth Roberts said the move would be temporary. But

Manchin told the Bluefield Daily Telegraph, “Northfork is closed. You can use the word permanent.” Northfork Mayor Nick Mason questioned why the state would close the school when repairs and renovations were still being completed.

- Residents of Cairo in Ritchie County are attempting to persuade the county Board of Education to save their community school. Cairo was included on the State School Board’s list of exemplary schools. The Board of Education is considering closing the school and transferring students to several other county schools.

- Summers County Schools Superintendent Richie Rodes has resigned, saying he will retire June 30 after 11 years as superintendent. Preston County Superintendent Charles Zinn also is stepping down. Zinn said he will not seek another contract when his current one expires June 4.

- House Education chairman Jerry Mezzatesta said he is considering a proposal to hire 1,200 additional people – 500 teachers and 700 service personnel – for public schools during the next decade. He proposes to fund the positions by dedicating \$3.6 million generated annually when property values and property tax revenues increase.

- More than 44,000 West Virginia students may benefit from a pending multi-million dollar antitrust settlement by Microsoft Corporation, a company official told the Joint Standing Committee on Education. The settlement will establish an education foundation to award grants to schools where 70 percent or more of the students qualify for free or reduced school meals. The official said 183 West Virginia schools with 44,664 students meet the criteria.

- West Virginia’s “education report card” improved this year because the state Department of Education plans to overhaul a statewide testing program, according to a report in The Charleston Gazette. Education Week magazine gave the state a C, up from a D+ the previous year. The state’s grades for teacher quality (C), and adequacy (A) and equity (C) of resources remained the same. The state spends about \$8,400 per student each year, five percent more than the previous year, according to the magazine.

Busing concerns expressed in Ritchie, Lincoln

Parents from the Auburn area presented a petition to the Ritchie County Board of Education asking for shorter bus times for children in grades pre-kindergarten through four.

Pamela Blankenship said she knows of children leaving for school at 6:12 a.m. and not getting home until 4:45 p.m.

"We feel that it is unreasonable and unhealthy for our young children to be on the bus for such long hours going to and from school," she said. "Our children are on the bus three

Fayette. . .

High School, Mount Hope High School and Meadow Bridge High School. The board spared Nuttall Middle School.

The Charleston Gazette reported that dozens of people waited outside the locked board office before the meeting. When the meeting began, several people, including West Virginia Education Association president Tom Lange, asked to speak. They were told the board considered Monday's meeting a special meeting to vote on the closures only.

"You are taking the public out of public comment," Lange said.

Lange had presented a written report, outlining the financial condition of the school system. He said, based on those facts, such drastic consolidation is not needed. "...For a board to

times the state recommendation for their ages."

In another transportation matter, the State School Board expressed concern about the amount of time some Lincoln County students would spend on buses if the county's four high schools were consolidated into one county school.

At its January meeting, Board members James McCallum and Barbara Fish questioned Lincoln County board members and other State Board members about lengthy travel times

create such uncertainty and chaos in a school system is unconscionable."

An attorney for the West Virginia Federation of Teachers also filed a motion to intervene in the suit. Charles Donally said, "We are concerned that many of our members, as well as other citizens, were denied the opportunity to address the issue."

State Senator Leonard Anderson has asked the Fayette County School Board to rescind its vote to close the four county high schools.

"By not allowing those who attended the meeting to speak or to ask questions, the school board denied the basic right of taxpayers to petition their elected officials," Anderson said. "They denied the residents the right to participate in the Democratic process."

for Harts area students if their high school is closed.

Superintendent Bill Grizzell said he had hoped the situation would have been resolved by Logan County getting money for a new high school in Chapmanville that Harts students could have attended. But Logan County's request to the School Building Authority

Wreck . . .

community school in the 1990s, had cited the extremely hazardous trip as a major concern. The Pendleton County case went to the West Virginia Supreme Court, which ruled against the parents.

After Circleville residents lost their court

McDowell. . .

discussions are underway for the proposed consolidation of Big Creek and Iaeger high schools as part of a \$172 million flood-proofing project underway in the county by the US Army Corps of Engineers.

He also said he had submitted a grant to the State School Building Authority to allow for the consolidation of Welch Middle School with Mount View High School.

The state seized control of the McDowell County school system in November, after auditors found dilapidated schools and filthy conditions.

was denied.

Lincoln County Board member Carol Smith expressed fear the school closure would mean students would be more likely to drop out of school.

Smith said it took her 58 minutes in a car (exceeding the speed limit) to travel from the Frances Creek area of Harts to the site of the new school.

fight to keep their school, they prevailed upon the West Virginia State Board of Education to allow Grant County to run buses so the children could attend Grant County schools and avoid the treacherous trip over North Mountain. The State Board denied the request.

Hatcher, who is from the Big Creek district, said Manchin and state officials should work to improve instruction before consolidating schools.

In a presentation prepared for the State Board, the McDowell County group cited numerous studies that show low-income students are more successful in small schools.

"Small schools work better," Hatcher said. "Especially in high poverty areas, which all of McDowell County is. We want to let the state know what our position is."

The Challenge

The Challenge is published monthly 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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