



The

Challenge



February 2003

Rural Education In WV on Urgency List

A report issued by the Rural School and Community Trust in Washington, D.C., paints a disturbing picture of education in West Virginia.

The report ranks West Virginia among the top 10 states that are in need of significant action on rural education policy.

The report, entitled, "Why Rural Matters 2003: The Continuing Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education," is a compilation and analysis of data from numerous sources, which sheds light on rural education in the United States.

"Nearly one in three of America's school-age children attend public schools in rural areas," said Marty Strange, policy director for the Rural School and Community Trust. "Yet, if you listen to the education debate, particularly around the impacts of the new 'No Child Left Behind' law, chances are you still will not hear much about rural schools. In most of the 50 states, they are left behind from the start."

According to the Rural Trust report, 54 percent of West Virginia's population is located in rural areas. More than half of all West Virginia school children

attend rural schools. One in four rural school children live in poverty, which is the fifth highest number of all states. One very disturbing fact cited by the report is West Virginia has the nation's lowest per capita income at \$15,177, per year. The national average is \$19,285.

Despite recent pay raises for teachers, West Virginia has the 22nd lowest average teacher salary at \$32,916. The national average is \$32,694. All of the five surrounding states have higher average teacher salaries. New Jersey's is the highest at \$49,872, while the lowest average salary, \$24,234, can be found in South Dakota.

One fact cited by the report is quite telling in regard to the school consolidation issue. The report found that 6.4 percent of the state's education budget goes to transportation - the highest percentage of any state in the union.

A sagging economy has led to many West Virginians relocating out-of-state. According to the report, 40.4 percent of West Virginia schools lost 10 percent or more of their enrollments during the period of 1996-2000.

The report states, "Rural education is crucially important in

West Virginia, and is in urgent need of policy attention. [West Virginia] has the lowest rural per capita income in the nation and spends more of its rural education dollar busing kids around than any other state."

The report ranks West Virginia as number eight on the list of states in urgent need of attention. Of the states surrounding West Virginia, only one is ranked higher on the urgency list. Kentucky is ranked at number three, Ohio is 28th, Virginia is 15th, Pennsylvania 24th and Maryland is ranked 45.

States other than West Virginia and Kentucky which are listed among the top 13 state in need of help are Mississippi, Alabama, North Dakota, South Dakota, North Carolina, Arkansas, South Carolina, Louisiana, Tennessee, Montana and Maine.

A full copy of the report can be downloaded from the Rural School and Community Trust website at <http://www.ruraledu.org>.

Visit the new website for Challenge West Virginia at <http://www.challengewv.org>.

This 'n that from around the state

- The site chosen by the State Department of Education for a new \$30 million consolidated high school in Lincoln County was completely inundated by flood waters earlier this month after heavy rains hit the state.

- The West Virginia Poll has found that the majority of West Virginians are opposed to school consolidations, mainly due to long bus rides. The poll discovered that 62 percent of West Virginians believe that students are not getting any better education in new consolidated schools than they were in the old smaller schools. The poll also found that 57 percent of West Virginians want the State Department of Education to give up on consolidation altogether. The poll was conducted by RMS Research, Inc. The poll's sponsors are the Charleston Daily-Mail, WSAZ News Channel 3 and MetroNews radio network.

- The West Virginia Board of Education has approved the closure of Marsh Fork High School in Raleigh County. The plan is to close the school at the end of this school year and send the school's 200 students to Liberty High School and Trap Hill Middle School. A lawsuit is pending, which seeks to stop the closure.

- Another school bond levy has been shot down. Preliminary results indicate that Logan County voters defeated a \$6.5 million bond levy, proposed by the Logan County Board of Education. The unofficial vote totals were 1,193 for and 1,267 against. Only approximately 9.6 percent of Logan County's 25,434 voters cast ballots in the February 22 special election. Of the \$6.5 million total bond issue proposal, \$5.5 million was to be used to match a \$14.5 million grant from the School Building Authority for a new inter-county, consolidated high school for students from Chapmanville High School (Logan County) and Harts High School (Lincoln County). The remaining \$1 million was to be used for athletic facility improvements at two high schools and computer labs and HVAC systems at several county grade schools.

- A bill under consideration by the Legislature would make it a criminal offense for a county board of education member to abuse his power. Any board member, who acts outside the scope of authority granted to an individual board member, will be guilty of a misdemeanor, punishable by a fine of up to \$1,000 and/or a jail term of not more than 30 days.



- A study by the Food Research and Action Center in Washington, D.C., has found that a higher percentage of West Virginia school children receive free or reduced-price school meals than in any other state. According to the study, 57 percent of West Virginia's students receive free or reduced-rate meals.

- A survey of county boards of education, conducted by the West Virginia chapter of the American Federation of Teachers has found that county boards have spent at least \$7 million on outside attorneys during the past three years. Cabell County spent the most money on outside lawyers at \$911,000. Wyoming County, a relatively small school system, spent the fourth highest amount at \$344,000, surpassing the amounts spent by much larger counties such as Kanawha and Wood counties. The state's third largest school district, Wood County, only spent \$22,000. More than half of the total amount spent went to the law firm Bowles, Rice, McDavid, Graff & Love, which is based in Charleston. A lawsuit challenging such spending is currently pending in the West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals.

- The Boone County Board of Education voted three-to-two to close Nellis Elementary School if the county receives an SBA grant of more than \$2.5 million. The board previously voted to close Sylvester Elementary School. The two grade schools will be combined with others in the county.

- The Mingo County Board of Education has settled a lawsuit filed by the parents of a six-year-old boy who was left on his school bus, asleep, after the driver had finished his run. The board's insurance company will pay \$14,500 to settle the case, which arose from the January 2002 incident.

- Former West Virginia Board of Education President J.D. Morris was sentenced in federal court, on February 3, to 18 months in federal prison after he entered a plea of guilty to an embezzlement charge. Federal prosecutors say that Morris embezzled more than \$137,000 from Clay County Bank - a place where he had worked for more than 50 years. The money was taken from customers' interest accounts, expense reimbursements and student loan funds, prosecutors say.

Fighting Planned School Closings in McDowell County

A large group of McDowell County citizens are fighting the State Department of Education in its takeover and mass consolidation of that county's schools.

State-appointed county Superintendent of Schools Dr. Mark Manchin, has crafted a consolidation plan for the county, which includes the consolidation of Big Creek High School, in War, and Iaeger High School, into a \$41 million plus school. Manchin, who bypasses the McDowell County Board of Education and reports directly to the State Superintendent of Schools, has already closed Northfork Middle School and has announced plans to close Welch Middle School and Panther Elementary School.

In preparation for closure hearings, the legality of which is questionable, McDowell County residents organized and held four meetings to prepare school closure

opponents for the coming battles.

The groups held meetings in War, Northfork, Iaeger and Anawalt.

The meetings resulted in an alternate plan, which eliminates the need for the consolidations. The groups will present the plan to Manchin when the closure hearings are held.

"They put together an incredible small schools plan," said Linda Martin, director of Challenge West Virginia.

The mayors of both Iaeger and War have also joined in the fight due to the detrimental impact school closures have had upon the communities they serve.

"I know the impact will be significant," said War Mayor Tom Hatcher, in an interview published in the Bluefield Daily Telegraph. "There will be fewer people coming into town because the high schools aren't local anymore.

When people come to the high school, they tend to stop and shop in town. It [closure of Big Creek High School] would take a large number of people out of town."

The planned closures are also being challenged in a lawsuit, which is currently pending in Kanawha County Circuit Court. Two citizens' groups, Tops in Education and Big Creek People in Action, have joined with several affected students and parents, as well as the Town of War, in the lawsuit to stop the consolidations. The coalition is represented by West Virginia University Law Professor Robert Bastress.

HB2952 And SB145 Needs Your Support!

Members of Challenge West Virginia chapters from around the state visited the State Capitol on Friday, February 21, to lobby for passage of a bill which would change the way the West Virginia School Building Authority distributes school construction and renovation money.

House of Delegates Education Committee Chairman Jerry Mezzatesta (D-Hampshire) refused to meet with the group. When the group appeared for a

previously scheduled meeting with Senate Education Committee Chairman Robert Plymale (D-Wayne) the group was told the senator could not meet with them because he was sick.

The bill backed by Challenge would require the SBA to give the same weight to all factors when deciding on funding of construction projects.

If the bill passes, state recommendations on reasonable bus travel times will become mandatory.

The bill makes SBA rules subject to legislative review and approval and specifies that any school included in a county's comprehensive educational facilities plan would be eligible for funding, regardless of economies of scale.

Challenge West Virginia urges all of its supporters to contact their legislators to voice support for the bill (HB 2952 and SB 145).

Visit the new website for Challenge West Virginia at <http://www.challengewv.org>.

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 West Virginia 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.



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