



The

Challenge



February 2004

Thousands join Mingo County effort Challenge WV Mingo chapter fighting to save high schools

More than 5,000 Mingo County citizens have joined Challenge West Virginia in the fight against forced consolidation in their county.

Members and supporters of Challenge WV presented a petition with those signatures to members of the Mingo County Board of Education during a meeting on February 5th.

The Mingo County Board of Education is pushing through a state-approved consolidation plan, oblivious to the massive opposition from Mingo Countians.

The thing that makes the Mingo

County situation unique, is that nearly every politician in the county, with the exception of certain members of the BOE, has publicly voiced opposition to the plan to turn Mingo County's five High Schools into two.

The Mingo County group, under the leadership of Mingo County BOE member and Challenge WV Fellow Mike Carter and City of Williamson Mayor Charles "Butch" West, is actively campaigning to replace the two Mingo County BOE members who are up for re-election

in the 2004 Primary — Johnny Fullen and Jerry Mounts.

When the Mingo County group visited the State Capitol, seeking help from their representatives, they were largely ignored.

The group met at the Capitol on February 26 to ask legislators to introduce a bill to help them in their fight. Mingo County Senator H. Truman Chafin told the group that he couldn't help them because the last day to introduce a bill in the Senate was Monday, February 23.

The group was also told that they were too late to get a bill introduced in the House of Delegates. However, according to the legislative calendar, the deadline for the introduction of bills in the House was Friday, the day after the group visited with their representatives. In fact, more than 70 bills were introduced in the House of Delegates Friday. Legislative rules also allow bills to originate in committees after the deadlines.

West, who has been chosen as the group's spokesman, promises to take the campaign to the ballot box.

"If they do not stop this consolidation, then we are going to vote the incumbents out of office," West said. "We intend to defeat the two incumbent board members."



Photo by Michael Browning of The Logan Banner

Challenge Coordinator Linda Martin is working closely with the Mingo County Challenge Chapter to help in its battle to halt the consolidation of five high schools into two. Above, Martin shows the group one of Challenge's many publications available on the website.

Visit Challenge West Virginia at www.challengewv.org

Lincoln-Logan transfer agreement approved

An agreement on the transfer of Lincoln County high school students into Logan County schools has been approved, without the involvement of the Lincoln County Board of Education.

The contract was finalized between the Logan County Board of Education and the State Board of Education and governs the transfer of students from Harts High School to a new consolidated Chapmanville High School.

The agreement explicitly states that school closure hearings will be held at both Chapmanville High School and Harts High School prior to the transfer.

"This agreement shall become effective upon approval by the West Virginia Board of Education," the agreement states. "However, it is the intention of the parties to observe the requirements of *West Virginia Code* §18A-4-13a and State Board Policy 6204 and to conduct school closing hearings at Harts High School and Chapmanville High School."

According to the agreement, once the new Chapmanville school is built, the Chapmanville attendance area and the Harts High School attendance area will be merged. All Harts students in grades nine through 12 will be transferred to Chapmanville. Harts students may apply to Lincoln County for permission to attend the new consolidated high school there.

During the first year of the transfer, Lincoln County will pay to Logan County an amount equal to the per-student allowance from the state to the Lincoln County board. In the year following the transfer, Lincoln County will receive allocations from the state equal to one-half the amount of the first allocation to Logan County. During the second year after the transfer, the Lincoln County board will receive one-half of the previous year's allocation.

The agreement also contains provisions for complying with statutory mandates on the transfer of school personnel.

According to the agreement,

once the transfer is about to be completed, the parties will enter into a further "memorandum of understanding" to cover three specific topics:

- "Transition activities that are calculated to assure the appropriate integration of the students in relation to academic, vocational and extracurricular opportunities that will be afforded in the new high school."

- "A cooperative transportation plan that is designed to provide reasonable transportation times in an efficient and safe manner."

- "Any other items deemed relevant to enhance the welfare of all affected students."

The agreement was signed by the president of the Logan County board on February 2nd, and by State Superintendent of Schools David Stewart on February 6th. The W.Va. Board of Education unanimously approved the agreement on February 10th.

Logan County has been awarded an SBA grant to build the school.

Wise proposes new SBA-bus travel time bill

A new bill aimed at curtailing school consolidation in West Virginia has been introduced in the Legislature at the request of Governor Bob Wise.

The bill has been introduced in the House of Delegates under the designation HB 4498 and in the Senate under the designation SB 542. The legislation wraps a number of different proposals into one bill.

The new bill would mandate that any school included in the county's Comprehensive Educational Facilities Plan would be eligible for funding from the W.Va. School Building Authority. Under the current law, more money is given to counties to build new schools than is

given to renovate existing buildings.

The second objective of the bill deals with more legislative oversight of the School Building Authority. The bill would require that all rules promulgated by the School Building Authority must be approved by the Legislature. Currently, the SBA makes its own rules.

The third prong of the proposal involves bus rides. The bill would set maximum travel times for students as follows:

- kindergarten to fifth grade — 30 minutes;
- sixth grade through eighth grade — 45 minutes;
- ninth grade through twelfth grade — one hour.

This portion of the proposal has proven to be the most controversial.

In January, Gov. Wise proposed legislation (designated as SB 134 and HB 4023), the sole purpose of which was to limit bus rides for students. The original proposals included the same time limits as the new bill.

The time limits are not new. For the past several years the limits have been recommended by the W.Va. Board of Education's school transportation policy. The travel times have never before been mandated by the Legislature.

Challenge supporters should contact their legislators to voice their support for the bill.

This 'n that from around the state

• Dozens of Challenge West Virginia members and supporters from across the state attended a public hearing before the WV House of Delegates Committee on Education on the busing bill (HB 4023 and SB 134).

Most of the attendees were able to express their views on the subject and tell their stories about how long bus rides have impacted their lives.

Legislators were presented with copies of research commissioned by Challenge WV on the long bus rides issue.

Challenge WV Webster County Fellow Cindy Miller, a graduate of Webster County High School explained her personal experience on buses.

“Lengthy bus rides to a consolidated, countywide school did not improve my education a bit,” said Miller. “I had to ride the bus three hours-a-day for six hours of instruction time.”

The low part of the hearing came when the committee chairman, Delegate Jerry Mezzatesta (D-Hampshire County) misconstrued a comment made by Challenge West Virginia Coordinator Linda Martin.

Martin commented on the power of the voters to remove public officials from office for acting contrary to the wishes of the people.

Mezzatesta, becoming visibly angry, raised his voice saying, “If you want to come in and be confrontational, I can be confrontational.”

Many members of Challenge West Virginia say that Mezzatesta has always treated them poorly. They believe that Mezzatesta has personally worked to derail the small schools reform effort in this state. The delegate has scheduled appointments to meet with Challenge members and then failed to show without attempting to contact anyone. The House Education Committee hearing was scheduled for 2 p.m., but was pushed back in favor of two other groups who wished to meet with the committee.

Under the rules of the Legislature, a committee chairman such as Mezzatesta has complete control over a committee. A bill cannot usually be considered by the Legislature without a yes vote in the committee.

Reportedly at Mezzatesta’s direction, a report or “fiscal note” was prepared, which alleges that passage of the busing bill would cost West Virginia an additional \$56.3 million per year. The report claims that 607 additional school buses would have to be purchased if the bill is passed.

Martin and Challenge West Virginia hotly dispute those figures. In reality, the passage of the busing bill



would have no increased costs for county boards of education. The bill only prohibits the creation of any new bus routes. The bill would not alter any existing route.

“The information gathered for the fiscal note is clearly used to cloud the issue of the busing bill, since the information gathered was for existing bus routes,” Martin explained. “The bill before the committee would not affect current bus routes. No new buses need to be purchased and no new drivers need to be

hired. The bill is specifically limited to any new routes created in the 2004-2005 school year.”

“What would be affected is the state’s ability to close 120 elementary schools around the state,” Martin concluded.

• In 2002, a series of reports appeared in The Charleston Gazette, showing that very few of the benefits promised by state officials who worked to consolidate schools ever materialized. As a result of those reports, the State Department of Education promised a study on school bus times. As of now, the study has never been made public. The study has not materialized and Challenge West Virginia has now discovered that county transportation directors have not reported school bus times to the state since 1996.

Support these legislative bills

Members of Challenge West Virginia and our supporters around the state are working to secure the passage of important legislation. Please contact your Legislators and voice your support for the following bills:

• **S.B. 134 / H.B. 4023** — would limit the amount of time West Virginia public school students may spend riding buses each day;

• **S.B. 150 / H.B. 4018** — would alter the state school aid formula to remove the cap on funding for teachers in sparsely populated counties; and,

• **S.B. 542 / H.B. 4498** — would limit bus travel times, make all county schools eligible for SBA funding and give the Legislature more oversight of the SBA and its rules on school facilities.

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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