



The Challenge



February 2005

Gov. Manchin vows to protect small schools - distance learning gets push



Lincoln County students ask Gov. Manchin to end long bus rides.

Since the State Department of Education asserted its power over the Mingo County school system, taking it over for a second time, Gov. Joe Manchin has declared he will "protect and support every one of our state's small, rural, community-based schools."

"I grew up in a small community and attended a small school," Manchin said. "If you can preserve a community in a rural setting, you've got a child with an identity."

The governor said "I'm just committed to doing everything I can to preserve the community and rural schools that we have throughout West Virginia," said Manchin.

"That doesn't mean I'm against consolidation. It just means I'm against consolidation for the fact of building something new and disrupting everyone's lives and destroying communities."

Manchin's comments came after 50 Lincoln County students came to Charleston to rally against long bus rides, some of which require students to be on school buses up to three hours a day.

Challenge WVs Linda Martin is working with the administration to craft a new version of the "No Cost Busing Bill" which would limit the length of bus rides.

The busing bill would effectively end wholesale consolidation. Former House Education Chairman Jerry Mezzatesta attacked the bill saying it was too expensive.

The state Department of Education is still saying it would have a \$50 million price tag. Martin said that estimate was

"hogwash."

"We called it no cost because that's what it is," she said. Manchin indicated he would support the bill if it didn't add any



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costs. "If someone over-inflated it (the No Cost Busing Bill) because they didn't like it, that's wrong," he said.

Manchin opposed wholesale school consolidation during his campaign, a
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"It is unbridled power, super-sizing community schools" says Duty

is unbridled power, super-sizing our community schools," said William Duty, president of the Mingo County Board of Education, following the state board's decision to take over the Mingo school system for the second time in seven years.

Duty has been in the county's fight against closing three high schools and building a new mega-million dollar school on a strip mine site, causing long bus rides for many students.

The three high schools, Williamson, Burch and Matewan, are still considered

modern facilities, built in the 70's and 80's.

The state Office of Education Performance Audits found that the school system is on the verge of financial collapse, claiming students attend schools that have health and safety hazards and exhibit poor performance.

The state reported at least one-fifth of the state systems are in dire straights financially.

Duty admitted there are problems within the system, but about 50 of the state's 55 counties have failed to measure

up to No Child Left Behind. He says the takeover is about Mingo's resistance to mandated school consolidation - "The state eliminating our community schools."

"No one in their right mind would sign-off on the state's plan. We don't even own the land where they want to build the school. There are so many lose ends it would make your head swim," he said. "It's time to reign in the bureaucrats. The citizens of West Virginia have been rolled-over enough."

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This 'n that from around the state

• **RURAL EDUCATION WORKING GROUP ANNUAL MEETING** - A national conference, the Rural Schools and Community Trust, will be meeting in Charleston at Embassy Suites on April 1-3, 2005. The trust works to save and improve community schools.

• **BUS DRIVERS MUST TAKE NEW TEST** - West Virginia school bus drivers and drivers across the country will soon have to pass a new federally mandated test to keep their jobs. The new rules by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration require all bus drivers to take a written test on managing students, crossing railroad tracks and evacuating their buses during emergencies. They also will have to pass a driving test.

Some 230,000 children travel 42 million miles of roadway aboard school buses in West Virginia every year, according to the state Department of Education. The state has the most expensive transportation system in the US.

• **McCLUNG PLEADS TO 24 COUNTS** - Former Assistant State School Superintendent G.A. McClung has been named in a 24-count federal indictment. He allegedly extorted and defrauded the state after awarding a \$2.4 million furniture deal to a longtime friend Phillip "Pork Chop" Booth. The charges relate to replacing furniture in McDowell County following severe flooding and McClung getting kick-backs.

• **BILL SEEKS FUNDING FORMULA CHANGE** - About 17 counties lost enrollment last year, but at least seven counties had their enrollment drop under 1,400. Small rural counties with little resources are hurting, often having to cut staff or programs below mandated levels.

Several of the state's school superintendents are introducing a bill that would guarantee counties that have increased enrollments be fully funded, plus the seven rural counties with



small enrollments would get a special supplement to maintain basic services.

• **RESIGNATION REQUESTED OF HAMPSHIRE BOARD MEMBERS** - Several Hampshire residents are demanding the resignations of three Hampshire County school board members. They have accused board members of ignoring problems that led the state Board of Education to declare a state of emergency and strip the district of accreditation.

The state acted earlier this month after an audit found numerous violations, several of them linked to school administrator Jerry Mezzatesta. Candy Canan, representing a group called Citizens for Quality Education in Hampshire County, says she demanded an investigation eight months ago and was ignored.

• **SCHOOL SYSTEMS IN RED** - Nearly a fifth of West Virginia's school districts are experiencing financial problems and at least two ended the 2004 school year with a deficit, a condition that state officials can use to take over a county school system. Preston and Taylor counties are among 10 that are experiencing financial problems.

Preston County's end-of-the-year surplus fell from nearly \$1.8 million in 2001, finishing the 2004 school year with a negative balance of \$536,339, according to the West Virginia Department of Education.

Taylor County had a deficit of nearly \$1.1 million on June 30, 2004, up from about \$1 million the previous year. State guidelines recommend counties carry a balance equal to 3 percent of their annual budgets.

The list includes Mingo County, which the state board took-over partly due to the county's finances. However, the number of counties in financial trouble is an improvement over previous years.

"Mezz Money" Gets Audited, Hampshire Stripped

The state Board of Education has stripped the Hampshire County school system of its accreditation, much of it linked to violations of state law and the policies of former House Education Chairman Jerry Mezzatesta, who has been employed by that county as a \$60,000 a year grant writer.

"Some of the personnel practices and violations may be more serious than oversights," the report said. A State Board audit concluded that a

\$75,000 grant sought by Mezzatesta for a Special Services Workshop in Romney was re-allocated to seven volunteer fire departments.

State Board superintendent David Stewart and the State Ethics Commission had previously defended the powerful legislator regarding wrongdoing, including double dipping. Mezz's problems have been used by Gov. Joe Manchin and the legislature to tighten the state Ethics Commission.

The audit found that a \$100,000 state grant awarded by the Department of Education in 2003 for staff development was used inappropriately on substitute teachers.

A \$18,679 balance of federal money should have been returned, but was not. Problems were discovered in the hiring of Mezzatesta's sister as a high school principal, not being certified at the time.

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movement that has been reversed in most states.

The governor supports Distance Learning Centers that uses technology to bring teaching services to rural schools. Gayle Manchin, the governor's wife, will be leading the effort for distance learning.

"When I put my wife in charge of distance learning, it's serious," said the governor. "She has the passion, the understanding and the knowledge to make a difference."

Martin said she felt distance learning is an important part of a solution. "It's the answer educationally, and it's the answer economically."

It would cost about \$20,000 to equip each school with cutting-edge distance-learning technology and would save millions of dollars of construction and transportation costs.

Manchin met with about 50 Lincoln County students after they rallied in front of the capitol along Kanawha Blvd. The students asked the governor to think about kids and their communities, and about creating more long bus rides. "I encourage you to continue your efforts to speak out about things that affect your life," Manchin said.

A bill passed by the West Virginia legislature gives the governor more power over state education officials who have been on "a rampage of consolidation," said Challenge's Martin.

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Jim Lees, a Charleston attorney hired by Mingo school board, said that he did not understand how the board could be called "dysfunctional" and unable to control county schools."

Lees says the high-powered take-over by state officials is a violation of constitutional law. "It is power-brokering at its worst."

"Beyond a few schools with problems, the county schools meet state standards and aren't that different from audits conducted in other counties," he said. "The board acted prudently by not moving forward with the consolidation plan," adding that Mingo was deemed out of control because new board members who took office in July did not support the consolidation.

The 60-acre site where the new Mingo South High would be constructed is on a coal-mining site and the county has no title. The site has yet to be stripped. State law requires a title or contract of land ownership to exist before a new school is built, said Lees.

The coal company has variously changed the amount of land they want to donate to the school project from 90 to 60 acres. The site is located about 10 miles from a crooked secondary highway on Red Jacket Mountain, with no current access road. The new school would be close to the proposed King Coal Highway, when it is built.

Lees said state education officials are

on "a non-stop freight train ... and by gosh you're going to consolidate."

State school superintendent David Stewart has appointed Mingo's current administrator Brenda Skibo to bring the system into accountability, although Skibo was in charge of the system while it allegedly got in trouble. Stewart was given power by the WV legislature to take such action, able to hire and fire school principals and administrators.

Jefferson County school board member Lori Stillely, PhD, said she is concerned about the public policy where the state keeps taking over school systems, a policy promoted by former education chair Lloyd Jackson.

Stillely said "I am concerned that county board members, elected by a majority of people in their county, are stripped of power by appointed state officials.

Senate Majority Leader Truman Chafin, D-Mingo, faulted the Mingo county school board for opposing consolidation without offering a good alternative. Chafin appears to have positioned himself on both sides of the controversial issue, but consolidation opponents say he has been in favor of closing community schools.

"A new school is the nicest place some students go," said Chafin, who indicated when enrollment drops below a threshold, even Distance Learning Centers would not be appropriate.

"They have the big bat," Duty said "We can go to a court of law, lay down and play dead or play with them," he concluded.

Smith hasn't heard the fat lady sing



Carol Smith and Lincoln students at Capitol rally against long bus rides.

Lincoln County's Board of Education President Carol Smith said "I still haven't heard the fat lady sing," after the WV Supreme Court voted, 3-2 not to hear an appeal of a Kanawha County court decision that allowed high school consolidation to move forward in Lincoln County. The suit was based upon the rights of elected board members and citizens to have a say in what happens to their local schools.

"What a display of power," said Smith. "They can do as they please and don't have to answer to anyone."

Smith and the elected Lincoln County Board of Education have unanimously voted against forced consolidation of Guyan Valley, Hamlin, Harts and Duval high schools. The state Board of Education forced the consolidation of the four schools into a new school at Hamlin,

causing long bus rides for many Lincoln students.

State officials assumed control of Lincoln County schools in 2000, citing low test scores and poor building conditions. Under four years of state control, there is no measurable improvement in test scores.

Lincoln's state-appointed Superintendent William Grizzell plans to borrow \$1 million to help complete the \$35 million plus consolidated high school project at Hamlin.

Smith says the elected school board is out of the picture in the decision. She believes Grizzell can borrow up to \$1 million during each of the next four years to use for the school. Smith has questioned the wisdom of borrowing the funds.

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.



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