



# The Challenge



February 2007

## Mason's community school battle shows big results

Mason County is a West Virginia success story following a long and passionate battle over school consolidation, an effort to keep its community schools in place.

Wahama Junior-Senior High School was dedicated on January 23rd, and Hannan and Pt. Pleasant will follow.

The idea of school consolidation surfaced in 1989, with the first school bond proposal set to close three high schools and create two new schools, one in the northern section of the county and the other in the southern section.

The bond proposal was soundly defeated at the polls.

Challenge Fellow and former Mason County school board member Darrell Hagley (pictured left) said "County residents began to rally to keep their local schools. The results now speak loudly for those efforts."



A second bond proposal followed about a year later, calling for one consolidated county high school to be built in or near Point Pleasant. Wahama and Hannan would have been closed and all students would have been sent to Point Pleasant. This proposal also went down to defeat.

Wahama and Hannan community members wanted to keep their community schools.

A plan was submitted by the local school board to the School Building Authority for a single county high school. The board voted to earmark one million dollars from the county excess operating levy to "enhance" the SBA project, to put the Mason consolidation proposal at the top of the SBA list.



A community-motivated law suit was filed by attorney Jim Lees. Lees was a leader in fighting the constitutionality of the SBA and the selling of bonds to finance school consolidation without the consent of a majority of the voters.

Mason resident Diane Hickel (pictured left) agreed to become a plaintiff in that lawsuit. The suit was

successful in declaring the school funding formula used by the state to be unconstitutional and in need of change.

Lees moved two legal actions forward to establish a way for the state to fund schools which would not compromise the integrity of the taxpayers. Both court cases were successful and the state was forced to find another way to secure funding to build new consolidated schools.

A committee from Mason County went to Charleston to seek funding for a single consolidated high school. This group was successful in obtaining \$14 million dollars from the State Senate Appropriations Committee for Mason County, which was to be placed under the control of the SBA for disbursement to the county.

The Mason County Board of Education was then required to accept the money under SBA's economy of scale guidelines for one consolidated high school - or nothing.

The county board of education members filed a legal action to attempt to free-up the money to be spent on all

three high schools, but they lost the case.



Challenge Fellow Thomas Ramey (above) expresses appreciation to superintendent Larry Parsons for his work to keep community schools.

A new school bond proposal was offered to the voters of Mason County to renovate the three high schools. This bond proposal would have been solely funded by the tax payers of the county. It went down to defeat.

Opponents were angry that they were being asked to fund such a bond for three schools with Mason taxpayer money after \$14 million SBA dollars had been returned to Charleston.

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## Mason's school battle...continued from page 1

Back to square one, community school advocates seemed to have no way out of the dilemma.

After years of frustration and failed bond proposals, a new proposal called the consolidating Point Pleasant High School into a 7 through 12 junior-senior high, thus meeting the SBA economy of scale guidelines for funding.

A new bond levy called for financing much-needed renovations and new construction at Wahama Junior-Senior High and Hannan Junior-Senior High.

This proposal was presented to the SBA, dependent upon passage of a bond levy by Mason County taxpayers.

The plan was approved at the state level and put on the ballot for in March of 2004, the bond proposal passed. The voters of Mason County had found a way to keep Wahama and Hannan as well as get a new high school for Point Pleasant.

This idea is now a reality with the Wahama and Hannan projects being completed and the new PPHS under

construction.

"A new and brighter future for all students, schools and communities in Mason County has opened up with great expectations ahead," said Challenge Fellow Thomas Ramey, attending the dedication of the Wahama facility.

"By compromising and working together for the best interests of communities, tremendous progress has been the result," said Diane Hickel.

## Fanfare Dedicates Wahama Junior-Senior School



**Newly renovated Wahama school pleases local community**

Wahama's school gym was filled to the brim with parents and community members, attending the dedication of the newly renovated school on January 23rd.

The taxpayer supported effort to save the school cost \$6 million.

"It is a dream come true," said

Mason superintendent Larry Parsons, "honoring everyone who voted yes."

Parsons said "Community people have made a difference, and many citizens have become stakeholders," for the 475 students.

Challenge WV Fellow and former



**"Who would have thought we'd be here today after such a long struggle," said Larry Parsons**

school board member Darrell Hagley said "It was tough business having school in the building with all the construction noise, but it was well worth it..

Mason board president Mick Cottrill told the crowd "Threat worry over consolidation has been laid to rest in Mason County," saying perseverance, commitment and work replaced lip service.

"We almost lost our school, and our community with it. The pride is showing in the faces of our citizens who love this community," commented New Haven mayor Steve Smith.

West Virginia State School Board member Barbara Fish said "This is what can happen when people set their mind to it. This is a community that really cares about education."

## Proposed bill grapples with long bus rides

A new bill is pending in the legislature dealing with long bus rides for elementary students and pre-schoolers.

How long is too long of a bus ride for an elementary school student?

According to a bill introduced in both the House and Senate, the answer is 30 minutes one way. Governor Joe Manchin has introduced the bills with the backing of School Building Authority Executive Director Mark Manchin.

Bus rides well over the 30-minute guideline for children as young as four is an issue with parents and local school boards, with the closure of well over 100 elementary schools still proposed.

"I commend the Governor for looking and making some decisions based on the amount of time spent on a school bus and small children and the amount of time they spend on the bus,"

said Mark Manchin. "I think it's a good bill."

The legislation, supported by Senate Education chairperson Robert Plymale, would make the state's guidelines into law.

Challenge WV has long contended the guidelines have been widely ignored, placing thousands of WV students on long bus rides, many one and one-half hours or more each way.

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## Proposed bill...continued from page 2

Manchin said current bus routes would not be impacted by the legislation, but the proposed law would affect consolidation or construction

in the future.

Reportedly, a waiver clause has been eliminated from the bill.

Guidelines for middle and junior

high bus routes would remain at 45 minutes and high school at one-hour each way.

## Lincoln board members step up, problems worse since state take-over

Members of the Lincoln County School Board of Education say they want to set the record straight after state superintendent Steve Paine keeps blaming them for lack of progress in their system.

Challenge Fellow and Lincoln board member Thomas Ramey said "The state has administratively run our system for seven years. Board members have made little if any decisions regarding the many problems. Still, Dr. Paine keeps making us responsible."

The system is suffering lower scores since the seven-year take-over and a multitude of lurking financial problems.

State Superintendent Steve Paine

was recently quoted in the Charleston Daily Mail as saying the Lincoln Board was "squabbling." Board members took great offense to that remark.

"We felt that was very unfair," says Ramey. "We are a dedicated board that likes to ask questions. We know there's some problems and, instead of hiding the problems, we like to bring those out and find solutions."

Four of the Lincoln County board members signed a letter they hand-delivered to the State Board. The letter was in rebuttal to comments by Paine in state media.

Ramey says they don't believe Paine is delivering a true accounting

of the Lincoln board's activities to members of the State Board of Education, so they showed up to do that themselves.

Dr. Paine, in what Challenge WV called an obvious public relations move, turned the meeting toward saying the Lincoln board was wanting control back.

"They indicated a willingness to move forward and that's what we've been waiting for for seven years," says Paine. "I think we're looking forward to the opportunity of working with them in the future. Let's get that school system back to the people."

Ramey said the board ignored their message.

## Bill would increase counties' share of property taxes for education

Counties could keep more of the money collected from property taxes to spend on education in a new House bill, co-authored by a southern West Virginia legislator.

Existing law limits counties to a mere 2 percent of property taxes, with the remaining 98 percent going to the state to be distributed under the school aid formula.

Under legislation co-authored by Delegate Richard Browning, D-Wyoming, the local share would rise to 30 percent --- a 28 percent increase in the current formula.

"This allows flexibility to spend money down at the county level rather than relying on the state for its resources," Browning said.

Such extra cash could help rural systems, funds could

be applied to salaries as incentives to keep teachers from straying into greener pastures. The money could also be spent on resources.

Property taxes are the primary source of income to run education systems in the state's 55 counties.

Money divvied under the school aid formula depends on student enrollment, which is now taking a heavy toll on small counties.

Rural counties have complained of being penalized to a degree since their enrollments are down - often for economic downturns - and yet their expenses remain high, considering the miles buses need to travel daily in transporting student.

# 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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