



The Challenge



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BILL PASSES SLOWING LONG BUS RIDES FOR WV'S YOUNGEST STUDENTS

The West Virginia legislature has passed a Challenge WV bill that will slow down long bus rides for thousands of WV's youngest students.

While the bill is not retroactive, "The use of the state's school consolidation hammer, while not halted, is surely slowed," said Challenge coordinator Thomas Ramey.

"This bill will give some power back to communities and local school boards," he said.

The bill will set a maximum limit of one hour on one-way bus rides for elementary school children.

"What we're saying is it's not OK to bus them over an hour," said Ramey. We're really happy, because that's exactly what we said over and over. We have to get a process started to stop future consolidation."

Busing bills have died during past sessions because school officials continued to say such legislation would cost millions of dollars.

"Our bills have not cost the taxpayers a dime," Ramey said.

Ramey said Challenge WV has made West Virginians quite aware of the downside of wholesale school consolidation, with polls showing citizens overwhelmingly disapprove of consolidation.

"Legislators are aware of the public sentiments, understanding that community-based schools perform much better," he said, acknowledging that consolidation has not saved

money as promised, nor has it increased performance.

"It's about time we did something to stop these tortuous, long bus rides," said Jana Freeman, a Challenge WV community organizer from Preston County. "This bill is a step in the right direction, but more needs to be done."

Freeman said many Preston County students are bused 90 minutes one way to and from school each day following consolidation, both elementary and high school students.

Ramey expressed his appreciation to legislators, Gov. Joe Manchin and the concentrated grass-roots efforts of Challenge WV fellows around West Virginia.

"It has been a pretty tiring effort, going to the Legislature and introducing bills that didn't have a chance of passing," he said.

"It is a bill that the governor has strongly supported for some time," said Lara Ramsburg, with the governor's office. "It's a topic he's been on board with. It's just taken a little time for it to move through the Legislature."

Ramsburg credited Challenge WV's work to pass the bill.

"They've never wavered from their commitment to this bill and should be given credit for that," she said.

Mark Manchin, director of the School Building Authority said, "We

all agree that [one hour] is way too long, particularly for small children. It should not be more than a half hour."

Misty Pritt, a Challenge WV fellow from Gilmer County, said local board of education members across the state often feel like their hands are tied when they make decisions.

Pritt said several board members have called her and said the new bill gave them hope.

"This is a huge win for children across the state of West Virginia," she said.

The state has long ignored its guidelines for how long children should be on buses, with tens of thousands of students over the limits.

Barbara Evans Fleischauer (Dem-Monongalia) told legislators that it is long overdue that the body address long bus ride problems in the Mountain State.

"This legislation is near and dear to our heart, with state officials going way overboard with busing children long distances, including many four and five year olds," she said.

Fleischauer said "Research has shown that such long bus rides are bad, and particularly hurtful to poor children. It is wrong, wrong, wrong!"

"Challenge WV will continue the battle for community-based education," Ramey said, "with our grass-roots efforts around the Mountain State."

Visit Challenge West Virginia at www.challengewv.org

MERCER OFFICIALS CHASING MONEY FOR CONSOLIDATION

A Mercer County citizen and school board member is speaking out regarding her concerns about community-based education.

Lynne White, who says she is not representing members of the school board, says "Instead of starting with the individual needs of our students, schools and communities, economies of scale and cost efficiencies have become the real drivers of educational decisions in West Virginia."

"It appears to me that we are chasing the money. Instead of starting with a transparent, inclusive, comprehensive, objective, and up-to-date analysis of our children's and our communities' needs, we started with the School Building Authority's economies of scale." White said.

Despite all the SBA's statements to the contrary, "I think the WV School Building Authority fund takes center stage in our conversation. In Alice in Wonderland fashion ("Sentence first - verdict afterward"), we start with the potential money and work our way backward to the children.

In Mercer County, for example, White says the superintendent and board president suggested last May that given recent appointments to the SBA board, Mercer County might now have a good opportunity to receive SBA funding for a major school construction project.

The board discussed several possible projects, reaching little agreement.

"Then, only a month later, with no specific public notice, no opportunity for

public input, and no analysis of alternatives, a three vote majority on our sharply divided board (strongly opposed by both members who live in the affected district) approved the superintendent's recommendation to submit a request to the SBA for a School Construction 'Needs Grant' to build a consolidated PikeView Middle School," White says.

If funded and built, this project will reconfigure four community K-8 schools into K-5 schools and transfer all sixth through eighth graders from the Athens, Lashmeet-Matoaka, Oakvale, and Spanishburg communities to the campus where the consolidated PikeView High School is already located.

Plans for a PikeView Middle School were included in Mercer County's Comprehensive Educational Facilities Plan (CEFP) 2000 to 2010 when it was approved by the board of education in December 1999.

However, no plans to actually build this middle school were pursued by the board until the vote in June 2007.

In a November 1999 public hearing for the CEFP, then-board president John Shott stated, "There is one thing that I think everybody needs to understand about what we're doing and that is, even if we pass the proposal before us, no school is going to close, there's going to be no reconfiguration or any shifting of grades from one school to another without public hearings on each of those steps."

Such steps have not been taken.

The superintendent recently described this project as "very tentative" and stated that public hearings would be held if the Needs Grant is awarded, White says.

White says the SBA has no process for public input once a county has submitted a funding proposal.

School officials have assured skeptical citizens that having the funding in hand would not bias their ability to hold fair hearings, and that the majority would not hesitate to return the SBA funding if citizens could demonstrate at those future hearings that the consolidated middle school is not the best solution.

"For the record, I do have strong reservations about building a middle school on the PikeView property beside Interstate 77, removing eleven to fourteen year olds from their community schools where their teachers and administrators have probably known them since they were four years old and can nurture them through critical developmental years," she continued.

White said schools nationwide are moving away from the middle school format back to K-8 configurations.

Researchers from Duke University and the University of California, Berkeley recently completed a comprehensive study of middle school age students in North Carolina and found that sixth graders in middle schools were more than twice as likely to be cited for discipline problems than sixth graders in elementary configurations.

HUNDRED HIGH SCHOOL IS HIDDEN GEM

Hundred High has been ranked fourth out of all high schools in the state by WV Reports.

Those who graduate, more than 70 percent, go on to college or technical training programs.

According to WV Reports, the rankings were based on information provided by the West Virginia Department of Education, the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission and the Community and Technical College System of West Virginia.

The rankings were based on dropout rate, number of highly qualified teachers and class size, percentage of students taking the ACT test, and the number of students who enroll in a college or university following graduation.

The small, 150 pupil, Hundred High

School is located in the rural community of Hundred, where small isn't just an adjective, it's a way of life.

Principal Sam Snyder, a graduate of the school in 1974, said, "Everyone whose gone to a small school will tell you they feel like they're a part of the school."

Snyder says the curriculum and staff are focused on the whole student, from excellence in the classroom to physical and mental well-being.

Snyder says since the class sizes are frequently small, students can get more one-on-one attention. As students progress to more advanced classes in their junior and senior years, the size of the classes shrinks even more.

Students take virtual courses online offered by the West Virginia Department

of Education and the state of Florida.

Those virtual courses allow students to take everything from foreign language and creative writing courses to Web design and microeconomics.

Challenge WV coordinator Thomas Ramey says technology has been a boon to community-based schools, although it seems to have been ignored as a curriculum answer when officials want to close schools.

Snyder says all the individual attention and creative classroom solutions are paying off. More students are graduating each year, Snyder said. Hundred High now has a 93 percent graduation rate.

"That's a reflection of what the kids are doing, what the school is doing to prepare the kids," he concluded.

BRIDGEPORT MAYOR FACING LAWSUIT OVER CHARLES POINTE

Political problems still surround the billion dollar Charles Pointe development in Bridgeport, Harrison County.

A lawsuit now claims Bridgeport's mayor would benefit from the plan because he is chairman of the Charles Pointe Community Enhancement District, an officer and stockholder in a company that promotes bond issues and lend-lease arrangements regarding the project, referring to Tax Increment Financing (TIF).

A proposal went down last year to

build a new Harrison County consolidated school inside the Charles Pointe development, essentially a gated-community.

The Harrison school board wanted to accept "donated" land from the developer, which would have resulted in the closure of several community schools.

Charles Pointe developers would have been given a tax break by the county commission for the donated land.

Challenge WV fellow Paul Hamrick says "Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is of-

ten presented as 'free lunch,' when in fact the taxes are cost-shifted to other taxpayers, in this case, benefiting the developers."

Hamrick said TIF is legal in West Virginia, and has been used for several projects, including a proposed water park in Fairmont.

"While TIF started out to help impoverished areas, it now seems to be generally used as corporate welfare," Hamrick said, "giving big tax breaks to launch big projects."

STATE BOARD VOTES TO CLOSE FAYETTE'S NUTTALL MIDDLE SCHOOL

Despite some protests, the state Board of Education voted 6-2 to close Nuttall Middle School in Fayette County.

The closure will reconfigure Divide and Ansted elementary schools and Ansted Middle School, a plan approved by the Fayette School Board.

Some of the protesters said students would face longer bus rides, while one woman said county officials did not give parents straight answers.

Geoff Heeter believes Fayette County

needs better schools, but opposed the Nuttall closure, asking board members to help "take us out of the cellar and get us up to the rooftop."

"I don't think the data is there regarding long bus rides," said board member Lowell Johnson.

Johnson and Gayle Manchin voted against the closure, with Manchin wondering why only five people showed up to protest the closure.

THIS 'N THAT FROM AROUND THE STATE

CHALLENGE GROUP HOSTS PUBLIC FORUM

Harrison County's chapter of Challenge WV recently sponsored a public forum with 11 of 13 School Board candidates attending and about 60 people in the audience.

The forum was held at the Harrison County Parks & Recreation Center.

The forum was coordinated by Challenge WV fellow Paul Hamrick, with a two-hour question and answer session.

CABELL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION CONTENTIOUS ISSUE

School consolidation is a problem in Cabell County, with community members unhappy, Huntington expressing disapproval and local school officials saying there is no other choice.

The point of contention is where to put a new consolidated school to replace Enslow and Beverly Hills middle schools.

Superintendent William Smith said the problem has been on the table for two years with officials saying the two schools must be consolidated and the only piece of property they feel is feasible is on the roughly 50 acres of property they already own.

The school board has taken no votes on the issue.

The Huntington City Council has passed a resolution opposing construction of a middle school outside city limits.

The state's School Building Authority recommends a middle school have 11 usable acres, plus an extra acre for every 100 students above 600.

With enrollment projections at just above 700, Assistant Superintendent Mike O'Dell said a minimum of 12 acres is needed.

Consolidation is needed to get SBA money, school officials say, because Enslow's small student population does not meet state size requirements for receiving money.

Despite SBA's chief Mark Manchin saying the agency no longer uses economies of scale, Cabell officials told local media that consolidation is the only way the school board can move ahead under SBA guidelines.

NEW CONSOL SCHOOL OPENING

While major school consolidation efforts happen in county's which have been taken over by the state, a new consolidated school in McDowell County is set to open in April.

More than 500 elementary students are relocating for classes at the new Southside Elementary School.

About 370 students from War and 161 students from Berwind will move into the new K-8 school.

COMPETITION HIGH FOR SBA MONEY

The West Virginia School Building Authority will be handing out \$70 million in SBA grants. Presentations are being made in March by 42 school superintendents.

They are asking for a total of \$256 million in upgrades or new facilities, or four times the amount of available money.

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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