



The

Challenge

January 2000



Students, parents relate bus horror stories

The little girl is five years old, a kindergarten student in Ritchie County. She gets up at 5:30 a.m. and boards a school bus just after 6:30. The bus arrives at her elementary school about

30 minutes later, but she can't get off. She and her sister, a second grader, ride around the Ritchie County back roads for 20 to 25 minutes more because there are no teachers on

duty at the school when the bus first arrives. They finally get to school at about 7:15 a.m.

The girls' brother, who is in middle school, gets off the bus when it makes its first pass of the elementary school. With their parents' permission, he and a classmate wait unsupervised until another bus picks them up to go on to the middle school. The boys leave the elementary school at about 7:10 and arrive at their middle school at about 7:45.

The Ritchie County boys are on the bus 65 to 70 minutes each morning, well in excess of state guidelines concerning school bus transportation. The bus times for the girls also exceed state guidelines.

Those guidelines say no elementary student should be on a bus more than 30 minutes one way; middle school students 45 minutes and high school students one hour.

In the afternoon, the little girls sit in a school lunchroom for more than an hour after their classes are over before getting on the bus for a 45 to 50-minute ride home. The children who left home at 6:30 a.m. get back to their mother at about 4:30 or 4:45 p.m.

A high school student in Webster County has a

commute of at least two hours each way, a trip that takes much longer when the weather is bad. He leaves his home at 6:45 a.m. and doesn't arrive home until after 5 p.m.

The young man boards a school bus at 6:45 a.m. and arrives at the local elementary school about 15 minutes later. He waits for

Please turn to page two

Support HB 2051! Better Schools Bill would limit school bus travel times

Challenge West Virginia is inviting you to come to the Legislature on January 26, Children's Day at the Legislature, to demonstrate your support for The Better Schools Bill.

House Bill 2051 (the same bill will be introduced in the Senate but is not yet numbered) would limit times children are allowed to spend on school buses.

The bill would limit transportation times to those times the School Building Authority says are reasonable. It also would require the SBA to consider factors other than econo-

Please turn to page four

Welcome, New Chapters!



In December residents of Logan and Harrison counties formed County Chapters of Challenge WV. Above, Logan County fellow Christine Spaulding and mentor JoAnn Farmer, and, below, Harrison County fellow Paul Hamrick and leaders of his county chapter, accept Challenge certificates.





Challenge West Virginia

The Challenge is published by Challenge West Virginia, a statewide organization committed to maintaining and improving small community schools and reforming education policy in West Virginia so that all of our state's children have the opportunity to receive a first-class education and the promise of a bright future.

Challenge members believe state education policy, which has resulted in the closing of a fourth of West Virginia's schools during the past ten years, does not serve the best interest of many children, especially those from

low-income families who live in rural areas.

Challenge West Virginia is a program of Covenant House, an independent, non-profit organization in Charleston, WV, which is not connected to any other program by the same name.

To start a chapter of Challenge WV, to inquire about the fellowship program or for more information, contact:

Linda Martin
801 Gordon Drive
Charleston, WV 25303
304-744-5916
LBM94@aol.com

Beth Spence
58 Frontier Road
Alum Creek, WV 25003
304-756-9191
bandb58@aol.com

Students, parents relate bus horror stories

15 to 20 minutes there before boarding a bus for the high school, which is an hour away.

"We have a bus transfer in Webster which takes a while, so I'm *on the bus* a total of about an hour and 15 minutes or an hour and 20 minutes in the morning (not counting the transfer time)," he said. A detour up a back road in the afternoon means his evening commute is between an hour and a half to an hour and 45 minutes.

Not only is the student unable to participate in sports or other extracurricular activities, his time with his family is severely limited.

"I leave a long time before my father goes to work," he said. "His shift starts at 3 o'clock. I'm still in school when he starts work and I don't get home until 5 o'clock when he's already at work. He doesn't get in until 11 o'clock so the only time I have with my father is on weekends."

"If I want to do something, I normally have to leave a note for my father to read when he gets in. So he reads the note while I'm in bed and returns the message. When I get up in the morning, I find out what he told me so we never really get to discuss it."

A parent from that community who attended the same consolidated high school estimated that from the time she left home in the morning until she returned in the afternoon, she spent 32 percent of her school day on a bus.

Another parent said he didn't remember a morning when students from his community arrived at school in time to eat a school breakfast.

The high school student said that is still true. "Especially if the weather conditions are bad and you're late to class. They don't have make-up breakfasts when the bus is late so you have to go through your day until lunch without food."

Another high school student said his normal bus ride is just under two hours one way but that he has been on the bus five hours round trip when the weather was bad.

"I don't have time for athletics," he said. "I love to

play baseball and stuff like that. I just can't fit it in."

He said he gets on the bus at 6:15 and doesn't get home in the afternoon until after 5. "By the time I get home, supper's already in little dishes ready to go in the refrigerator. Everybody's already eaten."

The students say they avoid higher level classes because they don't have time to do the required homework.

"The more advanced classes you take in high school, the more homework you have that evening. So you bring home five or six courses of homework in the evening and you're getting home at 6 or 6:30 anyway, it kind of depresses you and you don't have that zeal the following year to go the next step," one of the parents said.

The other parent agreed. "I graduated as a senior second in my class and I avoided all the college prep classes. I went on to college and graduated. I was on the Dean's List. But you avoid those courses and a lot of it is just the homework. You get home in the evenings and get your chores done, you just didn't want any more homework than necessary. And we were all very capable of taking those courses. It wasn't too mentally challenging. It was just there was no time for the homework."

A parent from Preston County said he chooses to transport his children to their elementary school, which takes him five to seven minutes. The children would board a bus at 6:30 and not arrive at school until 7:45 a.m. Although school dismisses at 2:35, the bus does not arrive at his house until at least 3:35, sometimes as late as 4 p.m.

He told the story of picking his daughter up at school, taking her to the dentist 20 miles away to have a tooth x-rayed and filled, stopping on the way home to buy a sack of dog feed and still arriving home before the bus passed by the house.

"Now, that's why I drive my children to school," he said.

These stories were taken from testimony given at four public hearings conducted in October and November.



This 'n that

- Judge Arthur Recht postponed additional hearings on the school funding case until April 3. During hearings in December Judge Recht denied a request by state legislators to dismiss them as defendants, something Sen. Education Committee chairman Lloyd Jackson called “a constant source of irritation.”

- A school finance expert who testified in the hearings said the state’s school aid formula, used by the Legislature to allocate money to county school systems, is inadequate. Richard Salmon, a professor at Virginia Tech, said the system of funding education must be reformed because the current method prohibits students from receiving the education necessary to break the cycle of poverty.

- Salmon proposed approving excess levies in all West Virginia counties, providing more state revenue to poorer counties and taxing property at 100 percent of its assessed value rather than at 60 percent as is currently done.

- In describing Lincoln County, where he visited six of the county’s 14 schools, Salmon said, “There’s many words you could use. Inadequate. Deplorable. Hazardous. Dangerous. Unsightly. Need replaced.”

- Monroe County superintendent Lyn Guy said she has struggled to balance unfunded state mandates with a long-standing school system deficit and the educational needs of her students. Since the consolidated James Monroe High School opened in 1994, cuts have been made to satisfy budgetary needs and mandates. As a result the number of class offerings has decreased, the number of teachers cut and students who were counting on advanced classes have had to do without.

- After touring numerous West Virginia schools during recent weeks, University of Southern Mississippi Professor Margaret Smith proclaimed them “some of the worst in the world.” Smith detailed curriculum and building problems that she witnessed in McDowell, Mingo, Webster and Fayette counties, saying, “It is a tragedy if a child goes in one of those schools one more day.”

- Funding expert Kern Alexander, a professor at Murray State University, said West Virginia is trying to stick every student, school and county into the same box of educational expectations without providing the appropriate means. “My testimony is that you don’t know what the student needs are when you start with performance,” he said.

- The Kanawha County Education Association released a report in December entitled “Robin Hood in Reverse.” The report contains data indicating that 10 of 14 schools slated for closure have high percentages of students who receive free or reduced cost school meals, according to a report in the *Charleston Daily Mail*. The study also said less than ten percent of the \$36.6 million allocated for capital improvements is slated for schools where more than 50 percent of students qualify for free or reduced meals.

- Members of the McDowell County Board of Education voted unanimously for a resolution in support of Challenge West Virginia’s Better Schools Bill. The resolution was presented to board members by McDowell County fellow Mike Lushbaugh.

- The Fayette County Board of Education voted in December to close 14 county schools and build new schools with a price tag of \$61.9 million. Board member Steve Pilato said he couldn’t support the plan because he was not comfortable with hidden costs, including transportation costs, cost of land for the new schools, access roads and utilities.

- State Schools Superintendent Hank Marockie ran into trouble while trying to get a superintendent’s job in Las Vegas, Nevada. Las Vegas school board members said Marockie told them that “private sources” provided him with a country club membership and a \$600 a month housing allowance, something that would violate state ethics laws. Marockie said the Las Vegas officials misunderstood what he said.

- *Charleston Gazette* reporter Eric Eyre found that during the past ten years, Marockie accepted \$99,015 from the nonprofit Education Alliance for a superintendent’s discretionary fund, funded by private foundations, corporations and utilities. The newspaper has called for an investigation. Kanawha County State Sen. John Mitchell said the Senate Education Committee will “scrutinize” Marockie’s comments. Kanawha County prosecutor Bill Forbes said he plans to investigate the expense account. And the president of the board of the Education Alliance said his executive board would look into the matter.



Challenge West Virginia

A program of Covenant House, Charleston, WV

Linda Martin
Education Coordinator
801 Gordon Drive
Charleston, WV 25303

Beth Spence
Rural Coordinator
58 Frontier Road
Alum Creek, WV 25003

Non-Profit Organization
US Postage Paid
Permit 2673
Charleston, WV 25301

Support the Better Schools Bill

Continued from page one
mies of scale when decid-
ing to close community

schools.
The SBA has guide-
lines which define reason-

able travel times for stu-
dents, but these guidelines
often are not observed.

The guidelines call for
elementary students to be on
school buses no more than
30 minutes one way; middle
school students 45 minutes
one way; and high school
students 60 minutes one
way.

Because these times are
recommended in guidelines,
and are not state law, they
are often ignored.

The bill also would give
the House Rules Committee
oversight over the School
Building Authority. At the
present time the SBA, which
decides which counties will
receive school building
funds, does not have to sub-
mit rules to the Legislature
as to how they will distrib-

ute funds.

The bill also would al-
low any school included in
a county-wide facilities
plan to be eligible for fund-
ing by the School Building
Authority.

For more information,
call the Challenge WV fel-
low in your area (numbers
are at left); Linda Martin at
304- 744-5916 or Beth
Spence at 304-756-9191.

Challenge WV Chapters

Preston County

Jana Freeman
Aurora, WV
304-735-3411

Lincoln County

Thomas Ramey, Jr.
Harts, WV
304-855-3930

McDowell County

Eddie Harman
Caretta, WV
304-875-4202

Ritchie County

Patty Deak
Ellenboro, WV
304-869-3462

Webster County

Cindy Miller
Hacker Valley, WV
304-493-6369

Logan County

Christine Spaulding
Madison Creek, WV
304-792-7160, ext. 113

Harrison County

Paul Hamrick
Clarksburg, WV

Check out our web site!

Visit Challenge
West Virginia at our
web site:

<http://www.wvcovenanthouse.org/challengewv/>