



The

Challenge

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Small, rural schools make exemplary list

Hacker Valley Elementary in Webster County. Cairo Elementary in Ritchie County. Pickens School in Randolph County. Nellis Elementary in Boone County. Mt. Nebo Elementary in Nicholas County. Nuttall Middle School in Fayette County.

All are small schools serving low-income communities. All made the State Board of Education's list of the state's 50 best schools.

Altogether 17 low-income schools made the top 50 schools list, based on

test scores, dropout rates, writing exam results and attendance. One in three of the exemplary schools has a free lunch rate above 50 percent, according to *The Charleston Gazette*.

The low-income, high-achieving schools average 150 students, confirming what all national research is showing: low-income kids perform better at small elementary schools.

The bad news is that seven of the 17 schools are

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Books valued at \$1.5 million

Challenge WV helped get \$1.5 million worth of books into West Virginia schools in 2001.

The books, which came through the Christian Appalachian Project, were distributed by Challenge fellows in Preston, Harrison, Fayette, Putnam, Ritchie, Clay and Webster Counties.

Above, Fayette County volunteers sort books.

Judge Recht calls for changes in funding formula

Judge Arthur Recht wants the state Legislature and governor to develop a timeline for changing the way the state pays for education, changes which could generate up to \$39 million more a year for West Virginia schools.

But Gov. Bob Wise says he won't request changes in the school funding formula. "We have a budget on an economic flatline," Wise said. This is as tough a budget year as the state has ever faced. No

one has \$39 million."

Legislators are talking about eliminating personal property taxes on vehicles and increasing property taxes on land.

Recht, who has kept open the historic school funding case that bears his name, has scheduled an April 19 hearing to discuss whether the state is meeting its obligation to provide a "thorough and efficient" education.

"I'm going to react to what is done and to what

has not been done," Recht said during a December hearing with state legislators and school officials.

State legislators are not expected to debate the school funding issue during the upcoming legislative session. Legislative leaders want Recht to dismiss the case.

The formula changes, which would primarily benefit rural school systems, were recommended by State Super-

intendent David Stewart and endorsed by Dan Hedges, the plaintiffs' lawyer in the school funding case.

Stewart proposed eliminating the formula's "net enrollment cap" that penalizes counties with a high percentage of special education students. Without the cap, county systems could receive \$36 million more.

Stewart also proposed

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This 'n that from around the state

- The School Building Authority awarded nearly \$70 million in state and federal construction money to 17 county school systems in December. Counties receiving the largest awards were Hancock, which got \$8.4 million for construction of a new Oak Glen Middle School, and Lincoln, which got \$7.5 million for the new Lincoln County high school.



- Fayette County principals have asked the county superintendent and school board to reconfigure existing schools to accomplish the board's goals of reducing costs and maintaining curriculum, according to a report in *The Charleston Gazette*. The principals say if three high schools consolidate at the current Oak Hill High School site, every science lab will be filled daily, meaning teachers will not be able to set up science experiments. Fayetteville High School principal Charles Garvin and Collins Middle School Principal David Perry, co-presidents of the county principals' association, say smaller schools are safer, more cost effective and keep parents more closely involved. More students can be involved in student government, athletics and extra-curricular activities at small schools, they said. Garvin said they fear test scores and attendance will drop in a larger, consolidated school. "We don't want to destroy our links to our community schools," Garvin said. "We can shoe horn students into these schools, but it is not possible to deliver an effective curriculum. We need to respect cultures that exist in our county." Fayette County Superintendent Harry Hoffer has proposed closing eight schools and 12 buildings.

- Former Fayette County Superintendent Matt Edwards offered the School Board several alternatives for solving its overstaffing problem without "wholesale consolidation" of schools. Edwards suggested the elimination of block scheduling, extending the school day and allowing schools to share teachers. Edwards warned that taxpayers might be unwilling to continue a levy because of the anger over the proposed school closings.

- A Fayetteville accountant also offered an alternative plan to the Fayette County School Board. Leland O'Neal produced a 35-page alternative plan after filing a Freedom of Information request and receiving about 1,000 pages of documents from the board. He suggested that if middle schools and high schools were joined in new

configurations, new opportunities for curriculum would be available. O'Neal said before he began the project, he thought he would find larger schools would be more efficient. "I thought the smaller, community schools were dragging the system down, but that is not true," he said.

- The Lincoln County Board of Education has filed the necessary court documents to begin condemnation proceedings on a site for a consolidated county high school, according to the *Lincoln Journal*. The court papers, filed on Dec. 7, would allow the School Board to take 96 acres of a 356-acre farm for the proposed school.

- Last spring the test scores of 23,889 West Virginia public school students who took the Stanford Achievement Test weren't counted in the overall results, according to a new report from the state Department of Education. Statewide, 13 percent of students' scores were excluded last spring, up from 11 percent in 1999. *The Charleston Gazette* pointed out that 900 more students were excluded than in the previous year and 2,600 more than two years ago, while student enrollment continues to plummet. McDowell County, recently taken over by the state, had the highest rate of exclusion with 22 percent of student scores not being counted. Other counties excluding high numbers of students were Lincoln and Webster with 21 percent, and Doddridge, Mercer, Wayne, Roane and Wyoming with 17 percent. Counties that exclude the fewest students are Wood with 6 percent, Marion with 7 percent, Hancock and Jackson with 8 percent, and Mineral and Tucker with 9 percent. Pendleton County, with the highest percentage of special education children in the state, excluded 11 percent of its students. Marshall County, with the second highest percentage of special education students, didn't count 13 percent of student scores.

- While releasing the names of 51 schools of excellence, the State School Board also released a list of seriously impaired schools, which included Gauley Bridge in Fayette County, Panther Elementary and Mount View High in McDowell County; Peterstown Elementary in Monroe County; Jefferson High in Jefferson County; Barnes Elementary in Marion County; Enslow Middle in Cabell County; and Man Junior High in Logan County.

Achieving

At-risk children can succeed and may do better at small schools

The State Department of Education recently released a list of 51 superior schools in West Virginia. In a word, they work. Attendance is good. Dropout rates are low. Test scores are high. The results of writing exams are good.

These schools do what we all want schools to do – equip children to succeed in life. But there are interesting lessons to be drawn from the list of exemplary schools.

As the *Gazette's* Eric Eyre reported, these aren't all rich kids' schools. At about a third of the schools that made the list, more than half of the students are poor enough to qualify for free lunches.

Donna Davis, deputy director of the office of Education Performance Audits, drew the inescapable lesson: "The data clearly show that an achievement gap can indeed be closed. With quality teachers and leadership, and high expectations, you can succeed regardless of socio-economic status," she said. "This should dispel the myths and excuses."

And it appears that there is another lesson as well. In the primary grades, where teachers must try to equip at-risk students with the basic skills for higher learning, smaller seems to work better.

The low-income schools that produced high student achievement averaged about 150 students.

At Cairo Elementary in Ritchie County, more than 60 percent of the 67 students qualify for free lunches. The remote Pickens School in Randolph County deals with only 38 students from kindergarten through 12th grade. At Diana Elementary-Middle School in Webster County, more than 100 of the 120 students qualify for reduced-price lunches and attend split-grade classes.

West Virginians can't afford to provide the 10-to-one pupil-teacher ratio that exists at Diana Elementary at every school in the state. It's expensive, and the truth is that not all children need that level of staffing.

But at-risk children who need it should get it. When they do, teachers can change the world.

That appears to be happening at a number of schools that deal with poor students – including Nellis Elementary in Boone County; Bethany Primary in Brooke County; Culloden Elementary in Cabell County; Nuttall Middle in Fayette County; Normantown, Sand Fork and Troy elementaries in Gilmer County; Polk Creek Elementary in Lewis County; Center McMechen Elementary in Marshall County; Bluewell Elementary in Mercer County; Mount Nebo Elementary in Nicholas County; Bradley Elementary in Raleigh County; and Hacker Valley Elementary in Webster County.

If they can do it, other schools can do it.

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Exemplary . . .

scheduled to be closed within the next eight years. Included on that list are Cairo Elementary and Nuttall Middle School.

"Each teacher here knows what the individual child needs," said Mark Haugh, a parent of a Cairo Elementary student and a supporter of small schools.

The faculty at Nuttall Middle School expressed concerns about the proposed closure of their school in a letter to the editor of *The Charleston Daily Mail*.

They said they had had little input in the plan to merge the school with

Ansted Middle School.

Faculty members said there would be no library at the merged school and no computer lab.

They expressed concerns about long bus rides that would make it difficult for some students to participate in extra-curricular activities and in a school-sponsored tutoring program.

Noting that Nuttall had been named an exemplary school, the only one in Fayette County, the teachers wrote, "This confirms that Nuttall should be cloned, not closed."

Recht . . .

changing the formula for service workers, which could generate up to \$3 million the counties could use, most likely to hire more bus drivers.

Hedges said there has been a failure of the Legislature to adequately fund education.

"You can't expect to continue to reduce educational funding as a percentage of the total state budget and expect education not to suffer," he said.

Recht also ruled that the school funding formula should be examined without considering county excess levies, which provide additional money for employee salaries, maintenance and school

supplies.

House Education Committee vice chairman Larry Williams said the net effect of changing the taxes would allow more dollars for education.

Senate Education Chairman Lloyd Jackson said the House plan was a different approach to a school-funding solution that already has been voted down twice.

"Clearly, what the House is looking at is some enticement to get people to seriously consider a statewide levy," Jackson said.

The Legislature has twice put before voters a proposal for a statewide levy. Both times the statewide levy failed.

The Challenge

The Challenge is published monthly 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.

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