



# The Challenge



January 2005

## Mingo not jumping on baited hook "No Cost Busing Bill" will end problem

Longtime coal miner and Mingo County school board member Mike Carter said "This is not about educating our kids," discussing the forced consolidation of the Mingo school system, currently affecting three high schools.

"We're being asked to jump on a baited hook. Big expensive buildings and long bus rides have little to do with educating our children. This is a sell-out," Carter said. "It certainly is not about saving money."

While the rest of America is moving away from school consolidation, West Virginia continues on a roll, closing hundreds of schools and planning on closing many more.

Most recently the consolidation movement swept over Lincoln County, where a new high school in Hamlin could cost between \$40 to \$50 million to construct, including site expenses.

It will be the most expensive public high school ever built in America. The school was projected to house 800 students, but some of them are going to other counties.

The new "cookie cutter" buildings have a life span of about 20 years, according to some experts.

Carter said his county got two letters from the state system on the same day calling for a show-down on accepting the SBAs \$17 million toward a new high school and with a new audit and another takeover by state.

"It's the powerful lording over people who believe in their communities," said Carter, who does admit there are times con-



Pictured top to bottom: Williamson, Burch and Matewan High Schools.

solidation makes sense.

Mingo County has already closed 17 schools in 14 years. The way the state's formula is set, we don't stand a chance.

"Education should be about teachers, kids, parents, subject matter and communities. Our Mingo teachers can go a few feet into Kentucky and make \$15,000 more," Carter said.

Carter said if this was really about saving money, we could move Williamson and Burch into the Matewan complex, but there would still be long bus rides.

"These three buildings will become empty ghosts, despite being constructed in the 70s and 80s," he said. Mingo

County has wasted millions of dollars following the state's program to go to the middle school concept.

People need to understand the money is going to big buildings and their big expenses, long bus rides and ever expanding administration, he said. "I'm proud to be a voice against that."

"I think much will hinge on whether our new governor Joe Manchin sticks to his anti-consolidation promise," said Carter, who strongly supports the "No Cost Busing Bill" which will be placed before the current legislative session.

The "No Cost Busing Bill," if passed will put an end to wholesale consolidation, a movement most citizens in West Virginia support.

"The education czars need to hear that we've had enough," he concluded.



## "Who among you would accept such a proposal?" asks Board President Duty

Mingo's school board president William D. Duty stands at the helm of a bitter battle to keep community schools open.

"It's hard to accept the SBAs plan for Mingo County," said Duty, saying they want to give the county \$17 million

dollars to construct a consolidated high school that could cost over \$50 million.

The Mingo board has hired Charleston Attorney Jim Lees to "defend the people," in what Duty believes is a con-  
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# This 'n that from around the state

• **MANCHIN SAYS EDUCATION TOP PRIORITY** - Governor Joe Manchin says education is one of his top concerns. He has received several recommendations on how to improve schools from experts, teachers and parents.

The education policy committee of the Manchin transition team has met several times prior to his inauguration. Chairman Jay Cole says the group has come up with three main issues, communication, funding and more autonomy for colleges and primary and secondary schools. The group said funding needs more self-autonomy for schools.

• **MINGO SCHOOLS FACING TAKEOVER** - The West Virginia Board of Education is primed to seize control of the Mingo County school system again, unless it can be convinced that the local school board has a way out of its financial struggles. The board has asked their superintendent Brenda Skibo to come up with a financial plan. Skibo was initially appointed by the state department to operate the Mingo system.

The State Board of Education voted to instruct Superintendent David Stewart to take any immediate action necessary to implement Mingo County's Comprehensive Educational Facilities Plan, which calls for closing several high schools and building a new consolidated facility. The board has rejected the plan.

• **STATE TEACHERS MOVING TOWARD 8-HR. DAY** - The West Virginia Board of Education voted eight-to-one to place the 8-hr. day policy change on a 30-day public comment period. Board members are expected to approve the change. Tom Lange, president of the West Virginia Education Association, says teachers already put in more than an eight-hour workday. He says principals shouldn't be able to force teachers to work extra hours before or after school. Judy Hale, the head of the WV Federation of Teachers, has been advocating for the change.

• **WILLIAMS GETS BIG NCLB BUCKS** - Right-wing talk show host Armstrong Williams was paid nearly a quarter of a million dollars by the Bush administration to promote its No Child Left Behind education bill. Williams touted NCLB in his column and on cable news. Williams, a leading African-American conservative and Clarence Thomas protégé, is a PR specialist with his own company.

• **MINERAL COUNTY RETURNS MILLIONS TO SBA** - The state School Building Authority's \$63 million-dollar budget deficit is getting some help. Mineral County has returned \$12 million the authority it awarded the county in 2003 to build a new Keyser Middle School. The county was required to pass a school bond in order to access the SBA grant. The bond failed last May.



The SBA suffered a set-back when it lost lottery money, although it is still committed to spending \$233 million statewide.

• **HAMPSHIRE GRANTS UNDER REVIEW** - The state is auditing grants given to Hampshire County under the control of Hampshire school board employee Jerry Mezzatesta. The grants came into question related to Mezzatesta "double dipping" while he was chairman of the House Education Committee. State Superintendent David Stewart told the state's media he saw no wrongdoing by Mezzatesta.

Mezzatesta was later removed from his chairmanship, lost his race for re-election and plead no contest to fabricating false information.

Meanwhile, Mezzatesta has filed a Freedom of Information request with his employer in an effort to find out what people have written and said about him in Hampshire County. He is seeking tape recordings of school board meetings during which people talked about him.

• **TEACHERS UNION ADDS HIGHER EDUCATION DIVISION** - The American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia has created a higher education division and hired the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission's legislative liaison to run it. Robert Morgenstern, who also is the policy commission's spokesman and the former PROMISE Scholarship director, began his new position January 27th.



Matewan High's school secretary said "This beautiful gym will become a ghost, like the rest of the school," one of several Mingo community schools to be closed.

## "Don't Do It Truman", Senator Chafin angry over allegations

State Senator Truman Chafin, who represents Mingo County, has found himself in the firestorm over school consolidation. The Logan Banner published a story "Don't Do It Truman!" indicating the senator has been asked by State Board of Education officials for legislative support to force Mingo County consolidation.

During a recent meeting, state education officials reportedly wanted some relief from the red-hot issue and decided to ask Senator Chafin for assistance.

Chafin, speaking on a Matewan radio talk show, did not actually deny such interaction,

but focused on the legislature's role in school consolidation, which he says is "hands off." Chafin accused the Logan Banner of lying and using "yellow journalism."

Challenge WV member Donnie Edwards of Mingo gave Chafin an opportunity to clarify the issue during the call-in program, but Chafin did not respond. "He didn't answer the question," said Edwards, using a carefully worded explanation regarding the role of a legislator.

Edwards said Mingo County is firmly against consolidation, but Sen. Chafin and the counties representatives in the House of Delegates have distanced themselves from agreeing

with their constituents.

Sen. Chafin did not respond to requests by the Challenge WV newsletter that would have clarified the issue.

The Logan Banner said state education officials may have gone so far as to ask Chafin to introduce new legislation that would help their cause.

"Chafin needs to listen to his constituents and not force consolidation on Mingo County. This country is a democracy, not a dictatorship. Chafin needs to remember that. The people of Mingo County voted him in and they can vote him out," said the Banner.

## "Who among you..."

Continued from page 1

stitutional infringement by bureaucrats over elected officials.

The proposed school is on a piece of mountaintop land that the school board does not own. r Contracting, representing the coal company, keeps reducing the amount of land they want to donate, from 90 acres to 60 acres.



The proposed building site is about 10 miles from the main highway on Red Jacket Mountain. "It is straight up the mountain, with

no existing road," said Duty, although the construction of the King Coal Highway is supposed to be near the school site.

"There are so many loose ends on this project, it makes your head swim," said Duty, who said the issue of long bus rides has never been clarified. "They keep giving mileage's, and if you live in Mingo County, it is the time it takes to get over the mountains and the winding roads that counts."

Considering narrow mountainous roads,



hairpin curves, bus stops, coal trucks and weather conditions, many students will be on a school bus one and one-half hour each way.

Duty said "I can't believe folks sit in Charleston and say this is good for our kids, education or the taxpayers," closing three community based schools that are doing a good job.

Duty recently took a tour of Williamson, Burch and Matewan high schools, pointing out the buildings are relatively new, constructed in the 70s and 80s.

Williamson High School's enrollment has drastically dropped with up to 200 students pulling out and enrolling in a nearby Belfry, Kentucky school, based on the fear their kids will have to endure long bus rides to the consolidated school.

"Kentucky has welcomed our kids with open arms, and the State Department of Education appears unconcerned," Duty said.

Using "economies of scale" with the loss of student enrollment, there might not be enough students to open the new Mingo Central High School.

"They have quit saying it will save taxpayers money, but at the same time they want to close schools because there are not enough students," implying cost savings. "There is no evidence of that, anywhere," said Duty.

Duty said a practical plan would be to down-size the physical plants of the current schools and to create Long Distance Learning Center's to fill the curriculum gap.

## "Pork Chop" returns to limelight, state education official indicted

Former West Virginia schools Assistant Superintendent G.A. McClung, 57, and his friend Phillip "Pork Chop" Booth have been indicted on 24-counts by a federal grand jury over a \$2.4 million furniture deal, following the 2001 floods in McDowell and Wyoming counties.

The top state Department of Education official got cash, Kentucky Derby tickets and a vacation cruise to the Bahamas after he steered the multi-million-dollar contract to Charleston businessman Booth. McClung collected at least \$50,000 in cash and kick-backs, according to the indictment.

A Charleston Gazette investigative reporter broke the story, which revealed Booth's company charged between two and four times the normal amount for school furniture and equipment after the floods, in addition to ordering \$68,000 worth of classroom furniture they didn't need.

McClung, who had served as a state appointed superintendent of McDowell schools, could face up to 179 years in federal prison and Booth) 15 years.

The federal charges follow a two-year investigation by the FBI, Internal Revenue Service and state Legislative Commission on Special Investigations.

McDowell County schools lost more than \$700,000 because of the scheme, said state appointed Superintendent Mark Manchin. Clacy Williams, executive director of the state School Building Authority, said "It's not fair to take personal advantage of somebody else's tragedy."

The former president of the WV school board J. D. Morris of Clay was sent to federal prison for stealing money held in his own bank that belonged to an education account and former state school chief Hank Marockie resigned after "committing unethical acts."

## Manchin wants SBA reorganized, leaders will approve plan



Gov. Joe Manchin has unveiled a bill that would reorganize the School Building Authority and give the governor extraordinary power over which school construction projects get funded each year.

If the bill passes, Manchin could hire and fire the authority's executive director Clacy Williams. The governor also would dissolve the current 10-member board and appoint new members. Manchin would become chairman. The new rules would take effect March 31.

Charleston newspapers reported that key legislators have agreed to approve Manchin's control over the SBA.

Manchin spokesperson Lara Ramsburg said the legislation has nothing to do with politics or Williams or authority board members. She said Manchin recently met with financial advisers in New York who want West Virginia agencies with bonding authority to "speak with one voice."

Williams is one of the state's principal leaders in school consolidation, which Manchin has said during his campaign must come to an end, at least the wholesale closing of community schools.

Williams has overseen more than \$1 billion in school construction since 1989, the year former Gov. Gaston Caperton set up the authority.

Williams has been at odds with Lincoln County school board President Carol Smith and Jefferson County school board President Lori Stille. Smith and Stille served on Manchin's transition team.

## Mingo school super busts civics project.

Teachers at Mingo's Burch school embarked on what they thought was a civics project with some of their students, writing and mailing postcards to legislative leaders Del. Bob Kiss and Senator Earl Ray Tomblin.

The cards call for legislators to support the "No Cost Busing Bill" being introduced by Challenge WV.

Mingo County school superintendent Brenda Skibo came to the school and confis-

cated about 120 postcards, saying the cards were "anti-consolidation propaganda" and the students participation violated school policy.

Burch teachers said material supporting school levies and other political materials have been allowed in the school in the past and said they felt the confiscation of the cards was a violation of the student's constitutional rights.

Superintendent Skibo declined to return a call explaining her position.

## 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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