



The Challenge



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Full court press killing community schools bill

It's been a full-court press to kill a grass roots bill in the WV legislature that would return some power to parents over deciding whether or not their community schools would be consolidated.

It would have mandated an election after at least 20 percent of a county's voters had signed a petition.

After closing more than 300 community schools, some balance would have been given to citizens regarding the closing of their elementary and middle schools.

House Bill 4040 was almost unanimously approved by the 25-member House of Delegates Education Committee, the vote was 93-4.

Governor Joe Manchin, who ran on protecting community schools, gave some last minute support to the bill, but did not appear to actively support the measure.

Such grass-roots momentum is not enough for the senate's education chair Robert Plymale (D-Wayne).

Plymale said his committee is not going to advance the bill, which effectively kills the legislation.

Plymale said "It's a decision that needs to be made by members of the board of education. If you don't like the decision, you can vote them out."

HEARD IT BEFORE?

Linda Martin of Challenge WV said "That might sound good, but its been the party line since former senator Lloyd Jackson and former delegate Jerry Mezzatesta were the architects of school consolidation."

Jackson, who was defeated in his bid to become governor, used Plymale's "local board decision" statement on the campaign trail, when asked to discuss issues related to school consolidation.

Martin said most West Virginians know about the "bloody hammer" state school officials use to hold local school boards hostage.

"That's the reason for trying to return some power to communities, in face of well over 100 elementary schools still on the chopping block," said Martin, with more likely to come.

Larry Williams (D-Preston), vice-chair of the house education committee, said "This measure would give some balance to the problem," indicating his constituents are "worn out" with the power executed by state education officials.

State education officials continue to ignore the long bus rides created by consolidation. "They keep doing studies with manipulated numbers" about how many students are affected, said Martin.

O'CULL SAYS BILL CAUSES PROBLEMS

Howard O'Cull, executive director of the West Virginia School Boards

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Bigger is better is good for West Virginians?

Higher powers in West Virginia have long planned to reduce the number of counties, bigger ones taking over smaller ones - all in the name of efficiency and reduction of costs.

Sen. Brooks McCabe (D-Kanawha), the state's newest "Consolidation King," is worried that Charleston and Huntington's population may drop below 50,000, saying by the 2010 Census, they will fall below the radar for federal

grant programs, and will no longer be considered sites for future business.

McCabe has been leading a two-year effort to get the legislature to pass bills that would not only make it easier for metro areas to consolidate, but county governments too.

The proposals are from the Commission on Governing in the 21st Century, which supports consolidation.

The commission was formed by

Gov. Bob Wise, but not a single member was from a small, rural, poor county.

Former Gov. Gaston Caperton asserted a plan to reduce the number of counties down to about twelve, mostly based on an "economies of scale" model that effectively gobbles-up rural counties by larger ones.

The "economies of scale" model has been used by state education officials to close hundreds of schools, asserting

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Association, was opposed to having local voting, saying "It just adds another layer to the issue," and could cause money problems for school boards.

O'Cull reminded Challenge WV members at a conference last fall that most of the constitutional powers of local school boards have been removed by the WV legislature, and taken to Charleston.

Debbie Phillips, Putnam County school board president, said the legislation would have provided for more participation from county voters.

"I think it's great to give voters a right. It gives them some debate. And I support that. That's what our country was built on," she said.

Del. Tom Campbell, co-chair of the House Education Committee said, "There seems to be a growing consensus that consolidation affecting our younger children is not a good idea," with thousands of children as young as four being bused one to one-and-one-half hours each way.

Martin says the state's educational bureaucrats and officials "totally ig-

nore the research that kids do better in small, community schools."

Thomas Ramey of Challenge WV said politicians are taking notice.

"The public is worn to a frazzle with public policy that destroys their schools and takes education away from their communities," he said.

"Voters could take to heart Sen. Plymale's admonition to 'vote them out,' not just school board members," concluded Martin, recalling the history of Jerry Mezzatesta, who also issued such a challenge.

Bigger is better is good for West Virginians?

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such closures will save money and improve education.

It never has.

So far, the legislature has failed to bite on the bills, as have the voters of West Virginia who turned down a county consolidation amendment several years ago.

THE VALUE OF COMMUNITIES

"All you have to do is go back and look at school consolidation," said Sen. Jesse Guills, R-Greenbrier. "It has divided communities, and it has destroyed communities."

Sen. McCabe, whose livelihood is

derived as a land and business developer, says "I'm terribly frustrated at the fearfulness," as many of the Senate Finance Committee members remained concerned that the metro government bill would benefit urban areas at the expense of rural neighbors.

McCabe says the focus now is only on opportunities to merge metro areas. "I can't imagine any area of the state where a rural area would be forced into a metro government."

However, McCabe has continued to make statements about "globalizing" West Virginia.

Many rural counties feel they have a purposeful right to exist, not the least

to protect themselves from the blight and problems of urban life.

Many believe that family and social stability - family values - centers on maintaining community life with nearby schools, churches and government.

Peaceful, pastoral country life that many people value would surely become part of a more urban world, to be taxed and developed as communities continue to have little voice.

The Charleston Daily Mail spoke well for the "bigger is better" cause.

When tiny Wirt County was about to collapse, they said "The county never amounted to much anyway."

But, surely there is value in the small.

\$1 million missing from Beckley Area RESA

More than \$1 million has disappeared from a regional education agency during the past five years and state and federal investigators are investigating what happened to the money.

At least one RESA employee has resigned, according to Mercer County Schools Superintendent Deborah Akers, chairwoman of the agency's advisory board.

"It has been determined that financial irregularities have occurred at RESA 1," said Akers.

McDowell County Superintendent Mark A. Manchin, also a member of

the advisory board, said "It appears some corporations were created, (post office boxes), invoices were generated, and checks were sent to them."

RESA 1, which serves McDowell, Mercer, Monroe, Raleigh, Summers and Wyoming counties, is one of eight regional agencies in West Virginia overseen by the state Department of Education.

While the state school board generally "takes over" county school boards when audit problems surface, it was unclear if they would take-over the RESA.

The RESAs were created to reduce the wasteful bureaucracy of 55 separate county school boards, with 55 administrative staffs, payrolls and purchasing offices.

RESAs supposedly could handle the mundane tasks of keeping schools equipped, but the RESAs have become just another layer in the state's top-heavy educational bureaucracy.

While at one time the RESAs made some sense, with the advent of the Internet and computerized records, it's easy for local administrators to bulk buy and keep track of things.

Challenge fellows question Sen. Plymale's action

Challenge WVs Clay County fellow Marge Bragg has challenged Sen. Robert Plymale for taking it upon himself to block the decision of 93 percent of the House of Delegates that supported counties voting on school consolidations.

"Although the senator feels that in the current system there is sufficient allowance for public input, my experience is otherwise," said Bragg.

In Clay County, while consolidation hearings were being held about school closings," bulldozers were already clearing the land that has already been purchased by the board."

Preston County fellow, Jana Freeman, points out that members of the State Board of Education and School

Building Authority are appointed to their positions and make the decisions on school policy.

Those decisions are largely based on an industrial model of economies of scale, which predicts that the more you produce, the less it will cost.

This model does not translate well to educating school children, says Freeman.

The latest research shows that small community schools provide the best education, especially for low-income students and are cheaper to build, operate and maintain.

States all across the country are downsizing their schools while WV is using the "bigger is better" model.

Local boards of education have their

hands tied when making decisions to close or consolidate schools.

As a result of declining enrollment and consolidation, fewer students are being bussed greater distances at higher costs to WV taxpayers.

Freeman contends the decision of where and how our students are being educated has been taken out of the hands of the voters and dictated by bureaucrats at a state level.

"The promise of greater academic achievement has not materialized as evidenced by our ranking of 39th in the country," she said.

Freeman said "H.B.4040 is a step in the right direction for restoring democracy to the people of WV and preserving our community schools."

The Mezz mess keeps on keeping on

Six Hampshire County school employees have received subpoenas a part of a federal investigation into the school system's finances and a grant solicited by former school board employee and House of Delegates Education Committee Chairman Jerry Mezzatesta.

Most of the employees work at the board office. They have been ordered to testify on March 21 before a federal grand jury in Martinsburg.

The FBI and a special agent with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Inspector General hand-delivered the subpoenas.

"It will be our full intention to cooperate with federal officials," said state schools Superintendent Steve Paine.

The state board just seized control of the Hampshire County system, citing numerous personnel, management and financial problems.

Federal agents have previously interviewed Hampshire County and Department of Education administrators.

They have specifically requested information about a \$75,000 grant that was initially intended for a sheltered workshop in Romney.

Mezzatesta allegedly diverted \$35,000 of the \$75,000 grant to a library and volunteer fire departments in Hampshire County.

He passed out checks to volunteer fire departments during a 2004 Hampshire County Democratic political rally called the "Bean and Cornbread Supper."

Hampshire County schools later returned \$35,000 to the state Department of Education.

Mezzatesta, besides being the chairman of the House Education Committee, worked as a Hampshire school board office administrator. He was fired in April 2005, after he lost re-election.

Hampshire County schools Superintendent David Friend resigned shortly before the state board took over Hampshire schools.

Friend and Mezzatesta were named in a 33-page audit report that outlined Hampshire school problems. Office employees told auditors that Friend and Mezzatesta "threatened, verbally abused and intimidated them," saying they were told to do things that were "highly irregular."

Mezzatesta and his wife pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor charge that they deleted or altered legislative computer records at the state Capitol.

He was widely defended by then state superintendent of schools Dave Stewart.

Mezzatesta's wife said that he dictated a phony letter to the state Ethics Commission.

Challenge WV members will attend Mississippi workshop

Several members of Challenge WV will attend the fifth annual Rural Education Working Group conference in Olive Branch Mississippi, April 21-23.

The group consists of rural activists, educators, parents and students.

The Rural School and Community Trust is sponsoring the meeting, which

they say is a spiritual-revival and policy-strategizing event.

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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