



The Challenge



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Harrison consolidation would create huge elementary school in billion dollar development



Targeted: neighborhood Northview



Targeted: rural Wilsonburg



Targeted: neighborhood Simpson



Targeted: neighborhood Johnson

More Harrison County students are facing being uprooted and bused to consolidated schools, with more than 100 elementary schools in West Virginia facing the same fate.

At least 20 community schools have already been closed and consolidated since 1975, with more pending. Harrison officials are connecting the passage of a \$34 million school bond to the closure and consolidation of at least four elementary schools, following recommendations by their architectural firm.

Voters are being asked to approve the bond which has numerous projects and perks, including the construction of a large elementary school at CharlesPointe, a new \$1 billion master-planned community in Bridgeport.

Opponents describe it as “a wealthy gated-community,” the school site is donated by the developer.

CharlesPointe is touted as an economic development engine with a mix of commercial and housing projects, their ad says “A place where children will get to know each other and families will put down roots for generations to come.”

Clarksburg’s vice mayor Margaret Bailey (pictured), thumping the podium, told board members “We have communities and neighborhoods in Clarksburg, not housing projects and developments,” referring to CharlesPointe.



Bailey recalled the closing of Morgan school in the Stealey section of Clarksburg, once one of the area’s best performing schools, where hundreds of kids came out

of hundreds of houses and walked or rode bikes down the street to the highly-acclaimed school. A parent told the board, The community “has gone down bad” without its school, students are now being bussed.

CharlesPointe is described as the first totally planned community in WV, and is located on 2000 acres off I-79. It is partially being built by Tax Increment Financing, a controversial tax-break system new to West Virginia.

Under the proposal, Johnson and Simpson community schools in Bridgeport, would be closed to create the \$22 million CharlesPointe school serving those 1000 elementary students. The massive project calls for at least 1000 housing units to be built, which could skyrocket the pupil base.

Small schools get targeted

A study by the National Rural Trust found little logic in WV’s targeting of hundreds of community-based schools for closure and consolidation. Members of Harrison County’s board indicated they believe studies that say rural and poor schools are targeted, and that research say-

(See Harrison Consolidation...on page 2)

Harrison Consolidation...continued from page 1

schools are targeted, and that research saying students in small schools do better.

In WV, despite consistent denial, the state's School Building Authority has used "economies of scale" to eliminate community schools which has placed thousands of students as young as four on bus rides of one-and-one-half hours each way.

Also on the proposed Harrison closure-consolidation list is rural Wilsonburg with



CharlesPointe, Harrison's billion dollar master-community project courting consolidated school.

175 students and NorthView with 300 students. NorthView is a well-established Clarksburg community where many students still walk and ride bikes.



Residents of both schools have been outraged by the proposed closures. School superintendent Dr. Carl Friebel (pictured) said

"We found little love," at the hearings.

What's important is not the size of the school, but the teachers in the classroom," he said.

Challenge WV fellow Paul Hemrick said "I'm amazed about the gap between what the board's study says are needs and what the public believes."

Board vice-president Sally Cann said "We have been listening very carefully and have heard what the communities are saying."

Challenge's Hamrick, questioning why efficient, effective community schools in

poor, rural neighborhoods are schools that are always closed, said "It surely must be they lack the political clout to contest policy decisions. They seem to be targets, despite the research, despite the logic."

Parents, appearing at a public hearing at Robert C. Byrd High School, complained about misplaced needs in the proposed bond, saying many wash basins at the new Nutter Fort school don't work. Parents said Lumberport Elementary has only four commodes each for male and female students for a student population of 320 students.

A parent accused the board of "pandering for passage," citing the placement of \$600,000 to \$700,000 on the bond for Astro Turf on a football field.

"We need basic resources, not just beautiful big buildings," said Harrison teacher Karen Renzella.



Retired Norwood teacher Willa Jean Frazier (pictured) said "Small schools bring a closeness to teachers, students and the community. It is here they learn the love of fellowship." Norwood is on the closure list.

"Every community needs a school to hold it together," she concluded.

Challenge fellow Paul Hemrick, speaking at a public hearing in Bridgeport, quoted a Rural trust Policy report on facilities, which in part says "Without quality facilities, supported by thoughtful policies and funding, thousands of children will continue to have their educational destiny determined by geography, rather than their knowledge, talent and skills."

The Harrison board could be re-thinking some of their bricks-and-mortar proposals and consolidation plans.

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Take-over looming with Fayette Schools

Fayette County administrators have six months to shape up or face a take-over by the State Board of Education.

The state board has declared a "state of emergency" in Fayette after a report from the Office of Education Performance Audits reported improper hiring practices, failed leadership and very few gains in test scores.

Lowell Johnson, State Board president, said "We must take swift and immediate action."

The board is sending a team of consultants to help the county with its problems. That group will make recommendations to the county within 60 days.

The Fayette system failed three years in a row to meet federal achievement standards required by NCLB.

The county must improve incremen-

tally toward a 2014 goal of all students performing on grade level.

The audit expressed concerns about relationships among former board members, the superintendent and central office administrators.

The report said some board members, both past and present, are uncertain of their roles in personnel and policy matters. Last July the board decided to hand all hiring decisions to the superintendent and personnel manager.

The state already runs schools in Hampshire, Lincoln, McDowell and Mingo counties, but has recommended that Hampshire and McDowell start working to regain local control.

Middle schools in, middle schools out

While Americans care about the quality of public education, the system often reacts with "brilliant faddishness" with wild policy swings that drag multi-billions of dollars in brick-and-mortar.

A current example, the middle school concept.

Elissa Gootman of the New York Times

reported, middle schools were the rage of the 1960's, "after educators determined that seventh-through-ninth-grade junior high schools were excessively rigid and un-tuned to adolescents' personal development."

In West Virginia, fashions take some time to arrive, so the state was late to jump

on the middle school bandwagon.

It arrived here just in time for experts to declare that middle schools are as impossible as adolescents.

Certainly, the state got on the consolidation bandwagon several years ago and has failed to get off, when most of America is moving in the other direction.

(See *Middle schools...on page 3*)

Middle schools...continued from page 2

Between 1999 and 2004, elementary school students made solid gains in reading and math.

Middle-school students made smaller gains in math and leveled reading.

New York State found that reading

scores drop between the fifth and sixth grade, and keep right on dropping.

In addition, 94 percent of middle schools report more behavioral problems and violence.

Teachers across the country seem to be

at their wit's end and trying to find solutions.

The middle school concept is being placed on the back burner after being widely promoted.

Focus could be changing in closing Kanawha County Schools

Kanawha County officials said they're hoping a new directive from Gov. Joe Manchin will give a boost to some of the county's proposed school building projects, especially plans for new West Side schools.

Manchin told lawmakers in his State of the State address that he would like funding guidelines for the state's School Building Authority to change.

He wants the school authority, which hands out money for construction and renovation of schools throughout the state, to pay as much attention to concerns about student health and safety as it does to economies of scale," which is the authority's way of pushing counties to consolidate schools.

Some local school officials say equal consideration for health and safety could give some county school project proposals a boost in the upcoming year.

Board member Pete Thaw said "Every school on the West Side has a safety problem or a security problem."

Thaw said the Governor's new emphasis on safety and health could give the school system more leverage with the building authority when its time to again seek funds for two new elementary schools on Charleston's West Side.

The board's newest two-school plan would send some students from Chandler and Watts elementary schools to Grandview, Bonham, Piedmont and Shoals elementary schools.

Projected enrollment for the two schools is 321 students at one and 313 students at the other.

Economy of scale involves the number of students and teachers the state deems would make a school run efficiently.

Several of Kanawha's schools do not meet minimum standards under the building authority's economy of scale. For an elementary school, the minimum student enrollment must be 290.

"in other years, economy of scale was the driving force," said newly appointed Mark Manchin, executive director of the building authority and a cousin to the governor.

"The governor is a strong advocate for community schools, and he still wants efficiency," Manchin said. But his first and foremost concern is the health and safety of children. It's, by far, paramount in any decision-making process from now on."

The Governor's proposal would not require legislative action, according to Manchin's spokeswoman, Lara Ramsburg.

"The Governor wanted to make it clear to the SBA to take all of those things into consideration," Ramsburg said. "It's in their

nature to look at what is the financial impact, but they should also take into consideration health and safety grants.

The promise during the past two decades by WV education officials was that school consolidation will mean better schools, sophisticated elective courses, better labs, advanced courses, new buildings wired for the 21st century, links to libraries, on-site health clinics and day care centers.

Educators say they want more funding this year.

A recent education study ranked West Virginia 43rd for a child's chances for success. Neighboring Virginia was first.

Administrators and educators want more money for schools from the legislature, currently in session.

Charles DeLauder, president of the West Virginia Education Association, the state's biggest teachers union, says "West Virginia is 47th in the nation in teacher pay."

DeLauder said every state that borders WV pays their teachers a minimum of \$3,000 more a year, with the problem worse in the eastern panhandle, where teachers are lured by \$10,000 more in neighboring states.

The WVEA is lobbying for a 6 percent increase for teachers and school employees, but the amount of increase being considered is much less.

Administrators are looking at the amount of local share counties are able to

keep. In Eastern Panhandle counties this would be a boon in funding because of high property values.

"That's a partial solution," said Delegate Mary Poling, D-Barbour, who sits on the House Education Committee. "It gives them some options, short of having this magical salary schedule that addresses all their needs.

Schools still need better Internet access and technology specialist to provide training and support to teachers and students, according to Steve Paine, state superintendent of schools.

DeLauder says the funding for public education in 1992-93 was 57 percent of the state budget. Now it's 49 percent. He says that shows a lack of commitment.

DeLauder says teacher pay is \$10,000 below the national average while 92 percent of the state's teachers are recognized as being highly qualified.

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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