



# The Challenge



January 2008

## ONE MORE TIME, A BILL TO STOP LONG BUS RIDES

**S**topping the bloody hammer of school consolidation by limiting long bus rides is once again before the WV legislature, a bill (HB 4406) sponsored by Challenge WV.

Thousands of West Virginia school children ride buses exceeding the state's own guidelines for being on a school bus, but thousands more drastically exceed the guidelines, placing children as young as three and four on rides of one-and-a-half to two hours one way.

"The State Department of Education fudges the numbers and minimizes the

problems," says Challenge WV coordinator Thomas Ramey.

The recommended bus travel time guidelines include 30 minutes for elementary school students, 45 minutes for middle, intermediate and junior high school students and 60 minutes for high school students.

The latest bill would prohibit creation of new bus routes for students in Grades Pre-K through 5 which exceed the elementary limit by more than 15 minutes unless a county board would adopt a motion to request "written permission" from the state Board of Education.

If the county board receives this approval, the bus route "limit" could not exceed 60 minutes.

In terms of the those provisions, the WVBE is required to provide technical assistance to county boards to create bus

routes consistent with recommended time durations.

"Almost every time we've pushed a bill to limit long bus rides, state education officials have told legislators the bill would cost millions of dollars," said Ramey, "In fact, it costs nothing, and is not retroactive."

Under terms of the bill, county boards must submit to the School Building Authority plans to be "consistent with sound education policy and budget constraints."

Additionally the bill would require that county board's must include updated estimates of associated bus transportation costs when projects include the closure, consolidation or construction of a school.

After July 1, 2008 the SBA would be prohibited from approving a county board project that includes closure, consolida-

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Challenge's Thomas Ramey was honored last year in Atlanta by the Bert and Mary Meyer Foundation for his dedication and commitment to social justice. Ramey was among a group of activists recognized from twelve southern states, stretching from Mississippi to West Virginia.

"The generosity of you sacrifices and leadership has made a difference in the quality of life in your community and throughout the rural areas of the south," said philanthropist Barbara Meyer.

Ramey was lauded as one of the outstanding young people in the

south by Bert and Mary Meyer Foundation executive director Hubert Sapp, recognizing him for his passionate work and for his ability as an organizer.

"I have learned that the poorest communities in WV and the US have the least amount of resources to create opportunity and improve the quality of life," Ramey said, upon receiving the recognition.

"Life begins and ends in ones community," he said, "Communities are worth fighting for in a world that is merging, centralizing, consolidating and globalizing."

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## BUS RIDE...

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tion or construction of facilities which exceed state Board of Education's guidelines more than 15 minutes unless the WVBE has given written permission.

### SPEAKING OUT

There are ten House sponsors, including lead sponsor Del. Joe DeLong, D-Hancock, House majority leader.

Del. Stan Shaver (D-Preston), another of the bill sponsors says the intent of the proposed legislation is to "keep our small local schools within a reasonable time-frame distance."

Shaver said he has always had concerns about the length of bus rides, but became more involved after attending a Challenge conference last year.

"I was on a panel, with Delegate DeLong and others, during that confer-

ence," said Shaver. "It became even clearer to me that long bus rides are counterproductive in our school systems. Delegate DeLong pledged at that conference that he would introduce legislation and I am happy to join him in co-sponsoring it."

"The days of full-scale consolidation are about over," Shaver said. "And it couldn't come too soon," indicating that thousands of WV children will remain on long, expensive bus rides.

WV has been on the consolidation bandwagon for years, when most of America has returned to community-based schools.

Lorelei Scarbro, a Raleigh County Challenge WV fellow, echoed Shaver's sentiments, saying "We're trying to protect any child in West Virginia from being placed on long, extreme bus rides."

"The bill basically forces local school systems to consider the length of bus runs

when they consider consolidation in the future," said Jana Freeman, a Challenge WV fellow from Preston County.

Several delegates, particularly Del. Woody Ireland, R-Ritchie, said the real issue in long bus rides was not time but "distance" and that Challenge WV should concentrate on the latter.

Ireland said he often is passed by school buses trying to get students to school.

Del. Gerald Crosier, D-Monroe, brought up the same issue, saying "You are going to make the bus drivers speed it up."

Ramey said such "scrambled observations" have killed busing bills several times before, none having passed in both houses.

The bill has support of the Senate and Governor Manchin, but such support has risen before.

Ramey said the bill doesn't really solve the long bus ride problem, but it is a good "first step."

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## RAMEY IS A PASSIONATE STAND-UP LEADER FOR WV COMMUNITIES

Thomas Ramey, a well-know social justice activist and member of Challenge WV, has taken the coordinator reigns of the statewide organization.

Long-time leader Linda Martin retired in December 2007.

Ramey, the youngest person ever elected to a board of education in WV, developed a passion about community-based education when he was only 14, a student at Harts High School in Lincoln County.

"My local school was chosen for closure by the Lincoln BOE, and I went to a board meeting to see what it was about," he said.

Ramey helped organize his fellow students against the closure, a battle which was eventually lost with Harts area children placed on long bus rides with an option to attend Chapmanville High School in adjacent Logan County.

Ramey established an appropriate argument to give at the board meetings, organized protests and lobbied the legislature through letters and phone calls.

"I learned how to mobilize," he said, a skill he later used as an organizer for Challenge WV.

### RAISED WITH GRASS-ROOTS PASSION

Ramey says he was raised in a home that heavily supported and understood the union movement in our country.

"My father worked as a coal miner, and he was a member of the UMWA. At different times, my father and his fellow workers had to exercise the right of striking."

"During those strikes I learned the importance of standing up for what you believe ... few will stand up for you."

"I knew at the time that the consolidation of my school would result in my friends and I being bussed up to two hours one-way," Ramey said, "I could not fathom the idea of losing our sense of place."

Ramey said the initial efforts to save his community school went well, but when the State Board of Education took over the Lincoln system, the state reversed the decision over the will of Lincoln County residents."

While a high school senior, Ramey joined Challenge WV.

### FEW REWARDS WITH CONSOLIDATION

"Challenge WV brought together West Virginians from every corner of the state that understood the school closure issue was a powerful movement with local school boards being held hostage by the state's School Building Authority," he said.

Ramey was a member of the CEFPP planning process in Lincoln County, and treasurer of Equal Educational Opportunities (EEO) the primary group that sued the state Board of Education to save Lincoln County schools. He was elected to the school board in 2006.

Ramey said with his involvement in Challenge WV he quickly learned the issue of school consolidation was big, a purposeful disenfranchisement of a whole segment of our society, including elected school board members.

"It was a ruthless practice of bulldozing down the wishes of communities all across our state," he said.

Ramey said consolidation has reaped little or no benefits for WV education, we

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## LEADER...

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still have lower test scores, high drop-out rates and skyrocketing expenses.

"They use to say it would save taxpayers money, a hollow promise," he said, "and all those extra classes rarely materialized."

After several years, my passion for

people of place and community life and education has increased, in a world where we're told bigger is better."

"Linda Martin has always said the basis of life begins where we're planted on the earth, a strange concept when the world is being driven by corporate movements like centralization, merging, consolidating and globalization," Ramey said.

Ramey's social justice work was recently recognized by the Southern Partner's Fund and the Bert and Mary Meyer Foundation.

Ramey concluded that Challenge WV is always looking for people of place around the state who would like to "stand up for communities," and help with the grassroots movement.

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## STATE BOARD HEARS RADICAL NEW EDUCATION CONCEPT

West Virginia State Board of Education members heatedly engaged in a discussion last week over what many consider a radical idea to change America's public education system, according to a report in the Charleston Gazette.

The proposal would essentially eliminate the need for local boards of education.

Marc Tucker, president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, proposed a school system where most 17 and 18-year-olds bypass their final two years of high school and teachers earn up to \$110,000 a year.

Local school boards would yield most control to third-party contracts, their schools and a powerful statewide Ministry of Education.

Challenge WV coordinator Thomas Ramey said "The 'ministry' concept has a bad ring, when we support community-based education in a constitutional democracy."

Ramey said taking education away "from

parents, the electorate and communities by consolidating, centralizing and globalizing is a destructive path."

Tucker's organization NCEE, relies on government funds and private donations to research America's role in a globalized economy.

The plan is called "Tough Choices or Tough Times."

Tucker said American workers must be resigned to lower wages and longer work hours if they don't better compete with foreign nations.

Board members weren't impressed, according to Davin White, Gazette reporter.

"I believe he is asking for a very radical change in the way schools are run," said board member Lowell Johnson.

Johnson wanted to get an opinion from the state attorney general's office on whether the state school board was even allowed to make the changes Tucker proposed.

Board President Delores Cook and

members Jenny Phillips and Burma Hatfield agreed with Johnson, saying the state board might not have the authority to consider less power for county school boards and other drastic changes.

Board members Priscilla Haden and Barbara Fish said they believed the board has the constitutional authority to take on the issue. Fish said she would like more information.

A vote on whether to seek an attorney general's opinion tied 4-4, but the issue was nullified because it did not appear on the board's agenda.

Johnson questioned the enthusiasm for Tucker's plan outside West Virginia, saying "I thought we were revolutionizing the schools through the 21st Century Partnership," referring to the state's plans for more rigorous coursework in schools.

State Superintendent of Schools Steve Paine has moved forward with globalizing education in the Mountain State as a way for students to compete with foreign markets.

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## STATE WANTS ONE BLUEPRINT FOR SCHOOLS, FACING RISING COSTS

Officials with the state School Building Authority (SBA) want to encourage efficiency in design, so the state can build more schools and stretch tax dollars.

The costs to build schools in West Virginia goes up each year.

It would standardize the cost and type of materials used to build schools, including the design, says the SBA.

Some architects don't want to stamp out identical schools, known as prototypes. They say it would reduce their professional role,

lead to design problems and legal issues.

President of the SBA, Mark Manchin expects statewide guidelines in June.

Each county would have to adhere to the guidelines, even floors, walls and roofs would have to meet certain standards.

Needs usually differ from county to county, said Rod Watkins, vice president of ZMM Architects and Engineers in Charleston.

Conflict has risen regarding architectural costs and contracts, with the former State Superintendent of Schools retiring and go-

ing to work with one of the firms to which contracts were given.

Local school boards and SBA staff would "determine if the proposed school design may be prototyped from other school designs immediately following SBA approval of a new school project."

Large contractors favor more single-design schools. An elementary or middle school set for mass production would be cheaper and easier to build and contractors would know what they bid on.

# 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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