



The

Challenge

July 2000



State takes over Lincoln County schools

The State Board of Education took control of Lincoln County Schools in June, replacing Super-

intendent Peggy Adkins and stripping the local board of its fiscal and decision-making powers.

The takeover is the third time since 1992 that the state has seized control of a county school system.

“It is always difficult to make this decision to intervene in the operation of a school system,” State Board President Cleo P. Matthews said. “But we believe this is necessary to bring high standards and quality education to the Lincoln County system.”

In November 1999, the West Virginia Board declared a state of emergency in Lincoln County after the Office of Education Performance Audits cited more than 200 instances of noncompliance with state standards. The auditors uncovered illegal hiring and accounting practices, poor student achievement, limited curriculum and shoddy facilities.

When the auditors followed up with a visit in May, they found many of the same problems and some new ones.

“We found a lot of issues with personnel selection, assessment and use of interim positions – what appeared subversion of the personnel laws of the state,” Kenna Seal, the executive director of the

Endangered School



Aurora School in Preston County opened in 1927 and for 50 years served students in grades one through 12. In 1977 the school’s tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders were sent to high school in Terra Alta; in 1990 they moved to Preston County High School. In May 1993, Aurora School burned to the ground. During the summer, members of the community reclaimed the burned-out site in an effort that saved the county Board of Education between \$30,000 and \$40,000. Community members sold scrap metal and turned the money over to the Board. When the new school was constructed on the ball field, community members purchased a piece of land for a new ball field and deeded it to the Board of Education. They graded and seeded the field and purchased and installed fencing. They bought bleachers for the gym so school officials could buy higher quality materials for classrooms. Altogether the Aurora community put more than \$100,000 into the new school, which was to be rebuilt as a K-8 school. When Gov. Caperton and state education officials dedicated the school, which opened in January 1996, county officials promised the return of seventh and eighth graders, who had been sent to Terra Alta. That never happened. Aurora remains a K-6 school. The school designed for 325 students has a population of less than 160. Community members, who still want seventh and eighth graders to attend the school, are afraid their sixth graders will be removed and then attendance won’t be high enough to justify keeping the school open. Aurora has the highest attendance rate and the highest students test scores in Preston County.

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Challenge West Virginia

The Challenge is published 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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Education Secretary calls for small schools

Too many high schools are too big, U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley told members of the Southern Regional Education Board, who met June 20 at The Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs.

"Let's reinvent high school," Riley said. "Downsizing may be a bad idea in the corporate world, but it's a good idea in the education world because smaller school environments are more conducive to learning."

Riley said President Clinton is asking Congress for \$120 million to help 700 high schools restructure themselves into schools within schools, career academies and magnet schools, each with no more than 600 students.

The Southern Regional Education Board, made up of educators and political leaders from 16 southern states met to review the goals for education it set in 1988 to be implemented by the year 2000.

Riley said improvements have been made in preparing children for first grade and students for college.

However, he said teacher preparation is one of the things that isn't being done better.

Riley, a former governor of South Carolina also called for higher expectations for all students.

"We must end what I call the one-third problem," he said. "Traditionally American schools have put students into one of three categories. One-third of all students were identified as smart and we worked hard to educate them. Another third were identified as pretty much hopeless and we ignored them. And the final third were put in the middle, and we allowed them to drift through school without really challenging them."

"That got us through the 20th Century, but it won't 'cut it' in the 21st. We must have high expectations and standards for all three-thirds of our students if we're going to compete in the global economy."

He also recommended:

- Universally available preschool for all four-year-olds
- New and innovative ways to encourage more parental involvement
- Reducing class sizes in the early grades to no more than 18 children per class
- A renewed focus on reading
- Making the arts part of every child's basic education
- Better pay for teachers
- Improving leadership skills for principals and administrators
- Quality after-school, summer school and preschool programs

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This 'n that from around the state

• **The good news:** Student test scores rose significantly in Lincoln County Schools this past school year. A majority of students at every school scored above the 50th percentile for the first time since the state mandated the Stanford Nine Achievement Test in 1997. **The bad news:** The county didn't count the scores of 23 percent of its students. At Harts High School, 33 percent of student scores weren't counted. McDowell County didn't count 25 percent of its test takers. Statewide, about eleven percent of student scores aren't counted, according to *The Charleston Gazette*.

• **More good news:** In June Harrison County residents learned that tiny Harden Elementary School in Salem had been named a school of excellence. **More bad news:** The school is on the proposed list to be closed and consolidated. Apparently, the 216-student school meets or exceeds all goals and standards except economies of scale.

• A statewide survey by Associated Press revealed that school boards around the state fired 482 teachers and 330 service personnel at the end of the 1999-2000 school year. Judy Hale, president of the West Virginia Federation of Teachers, said teachers with as much as 18 years' experience have lost their jobs.

• Putnam County officials are scrambling to locate portable classrooms for next year to house students who attend a middle school which was completely destroyed by fire in May. Unlike many West Virginia counties, Putnam is experiencing an enrollment increase.

• West Virginians spent \$54.35 of every \$1,000 of personal income for education in 1997, according to a Census report cited by the Associated Press. The state trails only Alaska, Wyoming and Vermont, the Census report stated. The report ranks West Virginia 17th in the amount it spends per pupil, both in total spending and instructional spending. David Haney, executive director of the West Virginia Education Association, said he was wary of the figures, because if they include the amount the state pays on the Teachers Retirement System debt, it's not a good measure of instructional spending.

• Kanawha County officials are examining a policy that allows 38 warehouse workers to drive county vans and



trucks from their homes to job sites and back every day, according to *The Charleston Gazette*. Maintenance director Jeff Allred said allowing workers to drive the trucks home saves the school system as much as \$99,700 a year. Board of Education member Pete Thaw said he believes the formula used to figure the savings is flawed. Allred, who drives a school-owned vehicle, racked up more mileage driving to and from his home than he did while on the

job, *The Gazette* reported.

• Maintenance workers in Kanawha County were paid more than \$360,000 in overtime this past year and \$483,000 the previous year, according to a report in *The Charleston Gazette*. Three warehouse workers – a painter, welder and technician – made at least \$52,000, more than classroom teachers, more than all but a handful of elementary principals, more than most assistant high school principals and more than their supervisors at the warehouse, *The Gazette* said.

• The Kanawha County Board of Education in June voted to close four elementary schools – Ford, Roxalana, Tyler and Mound. The students will move into a new Dunbar Primary Center for 410 students in grades kindergarten through two, and into Dunbar Intermediate Center for 373 third through fifth graders. The schools are to be completed by August 2001.

• Sharon Roon of Charleston wrote in a June 24 letter to the editor of *The Gazette*: “Does anyone have all the figures on what school consolidation is really costing? How much more are we paying to bus our children long miles at ridiculous hours to modern schools? How much do the new inefficient heating/cooling systems that run constantly and prohibit the opening of windows, even on those most beautiful days, cost us? How has the health of our children and school staff suffered due to this energy system that breeds mold, requires jackets be worn in class all year long and produces enough constant noise pollution to dangerously raise stress levels? What is the cost to parents who now must drive farther to visit their children’s schools? What does the loss of parent involvement really cost? How can we calculate the losses of children and parents who are not fortunate enough to have vehicles so now much forfeit parent/teacher collaboration, as well as extra curricular activities?”



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Fuel crunch feared

If gas prices stay as high as they are, fuel costs to transport students to public schools will increase 56 percent next year, an official with the state Department of Education told a reporter for *The Charleston Gazette*.

And that figure could increase if prices keep going up, according to Wayne Clutter, director of school transportation and facilities.

Clutter said if current gasoline and diesel fuel prices remain where they are now, counties would be paying \$3 to \$4 million more next school year. "That's phenomenal," he told *The Gazette*. "Our school system could face some real bad problems."

Counties across West Virginia operate about 3,500 school buses that travel 41 million miles during the school year. Most run on diesel fuel because they get nine to 11 miles to the gallon, compared with three to four miles to the gallon for those with gasoline engines.

During the school year just completed, \$4.05 million was spent on diesel fuel and \$1.77 million on gasoline, for a total of \$5.8 million. This compares with \$3.59 million the year before.

A 56 percent increase in diesel fuel costs alone would add \$2 million to the transportation budget, pushing the diesel cost over \$6 million.

Lincoln Schools . . .

Audits Office told *Education Week*.

In a 179-page report, state auditors reported that students at one elementary school spent a week of class time practicing for a talent show. They found that high school teachers don't give homework, that honors courses and advanced placement classes are limited and inconsistent, that student achievement is low and testing practices questionable.

The Board voted to grant State Superintendent David Stewart all of the power necessary to correct all deficiencies in Lincoln County Schools. Board members reassigned Adkins as principal of Harts High school and named Nicholas County Superintendent Bill Grizzell as Lincoln County superintendent through June 30, 2004. Grizzell's actions will be subject to the approval of Stewart.

Last year Lincoln County ranked 54th out of West Virginia's 55 counties in student achievement scores. Though scores were higher this year, 23 percent of student scores weren't counted. Lincoln's per-capita income is the fourth lowest in the state and one of the 100 lowest in the nation.

The state took control of Logan County schools in 1992 and Mingo County schools in 1998.