



The Challenge



July 2006

Will West Virginia's URGE TO MERGE affect local school systems?

This issue of Challenge focuses on the powerful forces that face the future of community-based education.

The urge to merge and consolidate counties and community government is now a greater possibility, following legislation passed this year by the WV legislature.

Government consolidation is constitutionally linked to local school systems, and what would happen when counties are dissolved or merged needs legal clarification.

On the heels of the city of Fairmont and Marion County looking at government consolidation, Senator Brooks McCabe, the state's consolidation guru, says he would like to see Kanawha, Cabell and Putnam consolidated by 2010.

Like the dynamic movement that is changing the the nation's economy, McCabe says he would like to "globalize WV," eliminate multiple county governments, which also means eliminating local school boards.

Most at risk are rural counties, or the de-constructing of community control over government and education.

Bigger is better and more efficient we're told, with little evidence to prove it.

Advantage Valley wants local chambers of commerce, businesses and governments to work together to help West Virginia become a more powerful economic force by the 2010 census.

Finding bogeymen?

Mark Dempsey, vice-president and director of Advantage Valley, says "If there are any bogeymen in this bill (consolidation), I can't find them. It doesn't make anybody do anything they don't want to do."

No bogeymen?

Sounds like the WV Department of Education spinning that school consolidation is "strictly a local issue decided by a local school board," when in fact school boards have been held

hostage by the powerful School Building Authority to consolidate.

Consider the greater ramifications of No Child Left Behind.

Former gubernatorial candidate Lloyd Jackson, one of the architects of school consolidation, when asked about his position on consolidation would only say "It's a local issue."

Communities have become outraged, school boards taken over, and court cases filed to overrule public will.

There are blocks that make government consolidation difficult, but it is a foot-in-the-door proposition.

McCabe said "We need to look good in the national census."

"We don't set the bar high enough (in West Virginia)," he said. "It [consolidation] will empower us. ... Its about changing our self-image," or bigger is better.

"Metro government would be the ultimate in regional cooperation," Dempsey concluded.

Educators excel at explaining results

It is a complicated world for those who try to understand reports on the success of education.

States have a huge stake in the scores on their exams.

Now, the federal government has of-

ficially approved WVs standardized test that children in grades 3 through 8 and grade 10 take across the state every year.

The U.S. Department of Education has granted "full approval" to the entire system West Virginia has

established to meet the No Child Left Behind Act.

The legislation requires every state to develop a program to monitor how well districts are teaching children.

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Visit Challenge West Virginia at www.challengewv.org

Educators excel at explaining results continued from page 1

A recent study by the Education Trust found that 71 percent of West Virginia eighth-graders were proficient or better in math according to the state's standardized test. Meanwhile, only 18 percent were considered proficient in math on a rigorous federal test.

Among fourth-graders, 74 percent were considered proficient or better in math on the state test. That's compared

to 25 percent by the federal guidelines.

Education officials in West Virginia say comparing state and federal scores side by side doesn't take all factors into account. They say the Education Trust study is skewed.

Jan Barth, executive director of student assessment for the state Department of Education says "They're not

looking at everything. You can't just compare the numbers."

"Our content standards and our test has been approved by the federal government," said Liza Cordeiro, state Department of Education spokesperson. "That cannot be ignored."

The Trust said it's up to each state to evaluate such information.

O'Cull discusses power, control and direction of WV education

(Continued from The Challenge, June 1 issue)

Given the state's penchant for Charleston-directed policymaking; given the "heritage" of county boards as illustrated by Ambler and Summers; given the nature of West Virginia's bent toward centralized education control in terms of the state Constitution, especially as buffered by strong legislative control over public schools and some would argue compliant courts, isn't the next "step" consolidation of school districts much as the state has seen consolidation of schools?

No, at least for now. The reason: Legislators derive too much power and autonomy from counties as counties per se, including the contiguous school boards, to consolidate school districts.

What may occur, however, is the consolidation of county board services. Is this a step toward county board consolidation? Possibly.

Yet, proponents argue the approach may be all that "saves" some counties in that the state School Aid Formula — actually the engine that has driven school consolidation — appropriates funds based on student enrollment.

As enrollment declines (or continues to decline), school boards receive less funds from the state, a series of events often culminating in school closures, downsizing of the school workforce and the like.

The only approach the Legislature, given this set of circumstances, can take is to (a) "prop" up smaller coun-

ties by inflating the number of students so these counties, given the artificiality, can draw more SAF dollars than they would or should or (b) require county boards to share some services likely through a RESA or other model.

As the Legislature contemplates these approaches — the former now is law — county boards could be in jeopardy of losing identity while gaining more services. Loss of identity can lead to a greater ease in nudging or evoking more centralized school services and, one could argue, eventually consolidation of school boards.

For the moment, let me take a different approach: County boards are most vibrant when they can and do provide the best (thorough and efficient) education system to their students.

Sadly, some county boards, due to loss of student populations, border on not being able to complete this mission — at least efficiently and, thus, effectively.

A call for vigilance

The greatest danger to county boards is not regionalization per se but constraining laws, rules and regulations which force counties into boxes not of their making — either to satisfy the aims of funders (legislators) or the will of constitutional bodies such as the WVBE or, for your purposes, the SBA.

Citizens who are truly interested in preserving local school boards will work diligently to change the state School Aid Formula which I believe

indirectly has contributed to so many school closures.

Legislators, to their credit, are studying the SAF.

Some of the discussions have been promising. In fact, under terms of a law contemplated this year, county boards would have been able to retain more of their local tax share. In fact, there's legislative talk of even providing county boards more leeway in terms of fiscal flexibility.

Given emergence of an on-going SAF study, the current RESA study and legislative review of school funding — not to mention a special legislative session for "taxes" contemplated for November — citizens should weigh in on these issues.

One means of advocacy would be to WVBE members with your thoughts on regionalized services or RESAs. State Board members are monolithic in their approach to these agencies.

Also, persons interested in preserving local control should express concerns to legislators. When my association enters into this type of conversation we rightly are accused of bias.

You, as an organization having fought to preserve local schools, can and should take a lead here. Indeed, we support your efforts. Since the mid-1980s WVSBA has taken positions opposing consolidation of school districts.

It's easy to over-read any situation. In my best judgment, county boards

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O’Cull discusses...continued from page 2 face greater loss of viability from statutory constraints, including the SAF, then from efforts to consolidate or eliminate boards.

All those who support local governance, however, must be vigilant, especially in terms of encroachment

including that in the name of efficiency.

I learned a valuable lesson about that very point this session when I, on behalf of my association, touted a bill to establish sharing of administrative services between and among county boards.

The measure failed. Why? A legislator, admittedly several years my senior, wanted to know why I was promoting greater regionalization of services. I now think he may have been on to something.

Indeed, let us be vigilant for county boards and local control of schools.

The future of citizen controlled public education at stake

Linda Martin, coordinator for Challenge WV, says most West Virginians are aware of the powerful movement to de-construct community schools, consolidate and create long bus rides.

The state of West Virginia has spent 15 years experimenting with efforts to initiate educational policy and infrastructure changes through redistricting and has spent over \$1,000,000,000.00 (that’s correct—over one billion dollars) in their efforts at consolidation that has resulted in the closure of more than 300 schools. More are on the block.

The promise: save money, efficiency, better curriculum and better results. WV educators have ignored the research and politicians have bought the promise.

Martin maintains the consolidation movement will have a lasting detrimental impact beyond the social life of our rural communities, student academic performance and overall safety and stability of children.

The movement will likely de-construct citizen control of public education.

“Fewer citizens are aware that state bureaucrats (including the federal No Child Left Behind act) have been given more control of public education by the WV legislature, that control has been taken away from local school boards and the citizens who elect them,” she said, “The future of public education is certainly at stake.”

Martin says “Even fewer citizens are aware that the next attack on community schools is the blurring of county lines, which will certainly

wrestle control from poor, under-populated rural counties,” likely the elimination of local school boards, much like the elimination of county governments.

In many parts of the state, students are encouraged to go to a school of “choice,” which is often in another county, at times in another state. It is a policy widely supported by many parents and has been the object of a political sell nationwide.

Challenge WV fellow Thomas Ramey and Lincoln County school board member says “Most supporters of choice have not taken the time to consider the end result.”

Ramey says Lincoln County may be the first case where the shifting of a large number of students to a neigh-

boring county could bankrupt their school system.

Martin contends WV citizens have been reaching a boiling point, trying to maintain community-based education, citing a bill overwhelmingly passed by the House of Delegates in the last session, but then stalled in the senate’s education committee.

The bill called for a local vote before school consolidations could move ahead.

“It was a grass roots measure. The delegates got the message from their constituents,” Martin said, “And those who shot it down had better pay attention.”

“State educators wanting more control will be challenged,” she concluded.

Thank You!
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If you enjoy receiving The Challenge you may send

donations to: Linda Martin

801 Gordon Drive

Charleston, WV 25303-2811

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

A program of Covenant House of Charleston, WV
600 Shrewsbury Street
Charleston, WV 25301-1211

**Non-profit
Organization
US Postage Paid
Permit No. 2673
Charleston, WV 25301**

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Challenge West Virginia County Contacts

Boone County
Danielle Johnston
(304) 369-2306
daniellenjohnston@yahoo.com

Braxton County
Misty Houghton
(304) 765-7927

Calhoun County
Dianne Weaver
(304) 354-6183
dianne@hurherald.com

Clay County
Marge Bragg
(304) 286-2655
ijram98@hotmail.com

Fayette County
Carolyn Arritt
(304) 484-7919
Carritt-McCune@citynet.net

Greenbrier County
Carla Persinger
(304) 392-9842
cpersinger@frontier.net

Hancock County
Brian Handley
304-387-1709
brianhandley@msn.com

Harrison County
Paul Hamrick
(304) 622-5664
ChubnWV@aol.com

Jefferson County
Paul Burke
(304) 876-2227
NumbersInstitute@juno.com

Kanawha County
Monica Prater
(304) 548-7301
missmonicastarr@aol.com

Lincoln County
Thomas Ramey
(304) 855-3930
tprameyww@hotmail.com

Logan County
Craig Manns
(304) 855-4442
cmwv2001@yahoo.com

Marshall County
Frank Longwell
(304) 232-1093

Mason County
Darrell Hagley
(304) 743-9451
DEHagley@WMConnect.com

McDowell County
Marsha Timpson
(304) 875-3418
marshatimpson@hotmail.com

Mineral County
Brenda Stonebraker
(304) 446-5429
bstonebraker@hotmail.com

Mingo County
Mike Carter
(304) 426-4226
hieck@hotmail.com

Monongalia County
Jon Frist
(304) 292-9599
jon.frist@us.army.mil

Morgan County
Andy Andryshak
(304) 947-5664
andy.peace@frontiernet.net

Nicholas County
Robin Kelly
(304) 649-5932
RocknBirdy@hotmail.com

Ohio County
Jim Mullooly
(304) 573-0699
jfm@1st.net

Preston County
Jana Freeman
(304) 735-3411
Janaf11@hotmail.com

Putnam County
Tim McCoy
(304) 586-9823
timothy.mccoy@pb.com

Raleigh County
Lorelei Scarbro
(304) 854-1016
candlelight29@aol.com

Ritchie County
Patty Deak
(304) 869-3462
pdeak@dot.state.wv.us

Roane County
Eric Rogers
(304) 655-7134
rpeskid98@yahoo.com

Webster County
Cindy Miller
(304) 493-6369
KCACMiller@juno.com

**Challenge WV
Coordinator**
Linda Martin
(304) 744-5916
LBM94@aol.com

Send comments or articles for
"The Challenge"
Contact Editor Bob Weaver
HC 65, Box 120
Mt. Zion WV 26151
email dianne@hurherald.com
fax 304-354-6183