



# The Challenge



July 2007



**THE MOUNTAINS DOWN** - Julia Bonds, award-winning environmentalist and leader of Coal River Mountain Watch, said the coal industry has ignored the impact of the cultural, educational, social, spiritual, and health problems of WV communities (Photo by Vivian Stockman)



**CHALLENGING COMMON SENSE** - Challenge WV fellows, Thomas Ramey and Lorelei Scarbro with Robert Kennedy, Jr., (center) advocating for the protection of community schools



Massey's giant coal silo looms over Marsh Fork Elementary School, with a 2.8 billion gallon sludge pond lurking on the mountain above

## Kennedy says education flounders in the belly of the beast

Environmental lawyer Robert F. Kennedy Jr. flew over the West Virginia coalfields in July to get a better view of mountaintop mining. He said it is "a sight that would sicken most Americans."

After visiting Marsh Fork Elementary School, he said it is an example of crimes against nature and crimes against children. He railed against corporate media for failing to report the traumatic issues directly affecting the lives of West Virginians.

Standing ominously over the Raleigh elementary school is a Massey Coal silo and a short distance up the mountain looms a 2.8 billion gallon sludge impoundment that shows leakage.

Despite the acclaimed "Billion dollar coalfield," southern West Virginia remains one of America's most impoverished regions, a lack of basic infrastructure, some of the worst school buildings and poorest test scores, with a few thousand coal jobs left, employment has been diminished

by mountaintop removal.

Challenge WV fellows Lorelei Scarbro, who lives in the community, and Thomas Ramey, met Kennedy while visiting the Massey Coal operation and Marsh Fork Elementary School.

Scarbro said "Realizing corporations don't have a conscience, how can any person who has one, support what has happened at Marsh Fork."

"And they're wanting to build a second silo beside the school," she said.

Kennedy was encountered by several Marsh Fork woman, supporters of the school and wives of Massey coal miners. They told Kennedy there is no problem with the giant silo, emitting dust and waste, nor are they concerned about the sludge impoundment.

They repeated, "It's about jobs and feeding our family," indicating the problem is worsened by outsiders.

Kennedy spent time on the creek bank near the school, a stream which tenuously sustains life.

He told a nearby gathering that Massey Coal has received tens of thousands of citations and billions in fines - crimes against nature and the people of West Virginia.

Challenge fellow Scarbro asked "How can anyone believe this is for the sake of the children?," a slogan promoted by Massey's CEO Don Blankenship.

Kennedy says that blowing up mountains and burying streams is taking precious resources that rightly belong to the public and to future generations, including the education and health of children.

Julia Bonds, award-winning environmentalist and leader of Coal River Mountain Watch, said the coal industry has ignored the impact of the cultural, educational, social, spiritual, and health problems of WV communities.

Bonds is the sister, daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter of coal miners.

Challenge fellow Ramey said

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"There appears to be greedy threads of corruption linked to school consolidation in West Virginia," citing recent deals with coal corporations, including land acquisition and envi-

ronmental breaks in the Mingo County school consolidation battle.

"How can putting children on long bus rides across tortuous mountains be about good education?," Ramey

asked.

"When the dust settles, it will be mostly about the money," he concluded.

# Harrison school bond goes down in smoke

Harrison County's \$42 million school bond failed with 4,454 voting against and 2,874 voting in favor.

"There were so many questions about maintaining the buildings that got zero dollars in the bond, while football fields were getting \$3 million worth of field turf," said Challenge fellow Paul Hamrick, the issue being cloudy to the public by polling time.

Initially the bond proposal was linked to several community school closures.

A new school at CharlesPointe, a partially gated billion dollar business and residential community, was never accepted and a second committee, called the "Committee for a

Better Bond" came out against it.

The committee placed a newspaper ad saying the CharlesPointe project would divide Bridgeport into the haves and have nots.

The Harrison County Taxpayer Coalition is still fired-up about proposed lease-purchase agreements for financing by the school board without voter approval.

Hamrick says major questions remain about Tax Increment Financing, which cost shifts the tax burden while giving breaks to developers.

"It is mired in the issue of schools being used as an agent for economic development," he said, which has support by state govern-

ment.

CharlesPointe developers originally said they were going to "donate" land for a new school in their project, but then the Harrison County Commission said it was going to purchase the 40-acre plot for \$32,000 an acre, but still give long term breaks to the developer.

Hamrick said opponents of TIF say the loss of general taxpayer money eventually means other areas of the community would likely be neglected.

Still, TIF is being used in several WV counties for community projects, indicating it is a practical financing device to move economic development ahead.



## Gilmer school board and superintendent going in different directions over resolving Normantown mold problem, foot-dragging linked to closure and consolidation

# Tempers flare over Normantown school problem



Misty Pritt

Community leader and Challenge WV fellow Misty Pritt told a Normantown Elementary parents group that Gilmer superintendent Ed Toman is "going in a different direction than

school board members."

Tempers are flaring after com-

munity school supporters recognized the system had failed to correct a mold problem that was discovered last September. The foot-dragging, they say, has allowed superintendent Toman to attempt to send some of the students from the 108-pupil school to Glenville.

Board member Phyllis Starkey said "It is all about the state closing Normantown and other county schools, using their economies of scale model."

Challenge's Pritt said "We thought the problem was resolved after the board twice voted 5-0 to

move forward with a plan to take care of the mold and get our kids back in the classroom when school opens."

During a community meeting of parents and supporters at the school, citizens were upset that Toman, after "a productive meeting," then asked the board to sign-off on a letter seeking approval to transport Normantown students in grades 4 through 6 to Glenville for the next two years, "until acceptable portable classrooms become available."

The board declined to approve the letter.

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Paul Hamrick

Challenge WV Fellow, Paul Hamrick of Clarksburg, urged parents to fight for their community school. "They have an important place in the

education of our children, and all the research says small schools do better," he said.

"You need to come together with a community voice," Hamrick urged.

Challenge WV Fellow Thomas Ramey said "It appears that Toman is insubordinate to the school board's decisions," following a year of purposeful indecision.

Toman told the community group that he had been making several efforts to take care of the mold problem, but Pritt says "Here we are in a crisis as school is about to begin."

Four of Gilmer's school board members were not aware of an item on the WV School Board's agenda regarding the Normantown school.

Challenge's Ramey said "The state has used a bloody hammer on counties they have taken-over, but then say local board's make the decisions about consolidation. In fact, school board's are held hostage to School Building Authority money."

Board member Starkey said, Gilmer County schools have good test scores, remaining fiscally responsible. "It's all about closing



Phyllis Starkey

community schools and consolidation," she said.

"Toman keeps saying Sand Fork is structurally unsound, which is not true, according

to the engineering reports," Starkey said, one of three Gilmer schools targeted by the state's economies of scale formula supporting consolidation.

Mark Manchin, the director of the state's School Building Authority came to Normantown to evaluate the situation.

Special school board meetings have been scheduled to resolve the issue.



**Country music singer Kathy Mattea and Challenge WV fellow Thomas Ramey discuss the negative impact of coal on the education of WV's children. Mattea said mountaintop removal is "devastating."**

**The West Virginia native, whose grandfathers were coal miners, toured several mountaintop removal mining sites, by air and by land. "I was overwhelmed by the extent," of the operations, she said.**

## The heat is on for Randolph's Valley Head School

State superintendent of schools Steve Paine has a warning for the Randolph County Board of Education, according to the Elkins Inter-Mountain.

Respond with a plan for addressing fire safety issues or Valley Head Elementary School and Elkins Middle School won't open at the beginning of the school

year.

Randolph's Valley Head elementary has been targeted for closure and consolidation.

The State Fire Marshal says it all depends on what corrective actions are taken by school authorities to fix fire safety violations in the buildings.

"Neglecting repair and main-

tenance on targeted schools has frequently been used as a mechanism to close community schools and consolidate," says Linda Martin, Challenge coordinator.

Parents who want to keep Valley head open, say the BOE has not responded to multiple requests for a plan of action for safety items.

# 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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