



The Challenge



June 2006

“Globalized” education threatens community control, place-based schools

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

Consider the future of public education and its connectedness to communities and the taxpayers that support it.

In a world where power continues to flow to centers of government, will community-based schools disappear in the next few years?

Unless parents and taxpayers take a stand, the answer is yes.

Like county and community government, education will be “globalized.” The biggest losers, poor, rural and sparsely populated areas, even though 40% of America’s students are rural.

Certainly, in WV, the State Board of Education has been given enormous power by the legislature over local school systems, with hundreds of small community schools already closed and several hundred more on the chopping block.

The message seems to be ... WV’s 55 county school boards are burdensome, often composed of “under-educated citizens” who are ill-informed, and whose constitutional powers have already been diminished.

State education experts claim that taxpayers can no longer afford small schools, an economies of scale model that has placed tens of thousands of Mountain State children on school buses for well over an hour each way.

State education experts say local schools can no longer provide a diverse curriculum that will prepare students for the 21st Century, including the placement of trained teachers.

Research overwhelmingly supports that children do better in small schools.

“Choice” has ramifications

While Challenge WV has been fighting a battle to keep community schools within counties, the issue has moved into a greater arena that challenges the existence of county systems, or an erasing of county lines to allow children to attend a “school of choice.”

The erasure is linked to the creation of RESAs, which were originally established to help local school boards improve their purchasing.

Choice has been politically sold nationwide as a good thing, and has wide appeal, but at the same time, indelibly linked to choice is the loss of community control.

The Lincoln County finance officer has indicated “choice” may bankrupt the Lincoln school system, with state officials supporting a large number of the county’s students to attend school in a neighboring county.

A new paper by Kenneth R. Stevenson expands even beyond, discussing the possibilities and critical issues

related to what the future holds for the field of education and the facilities that house it.

Stevenson asks “Will schools as physical places disappear and be replaced by virtual schools?”

Value of place-based schools

Feeding the assault on place-based education, some parents fear that their child will come to physical harm at school, also fearing that the values and beliefs that may be taught at school to their child will be in direct conflict with their own.

There are growing signs of “cooing” in America within homogeneous communities as evidenced by the increasing number of gated neighborhoods and housing developments catering to specific groups.

Families who move about every five years because of frequently changing jobs, have become less connected to a place, not rooted.

Unless schools come to be seen as integral to the lives of those without children in school, tax dollars will slowly but surely dry up for public education.

Challenge WV would remind education leaders they should be broadening their mission so that places called schools are viewed as community centers.

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The creation of distant, large, cookie-cutter institutions must surely risk the delivery of public education that America has held close to its heart.

Maintaining community schools has support from that community to

tax itself for new schools or to upgrade existing ones, says Stevenson.

If Stevenson's assumptions could become reality, education could become a cyber-space activity, with virtually no input from those it directly

affects, parents and their children.

Even more threatened are the basic cardinals of public education and how it directly effects democracy.

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

By Howard M. O'Cull

Howard M. O'Cull, Ed.D., is executive director of the West Virginia School Boards Association, a post he has held since 1985. The opinions expressed are his and are not written on behalf of WVSBA.

Does the "state," meaning the West Virginia Legislature, plan on consolidating county school districts? That is a question many members of Challenge West Virginia are asking.

The answer, in short form, is "no" at least in terms of an immediate rush to combine county school boards through legislative directive per se.

The concept, however, is not that foreign to West Virginia which has — by most accounts — one of the most centralized educational systems in the country as evidenced by state-leaning educational policy which the courts seem to fawn upon supporting.

This centralization has spawned creation of the School Building Authority of West Virginia and even the creation of the Office of Educational Performance Audits, an agency established in 1998 to "settle" the then long-running Pauley v. Bailey school finance case in bias toward school "outputs" rather than "inputs."

The practical effect of this legislation means that school boards, despite disparities in taxing capacity, would be expected to have the same outputs (educational achievement attainment) as other districts — even if having declining student enrollments which affects curricular offerings.

The West Virginia Department of Education also enjoys considerable power and authority under aegis of the state superintendent of schools, a constitutional

officer in West Virginia, and, of course, there is the state school board.

Again, the power and authority of these agencies vis-à-vis local school boards is monolithic and, as stated, often endorsed by the courts.

Whether or not one thinks the courts are unfair to local parties does not matter in that the courts, in a literal sense, apply concomitant laws and decrees based on these entities' large constitutional sanction and muster, especially the state school board.

Who controls RESA?

Adding to this mix, the state educational system includes eight Regional Educational Service Agencies, commonly known as RESAs.

In short, these agencies often appear in search of a mission, at least according to their critics. The agencies, established in 1972, provide an array of regionalized services to county boards and do achieve some efficiency, namely in terms of providing regionalized services for high cost/low incidence services such as some special education programming and the like.

Because of embezzlement at RESA I, RESAs again are under scrutiny.

The WVDE, in fact, has convened a committee to "study" RESA effectiveness, including the agencies' governing structure (county board and superintendent representatives from the region in which the RESA is located).

Since 2002, notions of RESA governance have been somewhat murky in that RESA executive directors "report" to the state Board.

One should note that the state board now argues in the RESA I "case," that

RESA executive directors serve as "will and pleasure" employees. The courts or state Grievance Board likely will determine the degree to which this doctrine applies.

The murkiness referred to above occurred in the WVBE was never able to fully "get their arms" around the agencies in order to provide proper monitoring, oversight and direction.

This series of events delighted WVDE officials — many of whom felt RESAs should "reside" under the state Department of Education.

Several CWV members have contacted me as to whether I believe RESAs will replace county boards or will be used in efforts to consolidate county school boards.

I think not. What may occur is that RESAs actually will be placed under the WVDE, at least in terms of their approaches and actions.

This approach likely will result in RESAs being more attuned to WVDE aims and objectives rather than freely floating along with their own agendas and approaches to programs and services.

Of course a major question concerns whether or not RESAs could take the place of county boards.

The answer is yes.

A constellation of factors, however, would have to emerge for such a proposition to occur, namely legislative sanction.

While anyone can be a prognosticator, the likely outcome of yet another RESA "study" will be greater state oversight of these agencies, likely coupled with tighter reins on their spending and

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accounting practices and more programmatic direction in terms of outputs.

Neither of these actions would, by themselves, lead to consolidation of school boards. Why? There is little will in the state Legislature for such.

The power of county governments

Indeed, county board consolidation has been discussed since at least the mid-1980s. In fact, the notion was seriously entertained by the late Kanawha County Senator Buffy Warner.

When Warner was able to maneuver the Senate Education Committee into a serious discussion regarding what would be necessary for county board consolidation to occur, he was told that a constitutional amendment were necessary.

Anyone who reads the state Constitution knows this not to be the case in that county school district boundaries are subject to legislative directive.

While some scholars argue county board boundaries could be changed by an act of the Legislature, other constitutional scholars point to a 1986 constitutional amendment which memorializes the notion that no more than two county board members can “serve” from the same magisterial district.

Being no legal scholar, I know of no inter-county magisterial districts. (This argument may not have standing, however, in that the Legislature could create just such districts.)

This brings me to a central point: While sheer consolidation of school districts could or can occur, this approach is not likely to prevail.

There are several reasons, chiefly legislators would reap the wrath of the

public which supports county government even if the set-up is inefficient or questionable, namely along these lines: Do we need a Wirt County when Wirt County could easily “combine” with Wood County?

The answer: We need a Wirt County because West Virginia, despite its centralization, is a state of “counties.”

This notion is perpetrated in various ways. Consider the former Budget Digest for instance. Many legislative projects, even if dubious, have been used to supplement ailing counties. The result, in fact, has been greater disparities between counties.

Yet how many legislators are willing to forego popular county projects — even if funds could have been spent to benefit a greater number of persons. As Tip O’Neill said “all politics is local.” Local politics in West Virginia is county-driven.

Additionally, one may buffer this response by examining how badly a 1989 amendment, actually aimed at curtailing the autonomy of the state School Board, failed.

Partly buoyed by some state officials whose offices would have become appointive, the WVBE may have slipped by. Indeed, if such a referendum were held today, confined to the state Board per se, most observers would predict its passage.

Lastly, we move to the discussion of whether or not “metro-government” notions bid badly for county boards. The answer, again in the short term, is no.

County boards are, in no way, specifically mentioned as a “target” of metro-government.

Indeed, when metro government legislation was being discussed — prior to any bill being drafted — school systems per se were not included as part of the focus.

Despite the immediate unlikelihood

of county boards being consolidated, those individuals who support local government should be alert to several considerations, the central being that county boards actually were borne out of a “compromise” between those lawmakers who, in 1933, made significant changes to the state Constitution during the heyday of the Great Depression.

According to West Virginia historians Ambler and Summers, the county unit system was the “compromise” between state control on the one hand and greater leeway and local autonomy on the other such as seen in states having greater local educational discretion.

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.

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O’Cull’s commentary will continue in the July Challenge WV newsletter, plus other articles related to the future of community education.
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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.



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