



# The Challenge



June 2008

## Challenge WV helps put small schools on national agenda

The 2008 National Rural Assembly held in Washington in June represents a new and perhaps unprecedented process for looking more deeply at existing federal policy and how it affects rural education.

Challenge WV coordinator, Thomas Ramey and Fellow, Jana Freeman attended the three-day event, helping set the agenda on the importance of community schools.

A “Stand up for Rural America” session included former U.S. Senator Tom Daschle and current U.S. Senator Brownback.

While the enrollment in rural schools has increased 15%, they continue to face a number of challenges, including high poverty levels, consolidation and long bus rides, low student

achievement, low teacher salaries, and uneven distribution of Title I funds.

“It acknowledges that rural policy must address rural America not as a disconnected land, but as an integral part of national and global systems that rely on each other to function properly,” Ramey said.

He said the conference “looked at finding the gaps, identifying opportunities, and charting a path forward for rural communities.”

The conference centered on four distinct rural issues, including quality of education, stewardship of natural resources, health of citizens and investment in communities.

“Every child should have an equal chance to learn, excel, and help lead America to a better, brighter future,” said Challenge WV’s Jana Freeman.

Education policy should recognize the distinctive challenges and opportunities for rural schools and reflect the unique needs of those students, families, and educators.

### Stewardship For Rural America

Ramey said there was discussion regarding school consolidation and how it hurts rural economies and students.

For residents of rural America, it is easy to see how the economic, social, and cultural fabrics of their communities are woven together by the thread of a local school.

Ramey said in some states, wholesale consolidation of rural schools continues, with economic and political pressures sometimes forcing communities to enter into consolidation, pulling out the threads of connectedness and unraveling a community’s way of life.

“It’s all connected. Schools and jobs are intimately tied, the school acting as the cornerstone of economic life is a common theme in many stories throughout rural America,” Ramey said.

A study of the 1980, 1990, and 2000 population census supports the contention that when schools shut down, so can the local economy.

Census data shows a clear picture of the impact of local schools on rural economies, particularly as it relates to the closing of those schools.

Rural communities that have schools, for example, have more college graduates and professional jobs than communities without schools, such as those where consolidation has occurred.

*Stewardship, continued on page 2*



Challenge WV, Fellow Jana Freeman (left) and coordinator Thomas Ramey (right) meet with Sen. Evan Bayh (center) at “Stand up for America” in DC

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# Help Challenge continue serving West Virginia's kids

**Stewardship,**  
*Continued from page 1*

Since its inception nearly ten years ago Challenge WV has remained committed to maintaining and improving small community schools, statewide.

Our goal is to reform education in the Mountain State so that citizens have a voice in policy decisions and every child has an equal opportunity to receive a first-class education and the promise of a bright future.

Among others, one such realized goal was the recent passage of Challenge WV's proposed, House Bill 4406, which limits long bus rides for elementary students.

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The data further shows that rural communities with schools employ nearly 24 percent of residents, compared to only 10 percent employed in communities without schools.

Ramey said "In short, viable schools are equal viable economies for rural communities, whereas shutting down schools often leads to economic demise and the emergence of community distress."

High energy costs, the loss of a local job market, or dwindling populations are often mentioned as conditions linked to rural school consolidation.

Rural educators and activists urge more practical solutions, emphasizing that consolidation imposes higher costs on communities as they pay more to transport students greater distances to schools, strain students' academic achievement and extracurricular participation, and at the same time, strip communities of their identity and economic vitality.

## The flaws of No Child Left Behind

There are plenty of No Child Left Behind critics, not the least maintaining the initiative is a federal take-over of education and that the performance model sets standards that are doomed to fail.

The intent to improve public education is worthy, with significant areas of shortcomings.

But teachers claim they end up teaching to the test.

Others point out the Texas concept was sold by the Bush administration as a successful model, when it was actually riddled with failure, riddled with 'false intelligence.'

Unable to push education fixes through Congress, the Bush administration is now taking its own pen to the No Child Left Behind law.

Many educators believe NCLB puts rural school systems, many of which have limited funding, in a situation to fail.

Education Secretary Margaret Spellings says she plans to make a host of changes to the education law through new regulations.

Among the biggest changes will be a requirement that by the 2012-13 school year, all states must calculate their high school graduation rates in a uniform manner.

West Virginia's graduation rate statistics have been called into question, grossly underestimating the number of students who dropped out.

States currently use all kinds of methods to determine their graduation rates, many of which are based on unreliable information about school dropouts.

States, according to Spelling, will be told to count graduates as students who leave on time

and with a regular degree.

While states will no longer be able to use their own methods for calculating grad rates, they will still be able to set their own goals for getting more students to graduate.

Critics say that allows states to set weak improvement goals.

The six-year-old education law is President Bush's signature domestic policy initiative. The law requires testing in reading and math in grades three through eight and once in high school. The stated goal is to get all kids working at grade level by 2013-14.

Spellings has been taking steps in recent months to make changes from her perch. However, the proposed regulations amount to the most comprehensive set of administrative changes she has sought so far.

The regulations call for a federal review of every state policy regarding the exclusion of test scores of students in racial groups deemed too small to be statistically significant or so small that student privacy could be jeopardized.

Critics say too many kids' scores are being left aside under these policies.

The regulations also call for school districts to demonstrate they are doing all they can to notify parents of low-income students in struggling schools that free tutoring is available.

The feds estimate only 14 percent of eligible students receive tutoring available to them.

The administration's proposal also would tighten the rules around the corrective steps schools must take once they've failed to meet progress goals for consecutive years.

"In West Virginia, the increasing costs of building new consolidated schools and maintaining a skyrocketing bus transport ration system, one of the most expensive in the nation, will drain the taxpayers pocketbooks," Ramey said.

"And to think that consolidation has generally been sold to legislators as cost saving," quipped Ramey.

"Besides, virtually all the research shows that students do better in smaller community schools. Somehow in West Virginia, we've had a bigger is better approach."

"With research pointing to the benefits of small schools, decision-makers should support and keep the small learning communities that already exist in rural schools," he said, spending taxpayer money to upgrade and repair existing structures.

### A Sense of Place and Pride

During the national conference, it was raised that small school settings allow for deeper relationships to be created between teachers and learners, providing students the opportunity to discover mentors and role models within their own communities.

A rural educator said, "When you take a school out of the community, you take away the community center, and sense of place and pride."

Kids benefit from the personal small school, they get a sense of who they are and who their community members are.

**Pride,** *continued on page 3*

# Slow Motion: Traveling by school bus in consolidated districts in West Virginia

By Lorna Jimerson, Ed.D

Editor's Note: Jimerson completed a research project for Challenge WV regarding long bus rides in West Virginia, published here because the issue is still on the burner for middle and high schools.

Over the past several decades West Virginia has closed scores of small, locally-based schools (primarily high schools) as part of district-level consolidation.

These consolidations have affected families and students in numerous ways. Most notably, students living in outlying communities are now required to travel much longer distances to reach centralized high schools.

Consequently community members have voiced concerns that very long bus rides take a toll on students, their schoolwork, and the degree to which they can participate in after-school activities (Spence, 2000).

The state of West Virginia recognized that long bus rides are not desirable and the legislature has issued guidelines on maximum lengths of school bus rides.

However, these recommendations have not been mandatory and are not enforced. Recommended maximum one-way bus rides are 30 minutes for elementary school, 45 minutes for middle

school, and one hour for high school students (Title 126, 2004).

Editor's Note: 2009 In spite of these recommendations, until recently, complete and up-to-date data on the length of bus rides was not available. As of 2002, however, district (county) transportation directors have been required to annually report bus ride lengths.

The latest available state report (for 2005) indicates that about 7.4% of West Virginia students ride school buses over the recommended times. This statewide average "override," however, does not offer a complete picture of bus rides around the state.

Bus ride lengths vary dramatically by county - from a low override rate of .4% to a high override rate of 31.3%. In some schools, in some counties, very few students experience lengthy rides.

In other counties, however, a very high percentage of kids ride the bus for extended periods of time. And according to the state data, every county in West Virginia has at least some students riding the school bus over the recommended times (Transportation Times 1-06, 2006).

Though the state busing report is helpful in providing a broad picture of bus ride lengths, it lacks some critical information. Conspicuously missing from the state reports is the actual length of bus rides.

The state report indicates how many students (per county) endure overrides, but provides no data on the extent to which student travel exceeds the suggested limit. Do students ride one minute over the recommended maximum time...or one hour?

Also missing is any information about the impact of long bus rides. For example, to what extent are long bus rides associated with decreased academic performance, dropout rates,

set requirements for construction schedules, materials, roofing, flooring, indoor and outdoor walls, the quality of doors and windows and more.

Some West Virginia school architects had worried that "cookie-cutter" schools might start to eliminate the architect's role.

"I think we've allayed their fears," Manchin said. "It's not our intent to require the exterior of [buildings] all look alike," although many of the new schools built with SBA money have "cookie-cutter" appearance.

and the ability to participate in extra-curricular activities?

Since further consolidation is presently being proposed statewide, the lack of solid data about the impact of current consolidation is problematic. This research by the Rural School and Community Trust (Rural Trust) is an effort to fill some of those gaps.

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## Pride, *continued from page 2*

Dee Davis, of the Center for Rural Strategies, Whitesburg, Kentucky, Suzanne Siskel, with the Ford Foundation and Ali Webb, of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation praised efforts of Challenge WV and others concerned about rural education in America.

There was emphasis on rural Broadband being critical to America's economic viability, with the United States being 15th out of 30 in developed nations when considering Broadband access to rural areas.

Three years ago Japan offered Broadband to 40% of rural residents, now it offers Broadband to 85%.

"Despite lots of pronouncements about Broadband access, West Virginia's rural areas are far, far behind," said Ramey.

Edyael Casaperalta, with the Center for Rural Strategies said, "Education offers our young the opportunity to return to our rural communities, not an opportunity to escape. Also, the public needs to understand that standardized tests are not curriculum."

Eloise Cobell, with Native American Community Development Corporation, from Browning Montana said, "While you [government officials] say it can't be done, we will never give up! Your broken system is no excuse for ignoring my rural America."

The SBA has increased the dollar amount that they will fund new school buildings based on square footage. Costs per square foot now ranges between about \$209 and \$239.

The SBA added \$8.25 per square foot to align with the new quality and performance standards and \$4.97 per square foot to employ environmentally friendly concepts.

The state says they are "going green" in an effort to cut back energy costs.

## SBA Will Sell Bonds On Wall Street, Change Square Footage Costs

Members of the state School Building Authority hope that by selling bonds on Wall Street, they will help secure \$100 million to help build West Virginia schools over the next three years.

Mark Manchin, the agency's executive director, expects the bonds will be sold in late July, and free up \$20 million this year, \$60 million in 2009 and \$20 million in 2010.

He figures the investment can't hurt, as the dollar amount that county leaders request to help build schools each year far exceeds the money on hand.

Manchin has said the SBA would invest some of its annual budget toward debt service, the money needed to pay the principal and interest on a debt.

The SBA has also approved new building standards for school construction. The new "quality and performance standards" will

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## Challenge West Virginia

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