



# The West Virginia Challenge

June 1999



## McDowell County forms chapter

Residents from throughout McDowell County, the state's most southern county, met at the Cherry Key Inn in May and voted to form the second county chapter of Challenge West Virginia.

More than 40 teachers, parents, business leaders and past and present government officials came together to express concerns about the quality of the county's public schools and the lack of leadership in addressing those problems.

Among those attending were two mayors, a board of education member, a former legislator, members of the clergy and other business persons.

"West Virginia has some of the lowest test scores in the nation," said one resident. "And we have the lowest test scores in West Virginia, so that puts us at the bottom of the bottom."

"We can't begin to solve our problems if we can't admit we have problems," another resident said.

Challenge WV Fellow Eddie Harman of Caretta accepted a plaque from Challenge Director Linda Martin acknowledging the creation of the chapter at a State Forum meeting in Flatwoods on May 15. Also accepting the plaque were Welch businessman Mike Lushbaugh and Chris Fields, a Bonner scholar from the University of Richmond assigned to the Caretta Community Center.

"We have several non-profit groups in our county, and we usually try to work together for the good of our people," said Harman. "Trying to keep local politics out of our education system is an ongoing battle. Now, with consolidation and talk of contracting out the school bus routes, it seems we have an even big-

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Challenge Fellow Eddie Harman, center, Bonner Scholar Chris Fields, left, and Welch businessman Mike Lushbaugh are shown with the plaque acknowledging the creation of the McDowell County chapter of Challenge WV.

## State Forum discusses legislative lobbying plan

Members of the State Education Forum sponsored by Challenge West Virginia met for the first time in Flatwoods on May 15 to share information from communities and to begin to make plans for the coming legislative session.

Forum members include representatives from communities where Challenge West Virginia has fellows and chapters, as well as others who support Challenge WV's commitment to maintaining and improving small community schools.

Former Senate Education chairman Si Galperin talked about his efforts to try to get legislative approval for the Challenge-backed Better Schools Bill during the past two legislative sessions.

Galperin explained that the bill essentially states

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## Challenge West Virginia

**The West Virginia Challenge** is published by Challenge West Virginia, a statewide organization committed to maintaining and improving small community schools.

Challenge members believe that the policy direction being pursued by education officials in the state, which has involved the closing of many small schools, does not serve the best interest of

many children, especially those from low-income families who live in rural areas.

If you would like to become involved in Challenge WV, please contact one of the fellows listed on page three or Linda Martin or Beth Spence, whose numbers are listed on the back page.

Challenge 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.

Editor of **The West Virginia Challenge** is Beth Spence, rural coordinator for Challenge West Virginia.



## This 'n that

◆ A Kanawha County judge refused to block a decision to reallocate \$14.4 million in School Building Authority money from Mason County to eleven counties across the state. Mason County returned the money to the state after deciding not to build a consolidated high school. Mason County resident Don Greene had asked the court to delay the reallocation until a hearing on his lawsuit challenging the decision to return the money to the state. The Mason County School Board is dominated by members who oppose consolidation.

◆ The Charleston Gazette reports that Mary Ann Raywid, a professor at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, examined dozens of studies on school size and determined that students – especially those from low-income families – perform better academically in small schools; parents become more involved in small schools than they do in large ones; dropout rates are lower and students participate in more extracurricular activities.

◆ Parents at tiny Confidence Elementary in Putnam County have vowed to fight to save the tiny elementary school they call “the jewel on the mountain.”

A Putnam County School planning group known as Vision 20/20 had originally recommended keeping all its schools and fixing them up. Three weeks ago the group began to consider options that could close two high schools – and Confidence Elementary.

◆ Some Kanawha County parents are raising questions about what has happened to money that was to have been saved through consolidation. *The Charleston Daily Mail* reports that in 1991, the Kanawha County Board of Education voted to close Boreman Elementary in Cross Lanes and send students to Point Harmony Elementary.

“When they closed Boreman, they promised they would use that money on Point Harmony,” said Karen Frazier, mother of a second grader. “We consolidated and they have not put any money into our school.”

The project was to have resulted in a pay-back of at least \$300,000 over eight years, but parents say that money was not put into Point Harmony. Second graders still attend classes in portable buildings and have to walk 300 feet unsheltered to lunch and other activities. Frazier’s daughter attends class in a 31-pupil classroom taught by two teachers.

Board members respond that the money saved during the consolidation was redistributed to the permanent improvement fund used for county building projects – and was absorbed in other parts of the school system’s budget.

## McDowell . . .

ger battle ahead.”

Members of Challenge West Virginia are concerned that, despite recent research showing that small schools provide the best education for children, the state of West Virginia continues to pursue a policy of forced consolidation. Since 1990, boards of education across the state have closed 26 percent of West Virginia’s public schools.

Challenge WV also has a chapter in Preston County.

## Lobbying . . .

that no one criteria — and particularly the criteria of economies of scale — can dominate when the School Building Authority decides which counties will be awarded money to build or renovate schools.

The bill also would:

- make into law transportation guidelines of 30 minutes from home to school for elementary students; 45 minutes for middle school students; and 60 minutes for high school students.

- require the SBA to consider sparsity of population in rural areas and how that sparsity affects transportation times.

- make clear that any school included in a county’s facilities plan may be eligible for funding.

- would require the SBA to submit to the Legislature rules as to how funding will be distributed.

Galperin urged Challenge members to speak to their legislators this fall – especially those serving on the Senate and House education committees – and then follow up with meetings later.

“Don’t argue with legislators and don’t threaten them,” Galperin advised. “Convince them, educate them, inform them. Be passionate and don’t give up.”

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