



The Challenge

March 2001



Challenge to have day at Legislature

Challenge WV members will meet at the State Capitol on Tuesday, March 6, to show support for Senate Bill 64 and House Bill 2270, known as The Better Schools Bill.

Anyone who supports the bill is encouraged to come to the Statehouse on this day to show support for the bill, which would eliminate long school bus

rides for West Virginia's public school students.

Those supporting the bill will meet at 10 a.m. in the Capitol Cafeteria, located in the basement of the Capitol Building.

Join Challenge WV at the Legislature March 6

The bill would change the law regarding distribution of school building money so that economies of scale would not be the overriding consideration when the School Building Authority

awards grants to counties.

The bill also would ensure that no child is forced to endure long bus rides to get to school each day by limiting school bus rides to 30 minutes for elementary students; 45 minutes for junior high students; and one hour for high school students.

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Meadow Bridge joins endangered school list



Community members are shown in the library of Meadow Bridge High School, which has been targeted for closure by the Fayette County Board of Education. The school was constructed in 1925 on land donated by a local resident, and the first class was graduated in 1929. Through the years, the community has worked to make additions to the school and athletic facilities. Approximately 350 students attend grades 7-12 at Meadow Bridge. County officials plan to merge Meadow Bridge with two other high schools.

Residents of the Meadow Bridge area of Fayette County met with Challenge West Virginia directors Linda Martin and Beth Spence in a meeting at the school on Saturday, Feb. 10.

The group is committed to saving Meadow Bridge High School, which has served the community since the 1920s. They are opposed to a county plan that would combine seven high schools into three.

Linda Martin was one of the speakers at a public meeting that followed a planning meeting.

She invited the community to join the

efforts of Challenge WV to save the state's small schools.

"We believe that it is in small schools in small communities where our children have the opportunity to receive the best possible education," she said.

Martin said state policy is forcing counties to close schools.

That's why a statewide organization is needed to change state policy, she said.

"Our goal is to form a chapter of Challenge WV in every county in West Virginia – and we want you to be a part of this movement."



Challenge West Virginia

The Challenge is published by Challenge West Virginia, a statewide organization committed to maintaining and improving small community schools and reforming education policy in West Virginia so that all of our state's children have the opportunity to receive a first-class education and the promise of a bright future.

Challenge members believe state education policy, which has resulted in the closing of a fourth of West Virginia's schools during the past ten years, does not serve the best interest of many children, especially those from low-income families who live in rural areas.

Challenge West Virginia 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.

To start a chapter of Challenge WV, to inquire about the fellowship program or for more information, contact:

Linda Martin
801 Gordon Drive
Charleston, WV 25303
304-744-5916
LBM94@aol.com

Beth Spence
58 Frontier Road
Alum Creek, WV 25003
304-756-9191
bandb58@aol.com

<http://www.wvcovenanthouse.org/challengewv/>

This 'n that from around the state

• Senate Education Committee Chairman Lloyd Jackson says the state should stop using the Stanford Achievement Tests it has been using since 1996. Jackson says the state should develop standardized tests that reflect what should be taught in West Virginia's classrooms.

Jackson said the test is driving the curriculum, when it should be the other way around. "obviously we need to upgrade what we're doing," he said.

State Department of Education officials agree but say that creating and scoring new West Virginia-specific tests could cost about \$25 per student, compared with the \$5 per student spent on the Stanford 9 Test.

Jackson's statement followed a recent evaluation of the state's education performance by *Education Week* magazine. *Education Week* gave the state a D-plus for its efforts to raise academic standards and specifically criticized the state for exclusively using the Stanford 9, saying the academic scope of the testing program is limited.

Senator Larry Edgell, D-Wetzel, a fifth grade math teacher, said 15 school days each year are exclusively devoted to preparation and administration of the Stanford 9 tests. He said rather than helping teachers, the tests often "box teachers in" by forcing them to concentrate on the instructional goals that will be on the test.

• The public school system is the largest or second largest employer in all but six West Virginia counties, according to a report in *The Charleston Gazette*.



• School building needs are expected to reach \$1.9 billion during the next ten years, according to a list of needs compiled by Clacy Williams, executive director of the School Building Authority. Williams said county school systems have requested \$763 million with individual counties agreeing to finance the remaining \$1.2 billion.

Gov. Bob Wise has suggested that the authority sell \$100 million in bonds to help fund the projects. The SBA has the ability to sell bonds, but they must identify a way to pay for them.

"The Legislature would have to identify a revenue stream for us in order to make debt-service payments," Williams said. "Wise initiated this discussion and we have jumped on the bandwagon."

House Finance Chairman Harold Michael, D-Hardy, said the state would have to come up with a special revenue source because the funds aren't there otherwise. "The payments on that kind of bond could average out to be about \$10 million or \$12 million a year. I don't know where the money would come from unless this issue is tied to the gray machines."

The last bond issue was in 1994, when \$136 million were sold. The bonds are expected to be paid off by 2004 with state lottery profits. The SBA allocated \$28.6 last year for 12 projects. The authority will receive \$22 million next year from the Legislature."

Williams said it's hard to fund major projects across the state with that amount of money.

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Challenge West Virginia's
Fact sheet on school transportation
in West Virginia

- West Virginia has a **higher percentage of its total education budget** going to busing than any other state in the nation. 6.8 percent. (It is higher than Alaska, Vermont, Montana, Iowa and other states considered rural.)
- West Virginia has a \$1.9 billion budget, and spent **\$129 million on transportation last year**. (Nebraska has a total education budget of \$1.7 billion and spent \$44 million on transportation.)
- West Virginia operates the **most expensive transportation** program in the country based on cost per pupil and cost per mile.
- **Salaries are not included** with the transportation costs but are considered as part of funding for all service personnel.
- Almost 2,800 bus drivers in West Virginia drove students almost **40 million miles** in 1997-98.
- The **allowance** for transportation costs was **increased** in 1998 by HB 4306 from 80 percent of actual transportation expenditures to 85 percent.
- Of the 55 counties, 35 (64 percent) have a lower than average student population per square mile and are assigned a **high cost allowance** (90 percent) for transportation.
- **Cost per pupil** ranged from a low of \$371 in Kanawha County to a high of \$790 in Clay County.
- In 1997-98, **513 accidents** involving school transportation occurred in West Virginia.
- **Bus drivers** in West Virginia **earn double** what drivers earn in North and South Carolina and Kentucky. Drivers are paid a full-time wage, but do not actually work 40 hours a week. In addition, drivers are paid extra-duty pay during their normal work day.





Challenge West Virginia

A program of Covenant House, Charleston, WV

Linda Martin
Education Coordinator
801 Gordon Drive
Charleston, WV 25303

Beth Spence
Rural Coordinator
58 Frontier Road
Alum Creek, WV 25003

Non-Profit Organization
US Postage Paid
Permit 2673
Charleston, WV 25301

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The bill would ensure that no one criterion, especially the economies of scale guidelines, would dominate other statutory criteria when decisions are made to award grant money.

The proposed changes would require the school building authority to undergo legislative rule-making review and have its guidelines approved as legislative rules.

In addition to travel times, specific changes proposed include:

Economies of scale: With the amendment, rules governing economies of scale would take into account the fact that in rural areas, population sparsity affects school sizes, transportation times and costs.

Eligibility for School Building Authority funding: The amendment would allow any school included in a countywide facilities plan to be eligible for funding by the school building authority.

The Better Schools Bill has the support of the West Virginia Council of Churches, the West Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church, the West-Marva District Church of the Brethren, the Government Solutions Committee of Community Council of the Kanawha Valley; United Way of the Kanawha Valley and The Conference of Agency Executives.

Michael said even \$100 million wouldn't take care of the major projects. "So then it becomes a political issue over who gets the money and who doesn't," he said.

- Clendenin Middle School has a one-year reprieve from the chopping block. Kanawha County Board of Education members, who had considered closing the school at the end of this year, instead voted to close the school in June 2002 at the urging of parents.

One factor in the postponement is that there is no place to put the 140 students at Elkview Middle School, where the children will be transferred. School administrators had recommended putting students in eight portable classrooms at Elkview. Instead they will ask the State School Building Authority for money to expand Elkview.

Anita Edmonds, a Clendenin parent, said she had mixed emotions. "A lot can happen in a year. They're long from rid of us."