



The Challenge



March 2005

Manchin's busing bill stalled, students still facing long and winding roads



Gov. Manchin and representatives of Challenge WV

West Virginia school kids will continue down the long and winding road, some riding buses several hours a day to consolidated schools that are costing taxpayers millions of dollars.

A busing bill, introduced with fanfare by Gov. Joe Manchin and widely supported by delegates and senators, would have put the crimp on long distance bus rides.

The busing bill would have slowed down the wholesale consolidation of West Virginia schools.

The bill was derailed by Del. Harold Michael (D-Hardy), the powerful chairperson of the House Finance Committee, currently being challenged for funneling millions of dollars

into his home county.

Gov. Manchin, surrounded by legislative supporters, school kids and parents said "The objective is to protect our children, especially our youngest children, from long bus rides," saying they are unhealthy and often unnecessary with new distance-learning technology.

"What's best for the child, to have

them in the classroom more, or on the bus?" Manchin asked.

Michael used the death-knell words "further study" to derail the bill, calling for the state department to prepare a report by next December.

State transportation director Bill Shaw said he had provided all the pertinent information the State Board could muster up.

Linda Martin, the director of Challenge WV, said they have been waiting for five years for that study and have never seen a single number. "It is simply a delay tactic," she said.

More money will have to be funneled into a bus transportation system, already deemed the costliest in the country, as gasoline prices rise to \$2.50 a gallon.

The state Department of Education ignores its own guidelines for how long one-way bus rides should be: 30 minutes

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King Michael's "drunken sailor bucks" makes "Mezz Money" look paltry



Del. Harold Michael

House Finance Chairman Harold Michael (D-Hardy) controls a "secret" \$8 million account for education, and leaders won't say exactly what the money is used for.

Michael says his tenure in the House has earned him the right to direct money, and he makes no apologies.

About 80 percent of the education money from the accounts has gone to

Hardy and Pendleton counties, which Michael represents.

There is no accountability after the checks are issued.

State schools Superintendent David Stewart says he doesn't know the purpose of the \$8 million education fund.

Stewart said Michael does have a hook. It can be released only on his orders. "We don't know what all that money is for," Stewart said. "We didn't ask for it."

Michael sneaked \$4 million into Budget Digest and the state budget a few years ago for a new community college in



Eastern West Virginia Community & Technical College.

his county, at the same time legislators appeared to be wanting to close state colleges. Last year he got a giant share of \$172 million in higher education money for his county.

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State Superintendent Dave Stewart ends stormy career

State Schools Superintendent David Stewart has announced that he is stepping down as head of West Virginia's public school system. he has served in the position for five years.



"It is simply time," Stewart said.

The 60-year-old Stewart will retire on June 30th. He says he is proud of the progress that the state's educational system has made during his tenure, but that he wants to move into another phase of his life.

The state Board of Education will begin a search for a new superintendent, likely in April.

Stewart was appointed in 2000 to replace Hank Marockie, who resigned following an investigation of his conduct.

Stewart has survived some trying times during his tenure, not the least being the imprisonment of the President of the State Board of Education and the removal of an assistant who has been charged with misuse of public education money.

He defended the double-dipping of

house education chairman Jerry Mezzatesta, until the Mezzatesta situation continued to unwind. Mezzatesta sent fake letters to Stewart to support his position. The state Ethics Commission reversed their "not-guilty" decision against the powerful legislator, and he was issued fines.

Mezzatesta was removed from his chairmanship and later lost re-election in Hampshire County. He is currently under federal investigation for mishandling education funds and the Hampshire School system is in trouble with the state school system.

Recently, Stewart seemed to be angry about Del. Harold Michael (D-Hardy), chairman of the House Finance Committee, who said he was proud that his tenure in the house had allowed him to help his home county, personally in charge of \$8 million of education money.

Stewart began his career in education in 1972 as an elementary school teacher. He later was an elementary school principal, an assistant county superintendent and a county superintendent before serving in various roles for the state Department of Education.

Soft Spoken Campbell replaces "hummingbird" Mezzatesta



The new chairman of the House Education Committee says he does not dwell on the "shadows or footprints left behind by his predecessor, former Del. Jerry Mezzatesta.

"This office is a way for me to make a difference for the whole population, really," said Tom Campbell, D-Greenbrier. "The state of our education system affects our young people and the professionals who teach and lead them, but it also has such an effect on our economy."

The contrast to Mezzatesta appears evident.

Mezzatesta, a self-described "hummingbird on amphetamines," often kept his committee on a short leash with a management style that mixed a feverish tempo with a quick temper.

Colleagues and supporters describe the soft-spoken Campbell as thoughtful, with a decidedly deliberative approach to his legislative duties.

Mingo's super-sized school on hold, suit questions state's constitutional power

Mingo County school consolidation has been put on hold, after Charleston attorney Jim Lees requested a stay in behalf of the Mingo school board members and citizens.

Lees' suit says state officials, none who have been elected, have usurped the power of an elected school board which has been "disenfranchised."

Lees said such measures could have a "chilling effect" on the rights of citizens and public officials throughout the state, and is likely in violation of the state constitution.

Circuit Judge Paul Zakaib of Kanawha County issued the stay until May 5th.

State Superintendent David Stewart had quickly moved the consolidation project ahead after the State Board of Education took over the Mingo system from the local school board after they refused to approve the state's consolidation plan.

State officials said the Mingo system flunked a recent audit, part of which was financial mismanagement, saying the system was operating in a "confused and dysfunctional manner."

At the same time state officials slapped Hampshire County on the wrist, after they produced a long list of financial and mismanagement problems, many of them linked to Jerry Mezzatesta, former House Education Chairman.

Mezzatesta, who is still employed by the Hampshire system, has been found guilty of numerous charges and is currently under investigation by federal officials.

Mezzatesta was a strong supporter of school consolidation

and the School Building Authority.

Mingo School board president Bill Duty said he found it difficult to accept that Superintendent Brenda Skibo was appointed by the state to fix such problems when the state originally took over the system, she remained in charge of the system when control was returned to Mingo, and she is still in charge after the recent takeover.

Duty said "Go figure. Could the real problem be that Mingo is not jumping on their baited hook?"

The state is closing three high schools built in the 70s and 80s, wanting to build a consolidated school on a strip mine site that the board does not own, and at a price tag that exceeds reason.

"Who among you would accept such a proposal?" Duty asked.



Longtime coal miner and school board member Mike Carter (pictured left) said "The state's plan is not about educating our kids. It's about long bus rides and big expensive buildings. It certainly is not about saving money."

"It is a powerful lording over people who believe in their communities. The education czars need to hear we've had enough," said Carter.

Duty has questioned the "unbridled power" of the state board in super-sizing schools. "To whom are they accountable if they have faulted?" he asked.

Busing Bill

Continued from Page 1

for elementary schoolchildren, 45 minutes for middle school, and 60 minutes for high school.

More than half of all bus routes in rural West Virginia exceed the guidelines. Manchin's proposal would make those guidelines into law.

His busing bill would not be retroactive, but limit such rides in the future.

State education officials have consistently proclaimed the bill would cost taxpayers millions of dollars, but the bill has been described as "no cost."

Martin said "Manchin's busing bill is not perfect, but it is a start to help West Virginia school kids and protect community-based education."

House Education Chairman Tom Campbell, D-Greenbrier, supported the busing bill, along with a cadre of delegates and senators.

Last year, Campbell's predecessor, former House Education Chairman Jerry Mezzatesta, blocked a similar busing measure, saying it would cost taxpayers millions. State Department of Education officials estimated the cost at \$50 million.

Martin said "That's baloney!"

Manchin said his proposal would not cost school boards a penny, since it only affects future school closures.

During the 1990s school officials closed about one-quarter of all schools in a massive consolidation effort, causing twice as many children to ride the bus two hours a day or longer.

While the rest of the nation is going back to community-based education, acknowledging students do better in small schools, West Virginia continues to surge

forward with consolidation, building multi-million dollar cookie-cutter buildings, and placing kids on school buses for long rides.

State education officials have claimed the "economies of scale" model saves money and brings better educational opportunities, but there is no evidence to support such claims.

Martin says "The promise is empty, and most West Virginia's are catching on."

Thomas Ramey, a Fellow with Challenge WV, said his group's grass-root activists, supporters and thousands of families around the state, will continue efforts to reign in a system that does not improve academics.

Challenge WV provides small-schools research to its approximately 10,000 members in 27 local chapters, sharing that with local school boards, politicians and parents.

Michael's Bucks

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That's beside about \$10 million Michael has diverted to his home counties from the Governor's Contingency Fund, making Jerry Mezzatesta's "Mezz Money" look paltry. Mezzatesta was a former delegate and house education chairman.

The Contingency Fund was once used to state distasters, now it has become "pork barrel" money.

Michael's "bring home the bacon" money far exceeds funds sent to any other West Virginia counties. Hardy County received 13 times the state average, Pendleton County received 10 times the state average.

Per capita, each citizen in Hardy County received \$528, each citizen in Pendleton County received \$391.

Per capita, fifty-one other counties received \$99 to \$11, the average being \$40. The \$11 was Doddridge County, receiving \$82,150.

"I'm certainly not going to criticize Chairman Michael for doing the job he was sent here to do by the voters of Hardy and Pendleton counties," said house speaker Bob Kiss (D-Raleigh), saying he has done nothing illegal. Kiss defended Del. Jerry Mezzatesta until the case against him grew, he then removed him from his chairmanship of the House Education Committee.

"I think it's a little bit hypocritical to

laud Sen. Byrd for doing his job in bringing money back to the state and yet criticize a state legislator for doing the exact same thing," He said when capitated most of the money goes to Kanawha, Cabell and Monongalia Counties. "I think it creates an atmosphere of politics of jealousy or envy (against the populated areas), which isn't good for the process."

That argument might be difficult to accept by Doddridge County.

Thomas Ramey, a fellow for Challenge WV, said "The problem here is Del. Michael is a chairman of finance, which should raise him above the self-interests of his own county. If he was just a delegate, it might be different."

The Charleston Gazette said Michael has used some of the education money to pave a road and parking lot at East Hardy Middle School. East Hardy High School got \$30,000 for wireless laptop computers and more recently the money paid for a \$75,000 playground at Franklin Elementary School in Pendleton County, the Hardy Rod and Gun Club (where he belong) got \$25,000, a bowling alley got \$16,000, etc. The county's high school got \$30,000 for a meat smoker

Michael got \$108,000 for a local cemetery from contingency funds, which erected a plaque honoring him. There are numerous plaques and building names honoring Michael's financial contributions.

After press inquiries, Michael said that the bulk of the money in the special accounts will be reallocated this year, declining to discuss what he planned to



Harold K. Michael Community Center rests behind Circleville High School in Pendleton County, which once engaged the community in a bitter consolidation battle, now closed, forcing long bus rides over the mountain to Franklin.

spend the money on.

Stacy Ruckle, spokesperson for House Speaker Bob Kiss, said "The fund was seen as a holding account. It was set aside as a safety net," for unexpected expenses related to No Child Left Behind.

Tom Lange, president of the West Virginia Education Association, said the Department of Education should spend the money this year to improve student achievement.

"You have a contingency fund to handle emergencies," said state Auditor Glen Gainer. "That's what it was designed for. But what has happened is we use it as a granting authority. We use it to fund various pet projects."

Gainer said Governor Underwood spent the money like a drunken sailor before he was defeated for re-election.

Now, it's Michael in charge of the pork, saying he didn't like to compare himself to Sen. Robert Byrd, but he did.

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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600 Shrewsbury Street
Charleston, WV 25301-1211

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US Postage Paid
Permit No. 2673
Charleston, WV 25301

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Challenge West Virginia County Contacts

Boone County

Nina Ball
(304) 369-5339

Braxton County

Sue Clifton
(304) 765-2994

Calhoun County

Dianne Weaver
(304) 354-6183
dianne@hurherald.com

Clay County

Marge Bragg
(304) 286-2655
ijram98@hotmail.com

Fayette County

Carolyn Arritt
(304) 484-7919
Carritt-McCune@citynet.net

Greenbrier County

Carla Persinger
(304) 392-9842
cpersinger@frontier.net

Harrison County

Paul Hamrick
(304) 622-5664
LITCCHC@aol.com

Jefferson County

Paul Burke
(304) 876-2227
NumbersInstitute@juno.com

Lincoln County

Thomas Ramey
(304) 855-3930
tprameyvw@hotmail.com

Logan County

Craig Manns
(304) 855-4925
cmwv2001@yahoo.com

Marshall County

Frank Longwell
(304) 232-1093

Mason County

Darrell Hagley
(304) 743-9451
DEHagley@WMCconnect.com

McDowell County

Marsha Timpson
(304) 875-3418
marshatimpson@hotmail.com

Mineral County

Brenda Stonebraker
(304) 446-5429
bstonebraker@hotmail.com

Mingo County

Mike Carter
(304) 426-4226
hiech@hotmail.com

Monongalia County

Jon Frist
(304) 292-9599
jon.frist@us.army.mil

Morgan County

Andy Andryshak
(304) 947-5664
andy.peace@frontiernet.net

Nicholas County

Robin Kelly
(304) 649-5932
RocknBirdy@hotmail.com

Preston County

Jana Freeman
(304) 735-3411
Janaf11@hotmail.com

Putnam County

Tim McCoy
(304) 586-9823
timothy.mccoy@pb.com

Raleigh County

Lorelei Scarbro
(304) 854-1016
candlelight29@aol.com

Ritchie County

Patty Deak
(304) 869-3462
pdeak@dot.state.wv.us

Roane County

Eric Rogers
(304) 655-7134
rpeskid98@yahoo.com

Webster County

Cindy Miller
(304) 493-6369
KCACMiller@juno.com

Challenge WV Coordinator

Linda Martin
(304) 744-5916
LBM94@aol.com

Send comments or articles for "The Challenge"
Contact Editor Bob Weaver
HC 65, Box 120
Mt. Zion WV 26151
email dianne@hurherald.com
fax 304-354-6183