



# The Challenge



March 2006

## State board ignores teary-eyed Harts students, accountability for low test scores

Pleading from teary-eyed students and their distraught parents was not enough to change the mind of the state Board of Education about closing Lincoln County's Harts High School at the end of the year.

The rural school is the victim of state mandated consolidation, but the closure is causing problems because Chapmanville High School, located in Logan County, is not yet prepared to handle the influx of Harts students.

They are facing skimpy quarters, janitor's spaces and crowded classrooms divided by make-shift partitions.

Chapmanville is expected to have an enrollment of 623 students, up from the current 492.

Harts parents and students wanted to hold-off the transition for one year until the new facilities are completed.

State board members expressed little empathy to the Harts group who traveled to the capitol to make their appeal.



State superintendent of Schools Steve Paine saw no reason to re-evaluate the Harts time line for closure, saying the school is the lowest performing school in West Virginia.

Paine said just 40 percent of Harts students were proficient in English, math, science and social studies on state tests in 2005, that figure dropped 10 points from 2003.

Thomas Ramey, Challenge WV fellow from Lincoln County, said Paine failed to mention that the state has been operating the system for the past five years. "No accountability here," he said.

Next year, Harts students will be facing long bus rides to attend the new consolidated high school in Hamlin or go to Chapmanville High in Logan County.

Steven Workman, a freshman at Harts, lamented "If they take away our community schools, what kind of

community are we going to have?"

Following a three-hour discussion, during which about 20 parents and students pleaded that Harts not be shut down this year, Workman was one of several people in tears after the 6-3 vote to close the school.

Lincoln school board members, who have had their authority removed, asked the state board to amend the county's 10-year facilities plan to keep Harts open for another year.

"My biggest concern now is we're going to have to finance this [new] school," said Lincoln school board member Billie Frye. "We've got a beautiful new school we can't afford. Our treasurer says we'll be sunk."

In 2004, state board members voted to build the new consolidated high school at Hamlin, which opponents say is one of the most expensive schools per capita built in the USA.

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Photos courtesy of the Charleston Gazette

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# State board ignores teary-eyed Harts students, accountability for low test scores

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State Superintendent Steve Paine said he did not remember any promises made to keep the school open until facilities were completed.

The new Chapmanville high school was scheduled to open next school year, but voters rejected a levy, delaying the process.

Some angry parents said they'd be willing to leave the county rather than submit to the current options.

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## Martin says Challenge will stick with research

Challenge WV Coordinator Linda Martin says West Virginia's education policy is still based on an obsolete model.

"It is a message Challenge has repeated a thousand times, and will continue to repeat," Martin said.

"Challenge has a mission not only to get our educational leaders to believe the research, but to inform the citizens of the state," she said.

"We've done a pretty good job educating the public, but officialdom has a vested interest in going down the wrong path."

Martin contends few states have beaten a path to school consolidation faster than West Virginia.

She cited a recent grassroots bill moved forward by the House Education Committee and almost unanimously passed by the House. "The legislation would have returned a little power to communities to decide about consolidation, allowing [citizens] a vote," Martin said.

Members of the House of Delegates were responding to their constituents, who are tired of the state's bloody hammer being used on their local schools.

House Education chairman Sen. Robert Plymale stopped the bill from moving forward.

"He used Lloyd Jackson's old saw that the decision to consolidate is always made by local school boards," said Martin, "Everyone knows that local school boards are held hostage by the School Building Authority."

### RESEARCH SUPPORTS COMMUNITY MODEL

Martin continues to tell state residents they live in the 21st century age

of information, but education policy decisions are being made by people stuck in the 20th century industrial age.

"The industrial model that guides them includes 'economies of scale', and that's what they use to decide where they will build larger schools while moving children further and further from the communities where they live," Martin said.

Martin says she sounds like a broken record - "State officials cannot be so uninformed as to not know what all the research shows — small schools provide a better education, higher graduation rates, lower dropout rates, and higher achievement."

During nearly a decade of Challenge WV, the research piles up showing small schools are better, at the same time educational bureaucrats ignore the thousands of kids age four and up who are being placed on bus rides of an hour and more one-way.

West Virginia spends more money transporting students than any other state.

"Today information is the predator and we are the prey," Martin said. "There is more information available than any of us needs or can consume. Much of it is inaccurate and sometimes even harmful to us. Our children need to learn to be thinkers."

### WAL-MARTING OUR CHILDREN?

"What enables us to make those selections is being connected with and involved in the real life and work of our communities, surrounded by people who know us and interact with us," she said.

Martin and Challenge WV fellows adamantly believe that community

people will help children "read their reality so they can write their own history and improve their world in the 21st century."

Thomas Ramey of Challenge said "Our schools are rapidly being removed from communities. They're all out on the four-lane roads like Wal-Marts. We're 'Wal-Marting' our children."

Author Jonathan Kozol has written that our public schools are often "prisoners of minds." Schools are starting to look more like prisons, with solutions offered to address school violence like metal detectors, identification tags, holding rooms and police officers.

Mary Anne Raywid, respected professor at Hofstra University, said students are more satisfied with small schools, fewer of them drop out and they behave better in small schools.

In addition, she says disadvantaged students particularly need the small school setting.

Martin says there are many studies that show school size is the most important predictor of school violence.

"The school where the metal detectors have been installed in McDowell is the consolidated school. They're not needed at the small schools," said community school advocate Mike Carter.

Researcher Craig Howley of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory in Charleston, WV, notes that school size exerts a "unique influence on academic accomplishments with a strong negative relationship linking the two: the larger the school, the lower the student achievement rates."

Martin concluded "This is not about nostalgia. This is about the best way to educate our kids."

# Capitol moving to rural Calhoun, Bureaucrats tired of racy life-style

By Bob Weaver

*(Weaver is editor of the Challenge WV Newsletter, a Calhoun County commissioner and advocate for small communities)*

Twenty-first century consolidation is coming to the Mountain State to "better serve you."

Hence comes an official invitation to consider the relocation of power to Sunny Cal.

West Virginia has until 2010 to begin reshaping its cities, towns and counties, says Senator Brooks "Merge" McCabe, chairperson of the Commission on Governing in the 21st Century.

McCabe was likely selected for the commission since he is a Kanawha County developer. His commission didn't clutter up their membership with a single person from a rural county.

Everyone knows that 55 counties and 55 county school systems is a nuisance, let alone those hundreds of bumbling-along towns whose town councils know nothing about management.

Several West Virginia areas are reportedly looking into consolidating themselves into efficient metro areas, according to the commission.

Consolidation, for most West Virginia counties, is where bigger towns or counties take over smaller towns or counties to save money.

It's bound to work.

Saving money like school consolidation or the DMV creating regional offices or the regional jail system, or, well ... bigger is better appeals to most Americans, until they check their pocketbooks.

The Commission sponsored three bills last year to help municipalities and counties to combine. Surely they

have a couple in the kitty this year.

"Competition among neighboring municipalities (counties) is outdated - the real playing field is now global," the report said.

We know about global in West Virginia. All our jobs have gone abroad, from making shoes and sweaters, to thousands of high paying chemical and steel jobs.

If you live up on Grannyshe or down on Mud Lick, you know that global is good, local is bad. But opinions can be changed.

Hey, part of going global is having our port security managed by other countries, the local water company owned by a European firm and our steel made in China.

"In a climate of limited resources, rising expectations, and aging population, rural areas must govern themselves more efficiently in order to preserve their quality of life and unique character," said the report.

It surely took a State Senator who surely went to college to write that conciliatory statement that says Charleston can do it better, even though they helped plunge the state into debt - ten billion dollars!

That's why we are hopeful that Charleston can be merged with the smallish Town of Grantsville and the County of Calhoun.

Here in Sunny Cal we understand fiscal policy, pinching pennies every day and keeping things in the black.

So, it makes good sense to move every form of government from Kanawha County to Sunny Cal.

We know how to manage a buck.

We could borrow a drag-line from Massey Coal and level a few hills for enough flat land.

A side benefit for the displaced will be the opportunity to live and work in a pastoral, peaceful and down-home countryside.

And there's some really nice people here.

Bureaucrats can be relieved of their racy life-style and no more dodging bullets near the Capitol building or Charleston's West Side.

We wouldn't put up with a single fit thrown by the likes of former politico Del. Jerry Mezzatesta, so no need for an Ethics Commission.

We would happily develop a new restaurant in Grantsville with a back room with some high prices, just to help the folks settle in.

Since Calhoun is the only county in the state that is still dry from the hard spirits, there would be no need to enlarge the local AA chapter. We'll reform 'em when they cross the county line.

Sober politicians make sober decisions.

Hey, think of such a dynamic and cultural change, going back to small communities.

People might begin to appreciate each other, connected to basic human needs.

We could keep small community-based schools and prevent kids being on bus rides of an hour or more to those mega-million dollar schools in the next county.

A return to community life would improve the social and moral fabric and the connectedness of government to taxpayers.

So Charleston, pack on up and head this way.

We'll treat you right.

And maybe we could get a better road to the interstate.

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## Challenge WV members will attend Mississippi workshop

Several members of Challenge WV will attend the fifth annual Rural Education Working Group conference in Olive Branch Mississippi, April 21-23.

The group consists of rural activists, educators, parents and students.

The Rural School and Community Trust is sponsoring the meeting, which

they say is a spiritual-revival and policy-strategizing event.

# 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

**Non-profit  
Organization  
US Postage Paid  
Permit No. 2673  
Charleston, WV 25301**

# We Support Small Schools!

## Challenge West Virginia County Contacts

### Boone County

Danielle Johnston  
(304) 369-2306  
daniellenjohnston@yahoo.com

### Braxton County

Misty Houghton  
(304) 765-7927

### 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

### Hancock County

Brian Handley  
304-387-1709  
brianhandley@msn.com

### Harrison County

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

### Jefferson County

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

### Kanawha County

Monica Prater  
(304) 548-7301  
missmonicastarr@aol.com

### Lincoln County

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

### Logan County

Craig Manns  
(304) 855-4442  
cmwv2001@yahoo.com

### Marshall County

Frank Longwell  
(304) 232-1093

### Mason County

Darrell Hagley  
(304) 743-9451  
DEHagley@WMConnect.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

### Ohio County

Jim Mullooly  
(304) 574-0699  
jfm@1st.net

### 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