

# 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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## Legislature drops bill to slow long bus rides

Many West Virginia children as young as four are facing long bus rides, in some communities over one-and-one half hours each way.

A recent bill in the WV legislature dealing with long bus rides for elementary students and preschoolers died, stopped by new Education Chair Mary Poling.

The bill, introduced by Governor Joe Manchin and supported by Se. Robert Plymake, Senate Education Chairman, would have made law the State Department of Education's own ride-time guidelines.

It would have limited to 30 minutes one-way how long elementary and preschool students could be on a bus, not retro-active, applying to newly constructed or consolidated schools.

"The 2007 bill had a waiver, and was about the softest bill ever intro-

duced," said Challenge Coordinator Linda Martin, but it would have given some consideration back to community schools and the youngest of students.

Over 100 elementary schools are still on the chopping block, with the SBA misrepresenting that closure-consolidation decisions are done by local boards.

"We all know boards are held hostage," Martin said. "Despite all the research for community-based schools, the power of the state's School Building Authority continues to use their bloody hammer and use their economies of scale formula."

Martin said "With some serious efforts by some legislators to buck the trend and a lot of lip-service, community education bills have failed."

A 2006 bill would have given

local communities some say over the consolidation of their schools, in many cases preventing long bus rides.

Martin gave an example of lip-service, issued by School Building Authority head Mark Manchin, who said "I commend the Governor for looking and making some decisions based on the amount of time spent on a school bus and small children and the amount of time they spend on the bus."

"Interesting statement, but no changes," she said.

Challenge WV has long contended bus guidelines have been widely misrepresented by the state, placing thousands of WV students on long bus rides.

Challenge has just completed an independent study about bus rides in the state, to be released soon.

## O'Cull blames Lincoln culture, politicians and board for school problems



The State School Board's Executive Director, Dr. Howard O'Cull, is blaming Lincoln County culture and politicians for on-going problems since the State Department of Education took over the system seven years ago, indicating the local school board lacks a spirit of cooperation with state officials.

O'Cull, writing in the school board association's publication, said "I may be treading where angels dare not thread," attempting to place the Lincoln problem in perspective.

Thomas Ramey, Lincoln board member and Challenge fellow, said "Our school board has been neutered to make any important decisions for seven years, while problems have worsened from test scores to future financial woes."

Steve Paine, State Superintendent of Schools, has twice blamed the local school board for such problems in the media, while two state-appointed superintendents have managed the system since 2000.

O'Cull says the Lincoln board will not accept the state's assessment that the system has not been financially devastated with the construction of one of USAs most expensive high schools in Hamlin, creating more long bus rides, while at the same time they have encouraged the transfer of about 200 Lincoln students to neighboring Logan County.

The loss in revenue in declining student enrollment, in itself, is a serious blow to the local school budget.

The West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) told Lincoln board members they will be able to operate on a "tight budget," a situation some state officials have privately stated is severe.

O'Cull, who represents local school boards and has previously applied for the State Superintendent of Schools job,

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says "Besides finances, local board members - some say with motive to embarrass the state board and the WVDE - want a through cataloging of what has happened with the system since state intervention."

"Still, more teachers and programs could be cut, a situation created by the WVDE, not the school board," Ramey

said.

Paine has told state media the WVDE wants to return the system to Lincoln. Ramey asked "Since the system is in such bad shape, should be not be reluctant? Why not audit how effectively the state's take-over has been."

The Lincoln County Journal wrote "O'Cull appears to confirm something

the state board has denied for years - that the state took over the Lincoln system to build a consolidated high school."

O'Cull said "powerful politicians" wanted just one high school.

O'Cull's article can be found online at [www.wvsba.org](http://www.wvsba.org) under the March 9, 2007 issue of The Legislature.

## Governor's wife appointed to State Board

Governor Joe Manchin has appointed his wife to the West Virginia Board of Education, saying the move will open up communication and improve education.

First lady Gayle Manchin has already attended her first board meeting. She is a graduate of West Virginia University, and has worked as an educator in Marion

County schools and at Fairmont State University.

Manchin's appointment of his wife is part of his effort to have more control over the future of education in the state.

He recently appointed his nephew, Mark Manchin, to be the executive director of the School Building Authority.

## Rural counties facing bigger challenges

New census numbers show 29 of the state's 55 counties have declined in population since 2000, but the executive director of the state School Building Authority Mark Manchin says that doesn't mean the state should get rid of county school systems.

President Bush's education secretary Margaret Spellings, a major proponent of NCLB, has implied that community-based education run by local elected board members is cumbersome and ineffective, indicating the nation's schools might best be run by

professional educators.

Under the state's school funding formula, rural counties are facing a bleak financial future, with little relief in sight.

Teachers, programs and service personnel continue to be axed.

Manchin says having 55 school districts continues to be manageable. He says neighboring states Ohio and Pennsylvania operate public school systems with hundreds of school districts.

Manchin, after hundreds of com-

munity schools have forcefully been closed in WV, says consolidating school systems in West Virginia would mean a loss of local control.

"It allows the people in communities to have access to their government," he said.

Manchin defended the RESA system, which some education officials believe has outlived its usefulness, particularly with the advent of 21st Century technology to assist with purchases and services.

## Young school board member Ramey prepares for aftermath of thwarted democratic process



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Thomas Ramey was just 20-years-old when the State School Board of West Virginia took over control of Lincoln County schools in 2000.

By then he had already been involved with county school politics

for several years, and he understood that the takeover effectively disfranchised local residents on school matters by taking away the power of their vote. Today, the state still runs the county school system, the board has almost no authority, and community participation is nearly non-existent.

"Prior to takeover it was not uncommon for board meeting rooms to be full of parents eager to give input; today we're lucky to have two people in the audience-total, because people feel it's futile," Ramey explains.

So, in 2006, Ramey decided to run for school board, with his eye on the day when Lincoln County will govern its own

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schools again. He wants the county to be prepared. For him that means working to re-engage citizens and help people understand what has happened to the county as a result of the state takeover.

He is now one of the youngest local school board members in West Virginia history.

His involvement with school politics and his philosophy about civic participation date back to his middle school years at Harts High School in Lincoln County.

One of his teachers encouraged students to get involved in state and county governmental processes. When a proposal to close the county's four small high schools was put forth in the mid-1990s, he was ready to help lead the community effort to stop it.

"I understood that community and having opportunities to be involved in your own community are important," Ramey says.

"When kids are forced out of their community and into long bus rides they become isolated. They are forced to disengage from community life. When people disengage from civic and community participation, that is a major downfall of any society."

The consolidation proposal was defeated and the school board submitted a facili-

ties plan to the state that kept all four high schools open.

But the State School Board rejected Lincoln County's facilities plan and shortly afterward, in 2000, the state took over the district, relieved the local school board of authority, and installed a new superintendent.

Then in rapid order the state moved to consolidate the high schools. The new high school opened this fall with the dubious distinction of being the most expensive high school building, on a per pupil basis, in West Virginia history—a \$32 million building for 900 students.

There are other consequences as well after nearly seven years of state control.

Test scores along with graduation and college-going rates in Lincoln County are stagnant or declining—among the lowest in the state.

Some of the elementary schools are in disrepair, but there is no money to fix them because the county's revenue capacity is nearly exhausted, as a result of costs associated with the new high school.

Additionally, the school district is facing a significant reduction in per pupil state funding because so many high school students left the county rather than ride the

bus four hours to attend the consolidated school.

For its part, the state maintains that the student achievement issues will be resolved with the opening of the new high school. And, it is beginning to discuss the idea of giving control back to the Lincoln County school board.

Some county residents remain concerned about the many financial and educational problems that the board will face. "People here have been cut out of decision-making for so long that many don't know what's going on. We have to be ready to deal with it when the state dumps all these problems in our laps. We have to address achievement and finances and protect the K-8 schools. And, we have to hold the state

accountable to keep its promises to the high school students. The state people don't have to live with the consequences of the takeover, but we do," said Ramey. He concludes, "When it comes down to it, this is a democratic issue. We have to speak the truth."

Thomas Ramey lives in Harts, West Virginia and is a Fellow with Challenge West Virginia, which helps community residents rally around issues and get involved in civic life.

Visit the Rural Schools And Community Trust at [www.ruraledu.org](http://www.ruraledu.org)

## WV education near bottom in US Chamber of Commerce report

The US Chamber of Commerce, an advocate of No Child Left Behind, says its' state-by-state education report card shows that the U.S. education system is failing and putting America's future competitiveness at risk.

West Virginia, despite spending one of the largest amounts per student in the US, is ranked at 43rd.

The Chamber's Education Report Card gives the state an F for academic achievement and an F on return on investment.

The state got a D in academic achievement for low-income and minority students.

Their report says the state is not truthful about student proficiency,

giving a D.

Other D grades were in post-secondary and workforce readiness and flexibility in management policy.

The state did get a C in rigor of standards and an A in management of data.

Nationwide, only about one-third of 4th and 8th graders—and well less than 20% of low-income and minority children are proficient in reading and math, a real issue in West Virginia.

Teacher quality is insufficient, says the Chamber. Data-driven innovation is far too rare. Only about two thirds of ninth graders graduate from high school in four years - and the students who do graduate are often

unprepared for college and the workforce.

The Chamber says, far too long, the business community has been willing to leave education to the politicians and educators. Not anymore.

This first state by state education report card by the business community takes a hard look at where we are and what reforms are needed to secure American competitiveness in the 21st Century.

"Working diligently together, we intend to support these reforms at the local, state, and national levels," concluded the Chamber.