



The West Virginia Challenge

March 1999



Challenge WV battles for community schools

Joyce White of Bomont, a rural community in Clay County, became involved in the school reform movement in West Virginia when officials tried to close her local school, H.E. White Elementary.

Joyce felt so strongly about the school and its place in the community that she mortgaged her farm to pay a lawyer to fight to save H.E. White. Husband Basil said, "I wasn't real sure we should risk the farm, but she really wanted to do it."

With the passage of Clay County's first levy, H.E. White and another small school, Ivydale, got a five-year reprieve. But Joyce and other Clay Countians are afraid the pressure will again mount to close their small rural schools.

They realize that even as more and more information becomes available showing that small schools provide the best education for children, the state of West Virginia has continued a massive consolidation program. Since 1990, local boards of education have closed 26 percent of the state's public schools.

That's why Joyce became part of Challenge West Virginia, a program that links persons across the state who

Please turn to page three



Charter Chapter

Challenge West Virginia Education Coordinator Linda Martin, right, presents a certificate to Arvin Harsh and Jana Freeman of Preston County celebrating the formation of the first county chapter of Challenge West Virginia. More than 50 residents of three communities in that county held a joint meeting in November and asked to form the Preston County Chapter of Challenge West Virginia.



First Class of Fellows

The first group of fellows was welcomed into the Challenge West Virginia program in February. They are, pictured, left to right front row, Phyllis McCoy, Mingo County; Loretta Conley, Clay County; and Cindy Miller, Webster County. Standing are Beverly Workman, Mingo County; Jana Freeman, Preston County; Eddie Harman, McDowell County; and Darrel Boggs, Clay County. Fellows not pictured are Jeanette Craighead, McDowell County, and Betty Neil and Pam Boles, Fayette County.



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.

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.



per pupil and cost per mile. Total estimated statewide pupil transportation costs in 1997-98 were \$130.4 million.

Almost 2,800 bus drivers in West Virginia drove students almost 40 million miles in 1997-98. During that year, 513 accidents involving school transportation occurred in the state, according to the MGT of America report.

In February 1999, a school bus collided with a car in Preston County, sending dozens of children to the hospital for evaluation, according to reports in *The Charleston Gazette*. None of the injuries was serious. The accident occurred about 3 p.m. on a rural road between Newburg and Tunnelton. Also in February, a bus ran off the road in Lincoln County, sending several students to the hospital, and a Raleigh County bus driver was killed when his bus, with no passengers was hit by a cement truck. A Raleigh County sheriff's department official said, "If there had been kids on that bus, they'd all be dead."

A kindergarten student was locked inside a school bus at the end of a bus run in Logan County in December, according to *The Gazette*. The child was asleep on the locked bus for about an hour before he opened a window to escape. A neighbor saw the boy and took him back home.

The driver had parked the bus at her house, but failed to conduct a required check. A statewide West Virginia Department of Education policy requires drivers to walk through the bus, checking all seats at the end of any run to make sure no children are left inside.

This 'n that from around the state

Data provided to the state by the research group MGT of America indicates that West Virginia operates the most expensive transportation program in the country based on cost

The senior editor of *Education Week's* Editorial Projects in Education took on the *Charleston Daily Mail* for an editorial stating that West Virginia's schools are "too small to be conducive to learning."

Not so, according to Editor Craig D. Jerald, who responded in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Mail*: "In fact, our indicators consider smaller schools to be a good thing." He said his publication reported that "Researchers at the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that elementary school students do better in schools with enrollments of 350 or less. These smaller schools are also consistently more successful in developing a sense of professional community, fostering leadership and involving parents. Ideally, every child would attend a small school."

Figures from the State Department of Education revealed that only ten of the state's 55 counties were able to stay within the state formula for teachers and only two counties were able to stay within the formula for service personnel, according to *The Charleston Daily Mail*.

An after-school program in Lincoln County (funded with a three year \$1 million 21st Century Community Learning Center grant), will be directed by Charles McCann, the county school board's personnel director and president of the Lincoln County Commission.

Two members of the school board are salaried through the County Commission, and McCann is a member of the grant's management team, which recommended the hirings, according to the *Gazette's* Fanny Seiler.

Editorialized the *Gazette*, "It's sad that the public school system – the only hope for a better future for youngsters in the low-income county – has been turned into a private gravy train for the political faction that wins the school board election."

Mentors

Serving as mentors for some of the Challenge WV fellows are individuals who have long been involved in the efforts for better schools. Among the mentors are, front row, left to right, Winifred Andrews, Fayette County; Amelia Anderson, Webster County; and Nancy Updegrave, Clay County; Back row, Arvin Harsh, Preston County, and Joyce White, Clay County. Franki Patton-Rutherford, McDowell County, also is a mentor.



The battle for community schools

are committed to maintaining and improving small community public schools.

The program, sponsored by Covenant House in Charleston, recently received funding from the Rural Challenge.

Challenge West Virginia consists of three parts:

- ◆ The fellowship program, made up of community representatives who will meet monthly for training sessions and to exchange information and ideas as they work in their communities to improve schools and to build membership in Challenge West Virginia.

- ◆ A statewide forum made up of persons committed to community schools, which also will meet monthly to examine issues and use their collective power to address key policy initiatives of importance to community schools. This group includes fellows, educators and others who believe current state education policy does not serve the best interests of many students, especially those in small, rural schools.

- ◆ A community schools support project, which will include annual academies to acquaint a large and diverse audience with the value of small community schools and to develop sources of funds to help support fellows and community groups in their school improvement efforts.

Ten men and women from across the state have been named the first fellows in the Challenge West Virginia program and are beginning to build a statewide movement in support of community schools.

The newly-named fellows are Darrel Boggs, Bomont, Clay County; Pam Boles, Gauley Bridge, Fayette County; Loretta Conley, Nebo, Clay County; Jeanette Craighead, Eckman, McDowell County; Jana Freeman, Aurora, Preston County; Eddie Harman, Caretta, McDowell

County; Phyllis McCoy, Delbarton, Mingo County; Cindy Miller, Hacker Valley, Webster County; Betty Neil, Gauley Bridge, Fayette County; and Beverly Workman, Williamson, Mingo County.

Joyce White is serving as a mentor in the program, sharing her years of experience with Darrel Boggs, the fellow from her community as he begins to build a local program. Other mentors are Arvin Harsh of Eglon, Preston County; Winifred Andrews of Gauley Bridge, Fayette County; Nancy Updegrave of Ivydale, Clay County; Amelia Anderson of Cleveland, Webster County; and Franki Patton-Rutherford of Caretta, McDowell County.

The Story of the Politics of Education in West Virginia

The 100-page Challenge WV study, *The Story of the Politics of Education in West Virginia*, is now available.

The study examines recent education history and policy in the state and raises questions about where West Virginia education policy is headed. For more information, contact Linda Martin or Beth Spence.

