



The

# Challenge

May 2001



## New Chapter

Residents of Putnam County recently formed the newest chapter of Challenge WV. Co-director Linda Martin, left, presents a certificate chartering the new chapter to Putnam County fellow Tim McCoy.

## Voters reluctant to pass bonds

In recent weeks, Charleston newspapers have reported on growing organized opposition to bond issues in Fayette (May 5) and Putnam (May 15) counties. Will residents of these counties join a long line of voters from around the state who are increasingly saying no to bonds?

In the past year and a half:

- Marion County in April defeated a \$12 million bond that would have allowed construction of a new middle school. The previous year Marion County voted against a \$29.7 million bond by a three-to-one margin.

- In March, Mercer County voters rejected a \$21.9 million bond, with an overwhelming 8,729 against, only 1,527 for.

- Jefferson County voters rejected a \$49 million bond in the fall of 2000.

- Mason County voters said no to a \$25 million in May 2000.

- Monongalia County voters defeated an \$80 million bond in February 2000.

Challenge West Virginia co-director Linda Martin says opposition to school consolidation is fueling the vote against bonds.

“I think that, if people were asked to vote on bonds to improve their community schools or to build more small schools in communities, then the outcomes would be very different,” she said.

“Voting against bonds is just about the only way

citizens in West Virginia can express opposition to a policy that has closed more than a fourth of our public schools during the past twelve years.”

Challenge West Virginia fellows agree.

Tim McCoy from Putnam County said officials “could pass a bond for twice as much if they had a different plan. The plan to close schools is not in the best interest of kids.”

Paul Hamrick from Harrison County said he felt the bond in neighboring Marion County failed because “folks in power were making decisions without local input.”

“They felt they had to get a certain number of votes out. They didn’t count on other people coming out to vote.”

During the time other counties were rejecting bonds, Kanawha County and Wyoming County voters approved them.

But the Kanawha County bond was to improve two existing schools – George Washington and St. Albans.

Only Wyoming County passed a bond to construct a consolidated high school.

Linda Martin said she sees a disturbing trend.

“People who have always been willing to support schools are no longer willing to do so because school officials aren’t listening to them,” she said. “Officials are going to have to regain the public trust if they expect people to open their pocketbooks for schools.”

# This 'n that from around the state

- West Virginia students rank 39<sup>th</sup> in the nation in academic achievement, according to a report released in April by the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council. The rankings were based on ACT and SAT scores in 2000 and eighth graders' 1998 scores on the National Assessment of Education Progress. The report suggests that spending money on education does not necessarily raise test scores or improve achievement, according to Andrew LeFevre, who helped write the report. During the 1998-99 school year, West Virginia spent \$6,887 per pupil, compared to the national average of \$6,251. West Virginia ranked 36<sup>th</sup> in the same report last year.



- The state-appointed superintendent of Lincoln County schools has announced the selection of the Jones Farm in New Hamlin as the site for the proposed consolidated county high school.

- Logan County school officials have said they will not accept Lincoln County students unless Logan gets money for a new or enlarged school at Chapmanville. A survey conducted in Harts area indicates more than 200 students would opt to attend school in Logan County, if given the choice. Chapmanville principal Earnest Amburgey said his school, built to hold 460 students, has an enrollment of 400.

- The State Senate rejected Gov. Bob Wise's appointment for State Board of Education and instead approved Underwood appointee Barbara Fish of Parkersburg. Fish is a supporter of neighborhood schools.

- Science teachers are concerned that eliminating science testing at the third grade level will cause West Virginia students to slip further through the cracks in a subject they say is vital. A committee charged with recommending a replacement exam for the Stanford 9 achievement test is expected to ask state school board members to eliminate science testing for third graders. The committee will make its final recommendation to the state board in May. State school officials say the committee's intention is to focus on math and reading.

- Marion County voters have defeated a \$12 million school bond that would have allowed construction of a new West Fairmont middle school. About 42 percent of voters cast ballots in favor of the bond while 58 percent voted against it. The bond would have provided most of the money to build a school to accommodate 750 students. The School Building Authority was to have provided another \$3 million if the bond passed.

- The faculty senate at Hurricane Middle School has passed a resolution banning the public from attending its meetings unless a majority of the faculty votes to allow someone to make a presentation. The action was taken after Putnam County Board of Education members Patty Thornton and Karen Houdersheldt attended a meeting.

- Putnam County school board members have taken a 180-day option to buy property in Red House for a new consolidated high school. A local businessman urged the board not to purchase land before voters accept or reject a \$35.8 million school bond proposal on May 15.

- State Board of Education members say the Mingo County school system has gone from being seriously impaired to almost fully accredited in three years after reviewing the county's latest test scores, drop-out figures and attendance rates. But the state won't turn operations back to the county until another inspection is conducted by the state Office of Education Performance Audits to make sure all non-compliances have been taken care of. In 1997, 45 percent of the county's students scored in the top half of the SAT-9 test. Last year, 62 percent scored in the top half. When the county was audited three years ago, 170 noncompliances were cited. Last year that number was reduced to 20. The state took over Mingo County schools in 1998, citing low students achievement, a lack of leadership, and inadequate instructional practices.

- Fayette County schools will be operating with nearly \$1.5 million less next school year, according to K.R. Carson, associate superintendent of finance. Carson attributes much of the difference to a drop in state aid caused by declining enrollment. He said the county lost more than 500 students.

- The Monroe County school system, which had six consecutive deficits after consolidating schools in the 1990s is back in the red with a deficit of approximately \$100,000. Superintendent Lyn Guy attributed the deficit to higher utility, fuel and substitute teacher costs.

# Appalachian Studies Conference



Challenge WV co-director Linda Martin and fellows Jana Freeman, Paul Hamrick and Jon Frist participated in the Appalachian Studies Association's annual conference March 31 at Snowshoe Mountain Resort. Challenge WV's workshop was "Education in Appalachia – Changing State Education Policy from the Grassroots."

The Appalachian Studies Association is

made up of scholars, teachers and regional activists who believe that "shared community has been and will continue to be important to those writing, researching and teaching about Appalachia."

From left to right above are Jon Frist, Paul Hamrick, Linda Martin and Jana Freeman.

*(photo by Patty Hamrick)*

## ***Florida Legislature supports small schools***

Beginning July 1, 2003, all schools built or planned in Florida must be small schools, under requirements of a law passed by the state's legislature.

## **Challenge welcomes new class of fellows**

Challenge West Virginia welcomes new fellows Carolyn Arritt from Fayette County, Anita Edmonds from Kanawha County, Marge Bragg from Clay County and Eric Rogers from Calhoun County.

Continuing as fellows are Jana Freeman, Preston County; Paul Hamrick, Harrison County; Patty Deak and Terri Weiford, Ritchie County; Jon Frist, Monongalia County; Chris Stratton, Logan County; Thomas Ramey, Jr., Lincoln County; Cindy Miller, Webster County; Tim McCoy, Putnam County; and Mike Lushbaugh and Eddie Harman, McDowell County.

The law stated that the action was taken "in order to promote increased learning and more effective use of school facilities."

The state's legislative body found that smaller schools provide benefits of reduced discipline problems and crime, reduced truancy and gang participation, reduced dropout rates, improved teacher and student attitudes, improved student self-perception, student academic achievement equal to or superior to that of students at larger schools and increased parental involvement.

Lawmakers maintain that smaller schools can provide these benefits while not increasing administrative and construction costs.

Florida defines small schools as elementary schools with no more than 500 students; middle schools with no more than 700 students; and high schools with no more than 900 students. Schools serving kindergarten through 8 should contain no more than 700 students and schools serving kindergarten through 12 should have no more than 900 students.

# The Challenge

The Challenge is published by Challenge West Virginia, a state-wide 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.

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