



The Challenge



May 2006

Dismantling county school systems, the new era of consolidation

The next generation of school consolidation has come to West Virginia, and it's the elimination of county lines.

Its selling point is giving parents a "choice" of where their children attend school, a concept that has wide appeal, at least on the surface.

Nearly 150 students from Lincoln County's closed Hart's High School have been encouraged to attend a new high school, built with School Building Authority funds at Chapmanville, Logan County.

The Chapmanville school was a candidate for closure, with those students likely being consolidated in their own county, but Sen. Earl Ray Tomblin convinced the SBA to construct a new school, contingent on capturing students from neighboring Lincoln County.

"The Chapmanville school needed the Lincoln students to meet economies of scale," said Challenge fellow and newly elected Lincoln school board

member Thomas Ramey.

Harts was closed after a long intra-county battle over consolidation, ending in the erection of the new Lincoln County High School at Hamlin at a cost of \$32-\$40 million.

Logan will now be sending school buses into Lincoln to transport the students, traveling the same routes where pick-ups are being made to transport students to Hamlin.

The loss of students, with more expected, will cost the Lincoln system about \$1 million.

Dr. Anne Seaver, newly appointed superintendent of Lincoln County schools, said "The decisions related to cross-county school attendance were clearly decided before I arrived" but admitted "The scale of this is of concern."

Seaver linked the school consolidation issue to the closing of one-room schools, saying an economies of scale

model is necessary to keep schools financially sound.

She could not give an example of where school consolidation actually saved money, indicating she was not familiar with the research. "I focus on doing what I can do to give children the best education."

Birdie Gandee, Lincoln's school treasurer, told the State Board of Education she is vitally concerned how the large loss of students to Logan County will affect the county budget, indicating "We'll likely have to close more schools to make ends meet."

Some Lincoln school officials have said the system is on a fast-track toward bankruptcy.

The overhead costs of operating the new Lincoln consolidated high school, the most expensive school built to date in West Virginia, is expected to reach \$300,000 annually.

See Dismantling county... on Page 2

Sixty-two percent of "Schools of Excellence" are small schools

The WV Department of Education has announced their Schools of Excellence for 2006-07. Interestingly, 13 of the 21 (62%) have enrollment under the SBAs criteria as being too small.

The WV's Schools Of Excellence that fail to meet economies of scale:

Boone County: Jeffery-Spencer Elementary 105; Braxton County: Davis Elementary 174; Cabell County: Cammack Elementary 259; Harrison County: Lost Creek Elementary 160; Kanawha County: Midland Trail Elementary 203, Horace Mann Middle 442, Jayenne Elementary 238; Mc-

Dowell County: Welch Elementary 299; Ohio County: Triadelphia Middle School 442; Pendleton County: Brandywine Elementary 168; Raleigh County: Crab Orchard Elementary 281; Upshur County: Washington District Elementary 123; Wayne County: Ceredo Elementary 211.

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The State Board of Education took over operation of the Lincoln system over five years ago, saying it was poorly managed and students had some of the lowest scores in West Virginia.

Hart's teacher Phyllis Kirk compiled statistics she presented to school officials, called "The Final Show," displaying about a dozen charts that show student performance has dramatically worsened since the state has operated the system.

State School Superintendent Steve Paine still blames the local school board for the systems failure, although nearly all aspects of operation are determined by the state and their appointed superintendent.

Lincoln County board member Carol Smith says, "In the big picture, rural community schools will be the losers," with the WalMarting of schools and creating long bus rides well over the state's guidelines.

Smith said "It's a real blurry problem what happens to school levy money," passed by Lincoln voters, with their children going to other counties.

"Our citizens are paying tax mon-

ey for their children to be educated in Lincoln County, including the excess levy" Smith said, lamenting that Chapmanville didn't really want Harts kids, and not agreeing to change the school's name to indicate it is serving a regional community.

Linda Manns, the parent of a sixth grade Harts student, said "I'm still sending my daughter to Hamlin, because I refuse to give up my voting rights and my taxes to another county."

The cross-county-line consolidation has mostly affected Lincoln high school students, but "At a board meeting we learned that 37 elementary kids had transferred to Logan," Smith said.

Challenge WV coordinator Linda Martin said Lincoln students going to Logan "Hasn't solved a thing with long bus rides," with only a 15-minute differential in bus ride times. Many Harts students are on a school bus between one and one-half hours each way.

"Now we have children as young as four on these buses," she said.

Martin asked "Why should we let educational bureaucrats get by with this?" Challenge WV has been at-

tempting to obtain the state's plan to regionalize schools.

Superintendent Seaver said "Students crossing county and even state lines is not a new concept in West Virginia."

A number of Preston County students are being bused to Tucker County, with Preston taxpayers refusing to pass an excess school levy. In Williamson, mostly related to the Mingo County consolidation battle, a considerable number of students are enrolled in Kentucky.

While declining comment on a state plan to regionalize schools, Seaver said "The RESAs work at the will and pleasure of the legislature."

"County school boards have already had most of their constitutional powers removed by the legislature," said Ramsey.

What concerns Challenge WV and thousands of parents in the Mountain State is the removal of education from their communities and local control.

"It is globalizing education and deconstructing communities."

Wide gap in views between students and staff, says Alliance

A new study by the West Virginia Education Alliance reveals a wide gap of differing views between students and staff in low-income schools.

The Alliance says the gap may be leading to problems in achievement.

Alliance CEO Dr. Hazel Palmer just released the results of the study and says it appears students at low-income schools often have a more negative attitude than those in other facilities.

"Students who attend schools with high levels of students on free and re-

duced lunch and African American students, tend to see academic expectations and instruction, course taking, respect, mentoring, fairness, and student relationships in a more negative light than staff and teachers," says Palmer.

Palmer says both staff and students need to address the subject of equity.

Palmer says "Students are concerned about fights with other students, they're feeling like they're getting a lot of busy work, that staff holds low expectations for them, that the instruction

is routine, that there's not a lot of fairness in the school."

Staff members, who completed the same questionnaire answered the exact opposite.

They believe expectations are high and that instruction is engaging.

Palmer says that difference is likely the root of the problem, calling it a major disconnect.

Results of the study can be viewed on the Education Alliance's website at www.educationalliance.org.

State uses deceptive practices to hide minority scores

WV is not reporting half of the test scores of WV's black students under the federal No Child Left Behind law.

NCLB requires public schools to test students" math and reading skills periodically and report on overall per-

formance. Schools also must report how various categories of students per-

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State uses...continued from page 2 form, including race. If one subgroup fails, so does the whole school.

West Virginia, like many other states, avoids reporting the scores of minorities because of a loophole that

allows states to ignore scores for groups of children too small to be statistically significant.

The federal law allows each state to set the size of groups it considers statistically insignificant.

West Virginia set that number at 50. Any minority group of fewer than 50 isn't counted, which eliminates a broad swath of the state's racial minorities. The scores of more than 55 percent of black students and all Asians, Hispanics and Native Americans are excluded.

Less than 1.6 percent of white students were excluded. Historically, minorities have not performed as well on standardized tests as whites.

James Tolbert, president of the NAACP in West Virginia, said

"It's something they've been doing all along. It's deceptive, it's wrong, it's racist."

Tolbert says keeping information from black parents is even worse - "It's criminal"

State board reviews accreditation process

The state Department of Education is looking at what criteria should be used to determine the performance of West Virginia's public schools.

A 25-member panel will meet to study how the state Office of Performance Audits examines schools for accreditation.

The agency's director, Kenna Seal,

says education officials need to look at what constitutes full accreditation. He says more credit should be given for Advanced Placement programs and college entrance exam scores.

Currently, accreditation is based on test data and participation rates, graduation rates and attendance rates. Those are all criteria that help determine federal funding.

Seal says he would like to see a ranking system that would use academic and nonacademic criteria.

He also says college remediation factors could be a factor.

About 33 percent of West Virginia's college freshmen attend remedial classes. State board reviews accreditation process

RESA Director sues state after \$1 million missing

The executive director of RESA 1 has been suspended for not keeping a closer eye on the finances. Carol Morgan stood before the state Board of Education to answer questions about a million dollars discovered missing in January 2006. She requested an open meeting.

Now, Morgan has brought suit over her suspension.

Deborah Mitchell, Morgan's executive secretary took care of all of the office purchase orders. She resigned the day the state board went public with the missing money allegations and could face criminal charges. Dur-

ing two hours of questions, Morgan said she had no idea what was going on and repeatedly told the board, "I am not a financial officer."

Board president Lowell Johnson asked her about her financial responsibility. "We had perfect audits."

Board member Barbara Fish asked Morgan point blank about her accountability. Morgan told the board, "I had no reason not to trust her (Mitchell)."

Board members say Morgan refused to take responsibility even though it was part of her job. William Grizzell, who just retired as Lincoln

County Superintendent of Schools, will act as the interim executive director of RESA 1.

Meanwhile, Morgan's lawyer Erwin Conrad said "They, in essence said we are just doing a playground do-over. And that's really pathetic."

Morgan sent a letter to State School Superintendent Dr. Steve Paine saying she was retiring effective June 1st.

The criminal investigation into the missing money continues on the state and federal levels.

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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