



The Challenge



May 2007



OPPRESSION DONE UNDER THE SUN

The state will close 408-student Gilbert High School and bus students over tortuous mountains

"So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and behold the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter"
Ecclesiastes Chapter 4

Webster's field of dreams vs. Mingo's bloody hammer

It was different worlds on the same day in West Virginia in the communities of Hacker Valley and Gilbert.

Gov. Joe Manchin and School Building Authority, head Dr. Mark Manchin choppered to Hacker Valley, Webster County to the groundbreaking of a new community school for 50 plus students.

While the music played and salutations were given, Gov. Manchin told a large crowd of parents, students and community leaders that "Children lose that human touch when they are removed from their community."

"When I see the waste in various areas, don't tell me we can't afford schools in our communities...This ground breaking is a field of dreams - if we build it, they will come," Gov. Manchin said.

SBA Director Manchin affirmed the governor's comments, "If people don't believe that we support small schools, they need to come to Hacker Valley to see what is happening here

today".

Down-state in Mingo County there was no music, no joy.

At a closure hearing for Gilbert High School, Assistant State Superintendent Joelea Marple was pretending to be concerned about the future of the school, one of five schools in the state is closing to create a consolidated high school on a strip site in a remote area near Red Jacket Mountain.

Marple said "We are here to listen to your concerns," knowing full-well the 408 student Gilbert High will be closed and students will be thrust into long bus rides, in some cases, over three tortuous mountains.

Few came to give their input. The

local paper, the Gilbert Times, didn't even have a story about the community shattering event and the school principal said he didn't send a notice home with students about the hearing.

State appointed Mingo superintendent Dwight Dials said several legal notices were placed in the Williamson daily newspaper.

Mingo school board member Bill Duty has called the state's power "the bloody hammer of consolidation."

That hammer was pounding loudly in Mingo County. Duty said community members had already surrendered, there was no need to protest.

Board members are not allowed to



Marple



Duty

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speaking at closure hearings. Duty signed to speak.

He said the SBA is allocating \$18 billion dollars to build the new school, but he remains bewildered about the rest of the funding. Duty believes the consolidated school will cost in excess of \$50 million.

Duty questioned the legality of the state's closure hearing and complained he had to use FOIA's to obtain basic information from the state about the project.

"My list of unanswered questions continues to grow," he said.



Surber

"The next time someone tells you to get out and vote, your vote counts, don't believe it," said Gilbert resident Pam Surber at the public hearing.

State officials, who have taken over Mingo County schools, are closing Gilbert, in addition to the Mingo County Career and Technical Center, Matewan, Burch and Williamson schools, consolidating them into one school to be built near Red Jacket mountain.

"The State Board has taken our vote away, a dictatorship when at least four of our elected officials respect the importance of community schools," Surber said.

Surber said they have shoved consolidation "down our throats."

"No one I talked to knew there was a meeting," said Surber.

All the Mingo schools slated to be closed were built in the 1970s and 80s.

The closure of Gilbert was not in the original consolidation plan, but has been included likely to meet the state's economies of scale model.

The Gilbert community school was built in the 1980s, a structurally sound, attractive and well-appointed building.

While state school representatives minimized the effect of long bus rides over several tortuous mountains, Challenge WV fellow Lorelei Scarbro said she was out-

raged that closure was even being considered.



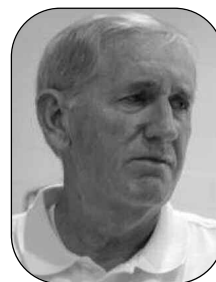
Scarbro

"We've been all over your county today. Are you crazy?," she asked. "I can't believe you've convinced yourselves you are doing this for the sake of the children," using a phrase coined by Massey CEO Don Blankenship.

"Can you even imagine Gilbert area kids participating in after-school activities?" Scarbro noted the state was unwilling to fund a new school at ill-fated Marsh Fork in Raleigh County, sitting within a few feet of a noisy and dirty coal operation and lurking under the shadow of a multi-billion gallon Massey sludge dam.

"We'd gladly use the SBA's funds in Marsh Fork," she said.

Gilbert citizen Dan Browning asked state officials if there is "anything we can do to keep Gilbert High from being closed." There was no response to his question.



Browning

"Don't you believe you have to come out of some big mega school to be successful," said Browning, using his children as examples. "You will demolish this community by closing this school," he concluded.

W.C. Totten, a retired Mingo school official, told parents that he was told that the valedictorian of Burch High School was really a C-student when they got to Marshall University.



Totten

"Mingo has too many teachers and too much personnel," he said. "We need to get on the ground floor (new school) so teachers can bid on jobs and not be excluded. Officials said Gilbert's faculty senate voted to close the school and consolidate, indicating they feared losing their seniority.

"Private donations will develop the sports fields," said Totten, "The sky's the limit on what the new school can offer."

The new Mingo school will be built on remote land that is currently being stripped by a coal company, and would eventually be in close proximity to the proposed King Coal Highway.

Nicewonder Coal is "donating" the land, provided there are lots of concessions, including tax breaks.

Currently there is no usable road to the school site, eight to ten miles from the nearest paved highway.

Challenge WV reported earlier that the new school is being used as an economic development engine, including the purchase of land around the school and the King Coal Highway.

Challenge WV has asked citizens to "Follow the money."

The Bluefield-Daily Telegraph reports there is a long road ahead for the \$1.6 billion King Coal Highway.

With funding lacking, "At 50 million a year from the federal government, which is described as simply wishful thinking, plus state matching dollars, it would take 36 years at a minimum to build the highway across southern West Virginia."

Gilbert's most notable citizen is coal baron and philanthropist Buck Harless, now in his 80s. Multi-millionaire Harless has given much back to his coal community, including the expansive Larry Joe Harless Community Center.

He has likely been a big supporter of his community school.

During the closure hearing, it was said that Harless supports Mingo's school consolidation and the new facility to be built on a still functioning strip mine next to the long-planned King Coal Highway.

Globalized education latest WV movement

State Superintendent of Schools Steve Paine says WV students must prepare themselves for a globalized world and become 21st Century learners.

Paine participated in a multi-state conference in Charleston, saying WV must surpass the NCLB standards that

guide elementary and secondary education.

"West Virginia teachers are primed to introduce new skills that students need to thrive in today's global society," said Barbara Michelman, director of communications for the Partnership for 21st Century Skills.

Paine, after traveling to China, said virtually all Chinese students are learning English, but only 24,000 USA students are studying Chinese.

Considering that China is expected to be a major economic engine, Paine is promoting the teaching of Chinese in state schools.

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He has embraced the concepts in Thomas Paine's book "The World is Flat," which advocates preparing students for a globalized market.



A video used by the WV Department of Education to inform teachers and parents, is titled "Citizens of a Global World," a model for the future of education in the Mountain State.

Starting next year in West Virginia, school-age children will be taught and tested using new standards, which are more rigorous and worldly, Paine said.

Critics of the plan say initially that more West Virginia students will fail to meet No Child Left Behind benchmarks for achievement.

"So be it," Paine said. "We have to raise the bar."

"We need to create (global) kinds of learners," Paine said.

Challenge WV coordinator Linda Martin asked "Whatever happened to giving children a broad-based education toward becoming critical thinkers?"

"This sounds like corporate education, destructive to a democratic society," she said.

Martin has said "A global citizen is a citizen of nowhere."

"It surely is the destruction of a system

based on community life and values. Not only going is place-based education, but more control is being surrendered to government and bureaucrats," she said.

Martin contends an economies of scale model, which is being used by WV officials to consolidate schools, will surely devalue the life of millions of people, mostly in rural areas.

"Merging, centralizing, consolidating and globalizing are economic movements that destroy communities, our schools and institutions that we value as Americans," Martin said.

Most of the movements are linked to the economies of scale model that has been used to eliminate community-based education.

Recht speaks out about landmark school decision

"What's interesting in West Virginia, the school - even the schoolhouse - isn't just an education environment. It's the cultural environment. It's the center of many things in the community," said Judge Arthur Recht.

Recht believes school consolidation is a major issue in the state because for so many areas, the school is the center of community activities.

The State of West Virginia has continued on unbridled school consolidation, placing thousands of children on long bus rides.

"When you close a school and go to a brand new building, you lose that. There are other things that should be taken into consideration, and folks should consider that," he said.

In 1982, the Ohio County Circuit never dreamed a school case - the Recht Decision - would define his career.

After 25 years, the 69-year-old Recht is still in the shadow of the case that began in 1975.

A Lincoln County parent filed a lawsuit claiming students in West Virginia's poorer, rural counties weren't getting the same education as those in wealthier counties.

The decision that helped equalize school funding is still the blueprint for the way West Virginia operates its school systems.

Recht said he thought in 1995 the discussion over the case was through, when he issued his final opinion. But the case continued in some manner until 2003, with arguments that the state wasn't abiding by the Recht Decision.



Gov. Joe Manchin meets with 53 students at Hacker Valley who will get a new school in their rural community, according to Webster Challenge fellow Cindy Miller, who led the fight to keep the community school



Greenbrier County's Williamsburg Elementary with 54 students has bit the dust, with instructor Angela McCallister saying "It's an environment that needs to stay," while principal Garry Burns said "They're missing the boat. Research shows that smaller schools are better." (Charleston Gazette Photo)

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.



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