



The Challenge



May 2008

CHALLENGE WV FELLOWS CONVENE AT TUSKEGEE



Robin Lambert of Rural Schools and Community Trust with Challenge WV Coordinator, Thomas Ramey

The Rural School and Community Trust Conference at held recently at Tuskegee University in Alabama, formerly Tuskegee Institute, was a reminder for Challenge WV fellows of many social justice battles.

Those attending the conference from around the USA advocate for community-based education.

“I was very interested in place-based learning and this was a chance for many of us to get a refresher,” said Challenge WV fellow Jim Mullooly.

“Interestingly, Tuskegee Institute was a model of such education as Booker T.

Challenge WV is happy to announce the passage of House Bill 4406 which will limit long bus rides for elementary students. Please help us continue this kind of important work by making a donation to:

Challenge WV
c/o Thomas Ramey
PO Box 146
Harts, WV 25524

Washington began the process of rationalizing and improving the black sharecropper culture in that area,” Mullooly said.

Progress, growth and creativity emerged from that core population and culture.

Challenge WV members attended workshops dealing with funding rural education and problems with disparity, in addition to being presenters at the conference.

“Challenge WV was able to review the groups successes at the conference, becoming inspired to continue grass roots work,” Mullooly said.

Several Challenge WV fellows participated in a tour of the community involved with the Tuskegee syphilis study.

A granddaughter of one of that group was a tour guide, giving a real sense of history and place.



Challenge WV Coordinator, Thomas Ramey; Challenge Fellow, Carol Smith; Rachel B. Tompkins, President Rural Schools and Community Trust; Challenge Fellows, Lorelei Scarbro, Jana Freeman, and Jim Mullooly.

Visit Challenge West Virginia at www.challengewv.org

TRANSPORTATION COSTS SKYROCKET AFTER DECADE OF CONSOLIDATION

West Virginia's county school systems need an extra \$5 million to keep their 3,000 buses rolling, with the skyrocketing costs of diesel fuel.

West Virginia already has one of the most expensive bus systems in the nation, following a decade of closure of schools and consolidation.

The State Department of Education has closed hundreds of West Virginia community schools, causing thousands of students to ride buses over the state's own guidelines.

Hundreds more will be on long bus rides of well over one-and-one-hours each way in counties like Mingo, with the closure of five rural high schools, a decision made by the state after taking over the local school system.

"At least state officials have quit saying

consolidation will save money," said Challenge Coordinator Thomas Ramey.

The legislature did pass a bill to slow the closure and consolidation movement this year, but consolidation already on the map will not be affected.

Gov. Joe Manchin may call a special session to ask lawmakers for money to keep the bus system afloat.

The state Department of Education has submitted the gasoline request to Manchin.

The school systems received a total of \$63 million in transportation, operation and maintenance funding from the state this year, based on 2006 cost figures.

The legislature was called upon two years ago for an additional \$3.5 million for gasoline due to rising costs.

The gasoline squeeze is causing problems nationwide with the elimination of sports and extra-curricular activities and holding classes four days a week.

West Virginia counties are reacting to the increased costs by dipping into reserve accounts and curtailing extra bus runs.

Despite the slow-down legislation on long bus rides, high costs are in

store for Mingo County residents. The state has closed four schools during its take-over of the rural school system. The recent busing bill is not retroactive.

Mingo kids will be traveling long and winding mountain roads from remote parts of the county to the proposed consolidated school on Red Jacket Mountain.

"Taxpayers, open your pocketbooks a little wider," concluded Ramey.

MINGO'S CONSOLIDATION BATTLE LURKING OMINOUSLY

State Department of Education officials and the State Board has a penchant for consolidating schools when they have taken over county school systems because of poor performance.

Perhaps the best example is the Mingo County school system, still on the front row for consolidation.

Opponents have called such consolidation a "bloody hammer," with the state justifying their actions on poor performance and bad decision making by elected school boards.

Gov. Joe Manchin has said he would not use School Building Authority (SBA) funds like a bloody hammer against the state's rural schools.

The justification indicates consolidation saves money and improves academics, creating greater opportunities for the state's children.

Unfortunately, there is little if any evidence of such.

SBA Director Mark Manchin told media "For the SBA, in every instance, with the exception of the eastern panhandle in places like Berkeley County and Jefferson County where growth is amazing...we just haven't approved new schools where there are no children present." (April 24, 2008)

Manchin must have drawn his line in the sand recently.

Still lurking ominously is the closure of five Mingo County schools, with students to be bused long miles over crooked mountain roads to an isolated area, with a yet to be built consolidated school.

The Mingo school consolidation battle has gone on for several years, with the state taking over the system twice, moving consolidation ahead.

State Schools Superintendent Steve Paine said the decision to provide funding (\$16.4 million) should bring an end to the discussion.

The state has ignored duly elected school board members, who have lost several court battles over the matter.

Charles "Butch" West, a Williamson attorney and Mingo school board member says the system lacks money to build the new consolidated school, unless county taxpayers approve a school bond issue.

West says the new school could cost \$73 million.

It is to be built on a strip mine site on land donated by a coal company, which is being given

significant tax breaks for their contribution.

A Mingo development agency is viewing the project as economic development, adjunct to the King Coal Highway which could be completed sometime in the next 30 years.

State appointed superintendent Dwight Dials says the building of the consolidated school is not a matter of "if," but a matter of "when" work will begin.

Despite enormous increases in bus transportation costs, Superintendent Dials says "It will be a great day for Mingo County when the school is built and ready for occupancy."

Challenge WV fellows will be returning to Mingo County in June to re-visit the contentious consolidation battle.

NORMANTOWN SCHOOL FIGHTING FOR LIFE

The state School Building Authority has approved 13 school construction projects for nearly \$70 million.

Gilmer County's Normantown Elementary school received a \$100,000 SBA emergency grant for additional temporary modular housing for students, denying a grant request for \$617,000 to remedy a multitude of long-ignored problems with the physical plant.

Normantown students have been re-located

outside the main building because of a mold problem, with modular units already being utilized.

Misty Pritt, a spokesperson for Normantown School and Challenge WV fellow, said there was a conflict between the State Fire Marshal's office and architects Williamson and Shiver over a "letter of occupancy," which would essentially guarantee that children could return

NORMANTOWN...
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HARTS GETS FUNDING FOR NEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Governor Joe Manchin and first lady Gayle Manchin came to Harts, Lincoln County, to praise the community for its hard work and perseverance in getting a new Pre-K-8 school.

The Harts community received \$12.3 million from the School Building Authority to construct a new Pre-K-8 school, according to Lincoln County School Board Member Thomas Ramey.

“The community decided to rally around the idea and show their support by coming here today and to thank the governor, the School Building Authority, the state superintendent of schools and others for their dedication to this community,” Ramey said.

“It’s been a tough eight years under the state takeover and the Harts area has felt quite

neglected.”

I think this school being constructed will be one step in the right direction to show the people of this area that the Harts kids do matter and they are a part of Lincoln County,” Ramey said.

“I know the challenges we’ve had over the years and some of the divisions that happened when decisions were made and I think this is a decision that has really united and given people hope and confidence and faith again,” Manchin said.

“Your children are our children and we want to do what’s best for all our children,” said Lincoln board president Carol Smith.

The Lincoln board will have to come up with local funding for the project.

EQUITY IN EDUCATION HAS LONG WAY TO GO

If No Child Left Behind is to bring equity to the education children receive in rural, poverty belt schools and their more highly funded counterparts in other areas, much has to change with the model.

Challenge WV fellows, traveling across America to school districts, are widely aware of the inequity.

States generally rank their school districts based on the performance of their students on standardized tests.

As on most standardized tests, high-scoring counties almost always have larger percentages of higher income students and greater local revenues than low-scoring counties.

In West Virginia, the results across the board have have been little to write home about.

A number of WV counties are listed in the 100 poorest counties in America, and the entire state is ranked near the bottom in income.

When districts are ranked on the basis of scores, those that are already highly-resourced grow in reputation and often property wealth adding to their revenue base.

Poor, rural counties lose ground and suffer losses in property wealth and in student enrollment.

The response by West Virginia’s education officials has been to close community schools, build larger consolidated schools, and place children on long bus rides, with a promise they will receive a wider curriculum and a better education.

There has been little if any evidence of that in West Virginia.

Matters are further complicated when low-wealth counties are expected to achieve the same results as high-wealth districts.

Schools seem to be forced to focus on test results to the exclusion of the overall academic development of their students.

Some education officials say far too many schools expect little from their low-income students academically and offer them little in the way of opportunity, blaming poverty for weak outcomes rather than examining their own efforts and attitudes.

With West Virginia’s funding of rural schools still based on student population, it appears few school systems will be able to deliver the quality of academics being demanded.

FIGHTING...

(continued from page2)

safely to the main building.

“The fire marshal was not satisfied with approval statements made by the architects,” Pritt said.

The SBA approved \$10 million for a new elementary school in Berkeley County, \$8.5 million for a new elementary school on Charleston’s West Side and three projects in the \$6 million range. A new elementary school in Jefferson County (\$6.4 million), a PK-8 school in the community of Harts in Lincoln County (\$6.3 million), and a new Pikeview Middle School in Mercer County (\$6.2 million).

Forty-one counties sought funding from the SBA for a total of \$256 million.

“There’s a lot of need out there around the state of West Virginia and we’re just trying to determine which has greater need. It’s a very difficult process,” SBA Director Mark Manchin said.

Other counties to receive funding out of the \$70 million included Barbour, Boone, Cabell, Ohio, Putnam, Raleigh and Randolph.

The SBA decided to fund projects in Braxton County, additions and renovations at six (6) elementary schools at \$3,900,000, pending the passage of a local bond.

Other projects funded, Greenbrier, Marion, Mineral and Preston counties, if local bond issues are approved.

The authority also agreed to fund \$3.7 million in emergency projects for schools in Barbour, Gilmer, Ritchie and Wetzel counties.

The Ritchie County Middle-High School piping and HVAC project is for \$1,648,353.

The future of Normantown Elementary School is looking a little better, according to Pritt.

Pritt said an application for the construction of a new Normantown School would likely be entered during the next grant cycle.

Rick Frame, a Normantown native and former candidate for the House of Delegates representing the 33rd District, has donated 11 acres for a new community school.

Pritt says Normantown was targeted for closure, with students to be bussed to Glenville.

“It has been a real effort by parents and community members to keep our school open,” she said.

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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