



# The West Virginia Challenge

May 1999



## Challenge members find it's not easy to participate in facilities planning

All West Virginia counties are mandated to develop ten-year comprehensive school facilities plans, a process that is taking place across the state. Although the planning committees are supposed to include citizen representatives, Challenge West Virginia members from a number of counties say they are finding it difficult to participate in any meaningful way.

"I always come home from these meetings angry," said Jana Freeman, Challenge fellow from Preston County. Freeman said the Preston County committee had proposed eight options for school

facilities, and "the architects proceeded to let us know what the School Building Authority would and would not accept."

She said when she asked if officials had considered that state laws might change during the next ten years, she was told they couldn't see the SBA's guidelines ever changing.

Betty Neil, Fayette County fellow, said her county's superintendent was intent on reducing the number of high schools from seven to three.



Jana Freeman

"Every time we have a meeting, and by the way they are public meetings, they always stress the point that we should not discuss anything that is being talked about at the meeting," said Neil.

## Vermont says small schools better for kids and communities

While West Virginia state education officials continue to insist that large consolidated schools provide the best and most cost-effective education for students, the state of Vermont has reached an entirely different conclusion.

In a report mandated by the legislature, the Vermont Department of Education found that while small schools cost more to operate than large schools, "they are worth the investment because of the value they add to student learning and community cohesion."

The study found that students in small schools do as well or better than those in larger schools despite lower income and education levels in the community, lower teacher salaries and less state aid, according to a report in *Rural Policy Matters*, the newsletter of the Rural Challenge Policy Program, which is based in Vermont.



Joyce White

"I really get angry when I attend these meetings because there are four parents, the superintendent of Fayette County schools and the rest are central office staff. They already know what plan they want to turn in to the Board and I feel like these meetings are all for show."

Joyce White, a mentor from Clay County, said she didn't know anything about facilities planning committees until she heard other people talk about them at a Challenge West Virginia meeting.

When settling a court case in 1996, the Clay

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## 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.

If you would like to become involved in Challenge WV, please contact one of the fellows listed on page three or Linda Martin or Beth Spence, whose numbers are listed on the back page.

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.



## This 'n that

◆ *Newsweek* magazine reports that the University of Chicago favors applicants from small towns. Officials of the highly respected university say that “small town kids tend to be well-developed as individuals. Like big-city kids, they’ve had a wider range of experiences than sheltered suburbanites.” By that measure the truly disadvantaged student is the child of a soccer mom, shuttling from one scheduled activity to another, *Newsweek* says.

◆ Harts High School students, carrying signs and dressed as historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Miss Liberty, packed a hearing for social studies teacher Gwen Ramey to protest the Board’s plan to cut American history to one semester and transfer Ramey. Many students did not attend school the week following the hearing at which the board upheld its plan to cut Ramey’s position. Others picketed in front of Harts High. County superintendent Rick Powell said Ramey is just one of many teachers caught in necessary downsizing, but the teacher says she has been targeted because she has long been an opponent of school consolidation.

◆ Webster County mentor Amelia Anderson, who also is a member of the United Methodist

Church, has submitted a resolution asking the church to endorse legislation defining school bus travel times for West Virginia students and calling for bus times to be addressed before schools are consolidated. The resolution will be presented before the West Virginia Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in June.

◆ A recent study funded by the Milken Exchange on Education Technology concluded that West Virginia’s basic skills/computer education program has resulted in higher math test scores. Data gathered for the study was not based on a random sample, but rather based on information collected from 18 schools which were chosen “based upon the judgments of West Virginia education officials and software consultants.”

◆ The Rural Challenge policy program has issued a white paper by consultant Belle Zars, which indicates that 23 million children ride in 400,000 buses that log more than 21 million miles a day and 3.8 billion miles a year at an annual cost of more than \$10 billion. The Rural Challenge estimates that about three-fourths of the busing is endured by the one-fourth of the children who attend rural schools. Find the white paper, “Long Rides, Tough Hides: Enduring Long School Bus Rides,” on the Policy Program’s web site, [www.ruraledu.org](http://www.ruraledu.org), or call the office at 802-728-5899 for a copy.

## Planning . . .

County Board of Education agreed to offer White and others “a meaningful opportunity to present their input into any future plan to close or consolidate” their community school and to have not less than two representatives participating in “any future proposals relating to amendment of Clay County Comprehensive Educational Facilities and/or the status of H.E. White Elementary School.”

“When he said we were welcome, I told him that wasn’t good enough, that we were to be in-

## Vermont . . .

*Rural Policy Matters* reports that the per pupil cost of operating small schools ran on average about 18 percent higher than the state average, but “these costs were mitigated by the higher levels of community volunteerism in food service, art, music and library services.”

As in many West Virginia communities, the Vermont schools were considered vital meeting places in communities which lacked grocery stores, convenience stores, restaurants and post offices.

According to *Rural Policy Matters*, the report recommended that the state should continue to provide additional funding for small schools and should encourage smallness itself if evidence continues to be strong that disadvantaged children do better in small schools.

(For more information about the Vermont report or to receive the Rural Policy Matters newsletter, write The Rural Challenge Policy Program, PO Box 68, Randolph, VT 05060, or e-mail at rchallenge@quest-net.com)

vited,” White said.

C i n d y Miller, fellow from Webster County, said her county had canceled a public hearing that parents didn’t know was even scheduled. “None of our suggestions have been taken,” she



**Bev Workman**

said, “so we’re writing a counter proposal for our specific school.”

Mingo County Fellow Beverly Workman said more than 40 people who showed up at a facilities meeting in her county were asked to leave.

She said she and Phyllis McCoy, who also is a fellow in Mingo County, were labeled as “troublemakers who got people worked up.”

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