



# The Challenge

November 2000



## Students take center stage at Conference

Young people took center stage at Challenge West Virginia's annual "Our Communities, Our Schools" conference on Saturday, October 7, at Cedar Lakes.

A panel of West Virginia students told about high school life as they are experiencing it. For some, long school bus rides are a major part of the school day.

Scott Simmons from Webster County talked about his daily commute of two hours each way.

In order to participate



The cast of Echoes in the Hallway

in cross country, his only extra-curricular activity, he rides home on an activity bus, which drops him off

four miles from his residence. He keeps a four-wheeler near the road and rides in the dark the final

miles to his house. His communication with his father, who works an evening shift, consists of notes the two send back and forth to each other.

Skylar Freeman from Preston County scoffed at the "expanded class offerings" she can choose from as a result of attending a large county high school an hour and a half from her home.

"They have something called 'Travel West Virginia,'" she said. "I don't take it, but I can't imagine anybody getting anything out of it."

Jacob Maynard from Harts, where the community is fighting to keep its small high school, talked about the joy of getting to attend a school where he is known and where he knows everyone.

"And I get to play basketball," he said. "At another school, I wouldn't get to play because I'm not very good."

Other panel participants were Jeremy Clayborne from Wayne County, Jonas Anderson from Webster County, Austin Weiford, a third grader

## Candidates debate consolidation

When Gov. Cecil Underwood proposed keeping Lincoln County's four high schools and creating a model for distance learning technology, he put the state's most divisive education issue – consolidation – back into the public debate.

"We need to look at putting together a network to provide services and eliminate the need for consolidation," Underwood told a gathering at Harts in Lincoln County.

Congressman Bob

Wise's campaign called Underwood's proposal an 11<sup>th</sup>-hour campaign ploy.

"After you do distance learning, you're still going to have four crumbling structures," Wise told *The Charleston Gazette*. "He walked in and simply blew up that plan. It shows he's ignorant of the issue or just used bad judgment."

However, Wise, who once told *Gazette* reporter Eric Eyre he felt lost in the large high school he attended, said he didn't think high schools should have more than 1,000

students, middle schools no more than 800 and elementary schools no more than 500.

Mountain Party candidate Denise Giardina and Libertarian candidate Bob Myers both support small schools.

Giardina said she thinks elementary schools should have no more than 350 students and she says children should spend more time in the chorus and less on buses.

She calls the School Building Authority the

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## Challenge West Virginia

The Challenge is published by Challenge West Virginia, a statewide 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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## Financing case takes up funding issues

When the Recht school financing case hearings resumed in October, superintendents from several school districts testified that they aren't able to provide a thorough and efficient education for all students because they don't have enough money to provide needed services and programs.

The hearings targeted legislative funding, inadequate facilities, educational financing and the state school funding formula. The superintendents charged that the funding formula penalizes rural counties.

Raleigh County Superintendent Dwight Dials said Marsh Fork High School students can't take human anatomy or physiology – courses called essential by the state – because of lack of funds.

Dials said the state asks county school systems to provide more programs and services with less money each year, according to a report in *The Charleston Gazette*.

Raleigh County employs 60 teachers and 60 service workers above what the state aid formula pays for. "The formula tells me I need to lay off people, but the needs of Raleigh County children tell me I need more people," Dials said.

"You're talking about a mission conflict," he added. "Maybe, mission impossible."

Calhoun County Superintendent Ronald Blankenship said his school system faces similar problems. He said he often takes out the trash at the county board office because the state funding formula doesn't provide enough money to hire the necessary number of custodians.

Hardy County Superintendent Ron Whetzel said he wants to offer advanced courses to students at Moorefield and East Hardy high schools, and he wants to hire more teachers, counselors and service personnel. But he can't because the formula won't let him.

On the other hand, the schools have greenhouses and new football stadium bleachers paid for by the state Budget Digest, the *Gazette* reported. Hardy County schools have received \$480,000 from the Budget Digest during the past two years – none of it requested, Whetzel said.

"We're talking about a substantial amount of money," Judge Arthur Recht said. "This bothers me. These are tax dollars. They come from the state treasury."

Pocahontas County Superintendent James Phares said transportation costs consume a large chunk of his school system's budget. The formula doesn't provide enough money for buses, gasoline and bus drivers, he said.

Attorney Dan Hedges said the percentage of state money allocated for K-12 education has declined during the past ten years.

Marshall County Superintendent Ron Zervos presented a study which showed the percentage had dropped from 25 percent in 1990 to 16 percent in 1999.

Attorneys for the state said the study was misleading because it didn't take into account the drop in student enrollment during that time period.

But Zervos said, "We should be expending more dollars even with fewer students to comply with the court order. We have a declining number of students, but the mandated courses still stay."

Recht's historic 1982 decision found that West Virginia's 55 school systems relied too much on property taxes and thus the state did not provide an equal education to those students living in counties with low property values.

The part of the lawsuit dealing with curriculum was settled in August.

Hearings in the 26-year old school funding case will resume November 8.

# This 'n that from around the state

- The Kanawha County Board of Education approved a motion to request almost \$5 million from the School Building Authority to expand Elkview Middle School. Clendenin Middle School would be closed. T. J. Edmonds, a Clendenin parent, spoke against the proposed consolidation, saying the plan is “so despised by both communities.”



- Many West Virginians want a closer relationship with their public schools, the West Virginia Center for Civic Life said in a report based on 19 forums held throughout the state in the spring and summer of 2000. “Parents and community members

want to have more input in the tone and direction West Virginia public schools take,” said Betty Knighton, director of the West Virginia Center for Civic Life.

Forum participants, who included teachers, parents, administrators, school board members and senior citizens, said they feel alienated and disconnected from schools. They criticized state policies that “overemphasize testing” and favor large consolidated schools. “Big schools work against relationship building,” Knighton said. “It’s much harder to be connected if they’re driving 45 minutes to get to the school.”

## Endangered School



Ellenboro Elementary, in Ritchie County, was built in 1917 as a three-story structure for students in grades one through nine. Soon after the building was constructed, ninth grade students were transferred to the high school. Ellenboro remained a 1-8 and later a K-8 school for many years with a steady enrollment of between 225 and 250 students. In the 1960s a cafeteria was built. In the early 1980s the top two stories were torn down when seventh and eighth grade students were moved to the high schools. Rooms were added for elementary students. When the county’s high schools were consolidated later in the 1980s, two middle schools were formed and fifth and sixth grade students moved to the middle schools. Fifth graders later were moved back into elementary schools. Today Ellenboro Elementary has 135 students in grades pre-K to 5. Ellenboro students have high achievement scores and the attendance rate is one of the best in the county. Today, Ellenboro, along with the rest of Ritchie County’s elementary schools, is endangered because of additional consolidation plans.

- A state public television broadcast from ten interconnected locations around the state on Sept. 21 was a testament to advances in the technology, West Virginia Public Broadcasting executive director Rita Ray told a legislative interim committee.

The broadcast sites were linked through the West Virginia State Unified Network – a statewide network of high-speed, high-capacity Internet connections.

Ray said the higher education system is conducting a study to determine how to use the new network to provide interactive classes to campuses around the state. She said she’d like to see a similar study for primary and secondary schools.

## Candidates . . .

“School Bullying Authority,” saying it forces consolidation on communities.

She said she worries about the dozens of elementary schools across the state that may close in the next ten years. “You take the heart and soul out of the community and you waste resources,” she said, adding that she supports a curriculum rooted in the community, a placed-based learning experience.

Myers called consolidation “more of a public works project than an education project.” He would like to abolish the SBA and establish independent school districts across the state.

He said in Lincoln County he would encourage Harts High School residents to set up their own school board, which, he says, the state constitution allows.

“There are only two elements in our society we institutionalize,” he said. “One is the prisoners. The other is students.”



# Challenge West Virginia

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### Conference . . .

from Ritchie County and Thomas Ramey Jr., a Challenge WV fellow and a recent high school graduate from Lincoln County.

Following the student panel, a group of young actors and singers from Turner Ashby High School in Rockingham County, Virginia, performed a play in which they delivered some of the same powerful messages.

“Echoes in the Hallway” expressed the concern of a generation that the education system is not connected to the reality of their lives.

In school, the students learned random bits of in-

formation and prepared for standardized tests, which in no way helped them deal with the turmoil in their private lives.

The performance was particularly poignant because it was dedicated to the memory of the play’s author, teacher Joe Hiney, who was killed in June at the age of 32 when his bicycle was struck by a car.

When keynote speaker Marty Strange of the Rural School and Community Trust took the podium, he said that in 28 years of public speaking, he had never had a harder act to follow than the two groups of young people.

He said a great deal of research has been done which supports what the kids are saying – but that they say it much more eloquently than the statistics.

Small schools make them feel important, make them feel that they are part of something meaningful, make them understand that they are not just “echoes in the hallway.”

“Knowing you’re expected to do well. Knowing you’re appreciated by people around you. Knowing that you’re needed. Knowing you can’t hide in a corner and be ignored. It’s about intimacy,” he said. “Big schools have a way of losing kids, of pushing them

into the margins of the curriculum, to the margins of life.

“Small schools make you be involved, academically and socially,” he said.

Strange said while big schools may be cheaper to operate, studies show that small schools cost less per graduate.

The Rural School and Community Trust supports schools with strong ties to communities and schools which use the student’s “real world” as their classroom.

“Kids can contribute now, they can do important work now,” Strange said. “And when they do, they learn.”