



# The Challenge



November/December 2006

## More of WV's youngest students facing LONG, LONG bus rides



Challenge WV Fellows celebrate Christmas at Covenant House, seen here making postcards for the homeless

After two decades of mammoth school consolidation in WV, well over 100 elementary schools are still on the chopping block.

Neglecting virtually all studies that say children get the best education in community-based schools, a quarter of them were closed in the 1990s.

The state's plan will place many of the youngest children, as young as three and four, on long bus rides to consolidated schools miles away from their communities, in many cases causing bus rides of one-and-one-half hours or more each way.

"The School Building Authority has not given the health and safety issue of children the weight it deserves," said Challenge WV coordinator Linda Martin.

"The bloody hammer of school consolidation continues, but we do have some promise of legislation during the 2007 session," Martin said.

The legislature has failed to pass Challenge supported legislation that would curtail long bus rides and would give greater say to taxpayers in each county regarding consolidation.

Challenge Fellow Jana Freeman said "I commend Senator Robert Plymale for presenting the idea of legislation that would keep SBA dollars from being spent on new elementary schools, resulting in our youngest children being bussed over the guidelines." (See Challenge newsletter October, 2006)

"Parents across the state are looking for a remedy to stop the harm of long bus rides," Freeman said, "It is vitally important that this legislation be passed to protect them."

Elementary school closures have been lost in the larger scale high school consolidation fights that have been ongoing across West Virginia for over a decade.

"We must recognize the need to act now before our smallest children are bussed before day-

light and home after dark," said Challenge Fellow Thomas Ramey.

"It is reprehensible for us to stand back and do nothing, a failure of leadership at every level," Ramey said, "No sensible person would go along with this. Our smallest children deserve better from our elected officials and state department educators."

Additional legislation that Challenge supports would include a bill to bring the term of a State Board of Education member down to five years.

At the Challenge WV fall conference, it was discussed that the SBA guideline of economies of scale really doesn't exist, especially for elementary schools. The weight should be lifted from economies of scale completely.



Challenge fellows gather for planning to protect the youngest and smallest WV students from planned elementary closures and long, long bus rides

Visit Challenge West Virginia at [www.challengewv.org](http://www.challengewv.org)

## WV ranks 1st in policy, much lower in vital outcomes

With the concept of community-based education put on the back burner, and rural West Virginia education being centralized, consolidated and globalized, here comes another study with alarming outcomes.

While the state's educators have been lauded as a national leader in educational policy, the state is falling short on outcomes, according to Editorial Projects in Education.

The national study says children's chances of success in WV are low because of poverty and other factors that affect them from cradle to career.

The study ranks West Virginia first for educational policy but 43rd for a child's chances of success.

The study looked at a wide array of things that affect a child, from math test scores to how steady their

parents' are employed.

The study says 48% of WV's children are from families with incomes at least 200 percent of the federal poverty level, compared to the national average of 59%.

Only 17.9% of the state's eighth-graders have proficient math scores according to the study. The national average is 28%.

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## SBA says McDowell school construction facing overruns

McDowell County's new school construction, coming in the aftermath of a consolidation battle, will cost \$7 million more to build.

A new high school and elementary school will be built at Bradshaw, a new K-8 school at War and a new elementary school at Yeager.

The original cost of the entire project was \$68 million, but the cost is likely to go as high as \$75 million.

That does not include what could

be the major overrun for the proposed consolidated high school at Red Jacket, with the closing of Williamson, Burch and Matewan high schools.

The state's new School Building Authority Executive Director Mark Manchin says the cost overruns have come in the site preparation for two new schools at Bradshaw.

Manchin said "The obstacles we face are just incredible," creating 18 flat acres for the two new schools and

that's requiring the removal of one-million cubic yards of dirt.

"We may find 10 punch mines as we start moving the mountain at the Bradshaw site," Manchin said, "It requires additional costs and several additional issues that have to be addressed."

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has already committed to \$43 million, while the state SBA has pledged \$25 million.



Amy Weintraub has succeeded Pat Hussey and Barbara Ferraro at the helm of Covenant House of Charleston, the lead organization supporting Challenge WV.

## Covenant House leadership changes, goodbye Pat and Barbara, hello Amy

Weintraub (pictured left) has been a community organizer and activist on Charleston's east side.

Hussey and Ferraro have led the nonprofit group since they came to the organization in 1981 when they were still nuns.

For 25 years the two women, standing up for their fundamental beliefs, have led Covenant House with integrity, energy, commitment, and passion, which has been extended to the homeless and other groups that are generally under-served.

Weintraub, who has served on the Covenant House governing board, grew up in the First Baptist Church of Spencer, married a Jewish man,

and now attends the local Unitarian church. She said her own spiritual journey ties into the multi-faith pillar that helps support Covenant House.

She is married to Marc Weintraub, a lawyer and Charleston city councilman. They live with their two children, ages 4 and 7, in the East End.

Ferraro said "I trust that she (Weintraub) will continue a tradition of caring for the most vulnerable, while working for social change. Her youth, vitality, tolerance and respect for people ... will serve her well as she continues to learn on this journey."

Weintraub, 38, started her official duties January 1, 2007.

## Mezzatesta to stand trial on fraud charges in March

Former House Education Chairman Jerry Mezzatesta will be tried in March on charges of defrauding the Hampshire County Board of Education and misappropriating public funds.

Mezzatesta, 59, of Romney, and former Hampshire School Superintendent David E. Friend, 60, of Rowlesburg, had been scheduled to stand trial in U.S. District Court.

Mezzatesta and Friend are charged with conspiring to misapply public funds between January 2004 and June

2005. If convicted, each could be sentenced up to 15 years in prison and fined as much as \$500,000.

Both men pled not guilty in October.

The case centers on a \$75,000 grant that Mezzatesta, a nine-term legislator, sought in March 2003 for the Special Services Workshop in Romney.

Mezzatesta had agreed not to use his legislative office to seek money for the Hampshire County school system, where he had long been an administrator.

But officials say he and Friend diverted some of the money to emergency service programs, including volunteer fire departments, without the state's permission.

The state ordered the county board to return \$35,000 the same month Hampshire County fired Mezzatesta from his \$60,000 administrative job.

The indictment alleges Mezzatesta acted "with an intent to derive an advantage ... in his effort to be re-elected" in 2004. He lost.

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## This 'n that around the Mountain State

**MANCHIN PICKS MANCHIN-** Gov. Joe Manchin has appointed his cousin, McDowell County Schools Superintendent Mark Manchin, as the new executive director of the state's School Building Authority.

"While Mark is well-known in certain circles as my cousin, he is first and foremost an extremely respected and accomplished educator," the Governor said.

Gov. Manchin has long proclaimed he is a supporter of small community schools, but the state's educational system continues to move in the opposite direction.

Mark Manchin will replace former executive director Clacy Williams. He will be paid about \$100,000 annually.

**STUDENTS HAVE A SAY?-** State Board of Education member Priscilla Haden wants to give students a role in the board's decisions.

Haden has proposed allowing a student representative to sit in on board meetings and participate in discussions, without voting rights.

Several of the board members responded, indicating it might not be logistically possible to implement such a proposal.

**FEDS COULD CHANGE NCLB-** State School Superintendent Steve

Paine believes the new-look Congress could change the No Child Left Behind Act, the controversial national education plan comes up for reauthorization next year.

Paine says he would favor Congress making the requirements more flexible. "We are a unique state with unique needs," he said, indicating a one-size-fits-all plan hasn't worked well.

Paine says in West Virginia "The rigor in our content standards and assessments is not there in order for our kids to be globally competitive with the world's leading countries." The state School Board just approved tougher education standards.

Superintendent Paine says NCLB reauthorization may also include more changes in the requirements for math, science, technology and engineering.

### **RESA WILL STAY**

**INTACT-** Despite a financial bombshell and questions about the need for West Virginia's Regional Education Service Agencies, state school superintendent Steve Paine says the program will stay in place, indicting a few

changes.

More than one million dollars from the RESA I fund was embezzled by a RESA employee over a ten-year period. Deborah Mitchell was sentenced to four years in prison for that crime.

The state legislature mandated Paine conduct a study into problems with the system.

The study came up with 27 recommendations to improve the RESA system. Paine says a key change is keeping a tighter financial leash on RESA.

RESA was first created to help county school systems with purchases, but since 21st century technology has arrived, many opponents believe the system is outdated, another bulging educational bureaucracy.

# Thank You!

**Challenge WV** thanks those who have made donations to help defray the cost of printing and mailing our monthly Newsletter.

If you enjoy receiving The Challenge you may send donations to: Linda Martin  
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# 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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