



# The Challenge



November 2007

## MARTIN SAYS "STOP THE MADNESS," STATE SMOKE SCREENS LONG BUS RIDES

When West Virginia closed hundreds of its schools, state education officials promised to save millions of dollars and provide new advanced classes, without making bus rides much longer for students.

Linda Martin of Challenge WV told a legislative hearing in Charleston "These are broken promises."

Bus times are longer than ever, few advanced courses are offered to rural students, and those savings never happened.

Martin says, during recent legislative hearings, state education officials have refused to get on the same page as Challenge's position regarding long bus rides.

"They keep saying it is going to cost a fortune, \$40 million, to pass a busing bill, when Challenge's bill costs nothing," she said.

"The busing bill that has failed to pass in the legislature is not retro-active. It prevents future long bus rides for thousands of elementary and pre-school students."

"Opposing Challenge's bus-ride bills these past years allows the state to continue their wholesale consolidation of community schools, now affecting the youngest of students," she said.

State education officials claim the number of children

on long bus rides has decreased.

"It's a smoke-screen statement," said Martin, who reminded officials they don't follow their own guidelines.

Under state regulations, elementary school children are supposed to ride no more than 30 minutes to and from school, while middle school students are allowed a 45-minute bus ride and high school students can ride for up to an hour.

About 70 percent of those riding for longer than called for are elementary and pre-school children.

### SAVE CHILDREN FROM ABUSE

"We want a transportation bill to say don't do this to our youngest children," Martin told the interim committee.

"One hundred twenty-one schools are on the chopping block," she warned lawmakers, the number of elementary schools set to close in the state in the next few years.

Martin said West Virginia already spends more on transportation per pupil than any other state.

"We're asking you to save future children from such abuse," she said. "It will become a bigger problem for the youngest when the state adopts further early education.

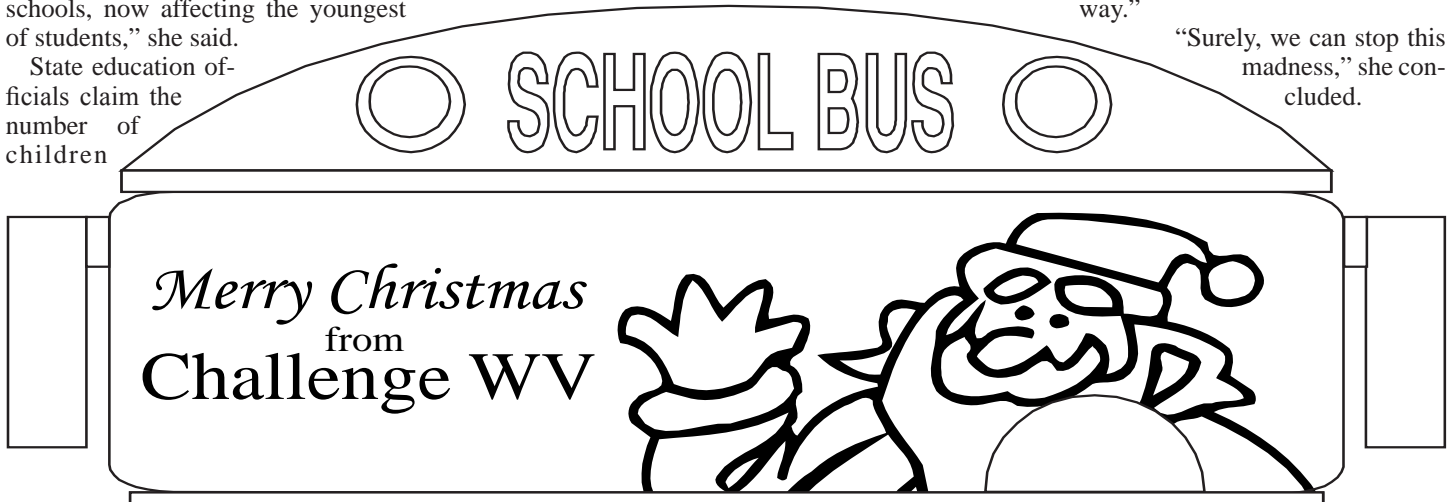
Education officials say 21,000 WV students are on bus rides over the state's own rules, but Martin says the numbers are fudged. She says 36,000 students were over guidelines several years ago before 50 more schools were consolidated.

Challenge WV fellow Misty Pritt of Gilmer County told legislators "I don't know a lot of people seated around this table, but I know a lot of times if it doesn't affect them directly, it's hard to see the picture."

"To keep children in a community school where they can thrive and learn, I don't think there's any waste in that," Pritt said, who is concerned about long bus rides if her community school in Normantown is consolidated.

Martin said "It's late, but there must be accountability for placing three and four-year-old children on bus rides, sometimes exceeding one and one-half hours each way."

"Surely, we can stop this madness," she concluded.



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

# BY POLICY STROKE, WV SCHOOLS BECOMING GOOD PERFORMERS - "NO SCHOOL LEFT BEHIND"

In West Virginia, not only are "all the women strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average," but the state's schools will soon become exceptional.

The US Chamber of Commerce, an advocate of No Child Left Behind, says its state-by-state education report card shows that the U.S. education system is failing and putting America's future competitiveness at risk.

They ranked West Virginia 43rd overall, giving it an F for academic achievement.

The Chamber says WV, despite spending among the largest amounts per student in the US, is not truthful about student proficiency, giving it a D.

Now, the WV State Department of Education has an improvement plan.

WV Public Radio reporter Scott Finn calls it "No School Left Behind."

President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" requires schools to measure the progress of students each year, a federal program that has a large amount of opposition.

Finn reported the decision by state officials, saying they've developed a new system to measure whether a school is succeeding or not.

In WV, under the new system, the number of low-performing schools decreases by 80 percent.

Under the current system, schools use a standardized test to measure their proficiency in reading and math.

If a certain percentage of students meet the standards, and if the school meets attendance or graduation goals, then the school is said to have made Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP.

Under NCLB, every year, a higher percentage of students must meet the standards.

By 2014, 100 percent of students must meet the standards.

Critics say NCLB fails to honor children's growth and accomplishments by relying on scores on a single standardized test, with a further argument that teachers now spend most of their time teaching to the test.

In November, the West Virginia Board of Education approved a new way of measuring whether schools are doing a good job.

Finn reported the new system doesn't replace AYP - at least not yet.

## SEAL ANNOUNCES "IMPROVEMENT PLAN"

Kenna Seal, director of the state Office of Education Performance Audits, in a WVPR interview says "Well, what we've done is come up with a whole lot of different criteria. There's more than just reading and math scores that we think are important."

"So we went ahead and put the other indicators in there, from ACT scores, AP scores, everything that we value in education."

Seal got in hot water recently for saying Lincoln county citizens are "four-wheel ridin', dope-smokin', alcoholic rednecks," describing a lifestyle that impedes student progress.

Lincoln schools have been listed as low-performing, but under the new standards, the system will appear highly improved.

Lincoln school board member and Challenge WV fellow, Thomas Ramey acknowledged there are problems with NCLB, but such steps now being taken by the state raise further questions about how students perform.

"Somehow, it gets more murky, with a swipe of policy making most schools appear to be a success story," he said.

"It seems that taxpayers in West Virginia should be demanding an audit of the state system's outcomes - audit the auditors," said Ramey.

"With a history of closing effective community schools, placing thousands of students on long bus rides, globalizing their education and now making most every WV school a "success," surely we need to take a closer look," Ramey said.

Seal and State School Superintendent Steve Paine has blamed the Lincoln school board for the low scores, although the school board has not been in charge of the system for seven years since the state department took control.

Under the old standards, 132 WV schools failed to meet state requirements. Under the new system, only 27 schools aren't making the grade - thus Finn's description "No School Left Behind."

Seal said, "So this list brought down that 132 schools that didn't make AYP, it brought that list down to 27. There appears to be more schools that are meeting this one, but ... it's just a different look."

Other measures paint a more mixed picture of education in West Virginia. Since 2000, the state's reading scores have de-

clined on the National Assessment of Education Progress, the country's only apples-to-apples comparison of test scores between states.

The state's math scores have improved.

Under the state's newest accreditation system, nine schools are listed as low performing.

## WILL LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS BECOME O.K.?

Worst of the worst are middle schools: Bland, Braxton, Barboursville, Lumberport, Logan, Peterstown, Ritchie, and Spencer Middle Schools. The other, Terra Alta East Preston School, serves preschool to 8th grade.

Seal says middle schools do more poorly because they are required to test all of their students. The more students are tested, the more chances a school has to fail.

"They (middle schools) test all their kids, so they have more exposure in terms of not making AYP, whereas high schools only test one grade. The elementary schools only test third and fourth grade. All middle schools test all their grades."

Finn says no school likes to be labeled as not making AYP. But that's what has happened to several of the state's highest-performing schools.

John Adams Middle School serves students from Charleston's wealthiest neighborhood, South Hills. But it failed to make AYP last year because its special education students didn't make state standards.

Now, John Adams has received full approval under the state's new accreditation system.

Seal says that is a more accurate picture of the quality of the school. He hopes that these new standards someday will replace AYP.

"Over time, we'll work this thing out, and I think the feds during next reauthorization will maybe give us a little bit of leeway, and maybe help us redefine that AYP, so we can use a little bit of the data we have, and still hold some accountability for that subgroup performance," Seal said.

McDowell County had the most low-performing schools, with 57 percent not receiving full accreditation, followed by Calhoun, Doddridge, Monroe, and Roane counties.

Under the new criteria, their performance will be much better.

Ohio County had the most high-performing

*(continued on page 3)*

# MAJOR CHANGES IN SCHOOL FUNDING FORMULA COULD IMPACT EDUCATION

West Virginia could spend nearly \$37 million more on its public schools over the next three years, by giving greater weight to how closely a county's students live together.

The proposal to change the long-held school funding formula was discussed by a House-Senate interim subcommittee.

Challenge WV fellow Thomas Ramey said "Not unlike the current funding formula, the impact of the proposal on poor, rural WV counties remains to be seen."

One proposal would divide the 55 counties into four groups depending on the number of students per square mile.

That provision would change the state school aid formula, which now parcels out funding based on whether a county is more or less densely populated than the state average.

Finance Director Joe Panetta says "The Department of Education supports these proposed revisions."

The draft's other major change is to eliminate the adjusted enrollment figure used to determine special education funding.

Such funding instead will depend on a county's net enrollment, with extra funds available to systems that can demonstrate need.

Sparsely populated counties with fewer than 1,400 students would also see changes meant to recognize their greater transportation costs.

Funding for operating and maintaining

buildings, meanwhile, would be determined by net enrollment and average statewide costs.

The formula now bases that funding the same way it allots money for educators and service personnel.

## WINNERS AND LOSERS

Panetta says thirteen counties would see gains of \$1 million or greater during that time, led by Berkeley County at \$2.6 million.

Three counties would see a net decrease: Pleasants, at \$85,000; Wetzel, at \$118,000; and Tyler, at \$183,000.

The density categories range from sparse, with less than five students per square mile, to high if there are more than 20, says the state department.

Fifteen counties would fall into the former group under current head counts, including such large rural areas as Pocahontas and Pendleton counties.

The high category would cover 13 counties and include the population centers of Kanawha, Berkeley, Wood and Cabell. Another

15 counties would be deemed low density, and the remaining 12 medium.

Delegate David Perry, D-Fayette and co-chairman of the subcommittee said "I think this is a major piece of reform legislation," Perry said, "I think it is a significant attempt to create parity and equity among the counties."

*"I think it is a significant attempt to create parity and equity among the counties." - Delegate David Perry, D-Fayette & co-chairman of the subcommittee*

Many educators blame the decline in values for the systems inability to deliver, off-the-road kids suffering from broken homes and families that are not vested in their children.

Challenge WV's founder Linda Martin says "There is a major disconnect, including elitist formulas that fail to promote critical thinking."

Ramey said "Faddish notions to globalize education, based on a corporate-government business model becomes a scary movement, distancing from community-based education."

"To many of us it seems Orwellian, big brother controlling the destiny of children."

"Teachers want to teach and often have a sense of how to accomplish the task, but for the most part, they've been removed from the decision making," he concluded.

Gov. Joe Manchin said he applauds lawmakers for taking on changes to the way state schools are funded, but did not endorse a proposal recommended by a legislative interim committee.

Manchin said he wants to be assured the money will be "getting into the classroom" and not dumped into administration.

The governor did acknowledge some changes need to be made to the school aid formula, used to fund the 55 county school boards.

## THIS 'N THAT FROM AROUND THE STATE

**SBA NEEDS MORE MONEY FOR REQUESTS** - The School Building Authority says that requests for new construction and renovation far outstrip the available budget.

SBA Executive Director Mark Anthony Manchin said that 42 counties submitted \$254 million worth of requests, five times the available budget.

The SBA won't begin those interviews regarding funding until mid-March, after the legislative session is over.

Governor Manchin says he'll weigh all the factors from salaries to new construction before making recommendations to the Legislature.

**PRESTON COUNTY NEEDS MONEY** - Following wholesale consolidation of Preston's secondary schools, the system says it is in dire need of funds.

The board is trying to make several improvements to its schools, but it doesn't have enough money to fix all the problems.

**TEACHERS UNIONS WANT PAY INCREASE** - With an election year and a projected \$96 million dollar state budget surplus on the horizon, the state's two teachers unions say it's time for educators to get a raise.

The West Virginia Education Association and American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia have different plans, but both want salaries to be increased by roughly \$10,000.

Between them, the unions represent more than 24,000 teachers in West Virginia.

They say the pay raises are necessary to keep West Virginia teachers from migrating to better-paying jobs in border states.

## POLICY...

*(continued from page 2)*

schools, with 84 percent of schools rated exemplary or distinguished, followed by Ritchie, Hancock, Putnam, and Tyler counties.

The US Chamber of Commerce did give West Virginia a C in rigor of standards and an A in management of data.

### EDUCATION FACES MAJOR CHALLENGES

The military-style reading and math drills in NCLB have pushed history, civics, music, art and physical education out of schools.

Poorer students in West Virginia's rural areas still seem to be left behind, with teachers lamenting they feel like they're teaching in a tight box.



# 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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