



The

Challenge

November 1999



We're Growing!



Challenge WV welcomes two new county chapters. Residents of Webster County and Lincoln County established chapters in September. Accepting a plaque for the Webster County Chapter are, below, left to right, Amelia Anderson and Cindy Miller. The Lincoln County Chapter plaque is accepted, above, by Gwen Ramey and Thomas Ramey, Jr.



Ohio students say 'Kids Can'

by Marty Strange

Kids can learn, they can serve their community, they can hire their teachers, and they can manage their time, if the experience of Federal Hocking School near Athens, Ohio, means anything.

That is what Principal George Wood and five students reported to participants at Challenge West Virginia's conference in October on *Our Communities, Our Schools*.

Can you imagine a rural school where students have an equal place at the table when faculty hiring decisions are made, where students work in the community for as much as two hours every day, where interdisciplinary prac-

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Keep organizing, Challenge urged

Marty Strange, director of the Rural School and Community Trust Policy Program, encouraged Challenge West Virginia members to get organized to "get our own values and our own vision for education into public policy in the state."

At the *Our Communities, Our Schools* conference, Strange said it is important to have a sustained strategy. "Help people who are afraid to do it, take care of yourselves and prepare for those who will follow you. Don't expect to see the end results. Hope your children will. The only alternative is to quit and lose."



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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This 'n that

- The state Board of Education in October declared a "state of emergency" in Lincoln County Schools and gave the county eight months to correct widespread problems or face a state takeover of the system. In a 200-page report, state school auditors listed 203 violations of state law, three times more than any other county they had visited. The auditors found poor instruction, illegal hiring and personnel practices, and dirty buildings.

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- The Annenberg Rural Challenge has changed its name to The Rural School and Community Trust. As we mentioned last month, the new president is Dr. Rachel Tompkins of West Virginia, who has located a new office in Washington D.C.

- Everyone currently receiving this newsletter also will be receiving *Rural Policy Matters*, the newsletter published by the policy program of the Rural School and Community Trust. You can expect your first issue of *Rural Policy Matters* the first week of November.

- A Nebraska study has concluded that while big schools cost less to operate if you measure the number of kids who attend them, small schools do a better job when the cost is measured by graduates. Rural Policy Matters reports that researchers learned the smaller the district, the higher the graduation rates. Because most larger districts had higher dropout rates, their cost per pupil graduated was higher than for smaller districts.

- In the 1960s, West Virginia had 2,800 public schools, according to a recent report by WSAZ-TV, Channel 3, in Huntington. Today, there are 850 public schools in the state.

- At an education summit in September, the Foundation for Better Schools in Upshur County, which is not related to the county school system, called for more local control of the school system; shorter bus rides for children; and keeping smaller schools with smaller class sizes.

- Kanawha County residents plan to take action to fight the county board of education's decision to close three schools that have high minority populations. More than 50 percent of the students in each school are eligible for free and reduced school lunches.

"It's very evident to us that they're really focusing on the schools that don't have the resources to fight back," said Marshall Snedegar, president of the Roosevelt Junior High School Local School Improvement Council.

- The West Virginia Department of Education has a new web site, which can be found at www.wvde.state.us

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Exploring school community links

“Communities are the places – literally and figuratively – where we construct our identities and come to know who we are and why we are important in the world,” Dr. Van Dempsey told members of Challenge West Virginia attending the *Our Schools, Our Communities* conference in October at Cedar Lakes.

“I believe our sense of community is made through the struggles, hard times, celebrations and stories that help us to define who we are and what we believe,” said Dr. Dempsey, director of the Benedum Collaborative at West Virginia University.

Many of those stories come out of the public schools that serve a community.

In recounting the loss of a school in his own North Carolina hometown, Dr. Dempsey said, “... the community died when its heart was taken away. The collapse of my hometown, economically and socially, has been parallel to the period when its schools were realigned, consolidated and closed.”

Countless West Virginians who have lost schools during the last thirty years can understand precisely what Dr. Dempsey is describing.

He criticized education policy that is made without listening to the voices of community people. “Unfortunately, politicians and officials are pawns of the belief that making educational policy at communities’ exclusion actually improves education,” he said.

The problem, he says, is that those officials who make policy often are too disconnected from the lives of people in communities. “Hence we close schools in the name of benefiting children without understanding the damage we are doing by destroying the school communities around them.”

A school that works and serves its community and its students is Federal Hocking High School in Stewart, Ohio, where the main goal



Dr. George Wood and students Chris Withem, Dusty Brunty, Cassie Gilliam, Matt Green, and Cyndi Sowards told of their remarkable high school.

is to help young people do the very best work they possibly can and become the kind of neighbors everyone wants living next door to them.

Principal Dr. George Wood and five students described a program where: students have a voice in hiring teachers; a constitution says students will maintain that kind of authority; interdisciplinary courses give students and teachers time to establish relationships; and every student, regardless of ability, participates in internships and develops a portfolio.

In describing the portfolio, senior Chris Withem said, “When I get ready to go to college, I can take it and put it on the table and say, ‘This is who I am, this is what I’ve been doing the last four years, and I want to go to your school. What do you say?’”

Check us out

You can now visit Challenge West Virginia at our new web site just completed by Ann Contois of Cyberfirms in Lincoln County.

The address is: <http://www.wvcovenanthouse.org/challengewv>

Dr. Stan Maynard of Marshall University is working with the community surrounding tiny Hannan High School in Mason County. Members of the Mason County Board of Education have returned school building money to the state and are fighting to keep their small high schools, including Hannan.

“At Hannan, they had the lowest test scores and they thought they would be consolidated,” Dr. Maynard said. “They knew they needed to fix the school.”

He said staff from Marshall University brought together different groups in Mason County that didn’t trust each other. Community members at Hannan brought sweat equity to the table, spending much of the past summer repairing and cleaning the school.

“We used an Adopt-A-Highway model,” he said. “A church would adopt a bathroom, a family would adopt a room. Every room except three have been adopted, and the kids take good care of that school. You’ll hear one telling another, ‘Don’t mess that up, my grandma cleaned it.’”

The Hannan project is just beginning, but Dr. Maynard is confident that in Mason County, political barriers can be overcome and trust can be built.



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Ohio students say 'Kids Can'

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tice is so routine that kids expect their work in math and history to be graded for grammar?

You don't have to imagine it at Federal Hocking, where the official mission is to help kids prepare for flexible career choices, active democratic citizenship, and lifelong learning.

But listening to these kids talk about their school and their education made it clear that there is another mission, too.

This school makes these kids responsible for their own education. They understand what they are trying to accomplish in school, and they are making real choices

about how to get it done.

It could only be possible in a socio-economically blessed school with lots of resources and a big enough enrollment to generate support for these special programs, right?

Nope. Federal Hocking serves an area of Appalachian Ohio where income ranks in the bottom 5% of the state.

Not all the changes at Federal Hocking have been popular among everyone in the community.

Disgruntled patrons who like more conventional forms of order pressured the school board into terminating Wood's contract a few years ago.

But the kids protested with a walkout and over 1200 local people signed a petition asking for his reinstatement, and when the legal and political dust settled, Wood was back at the helm and there were some new school board members.

Then the kids drafted up a school constitution enumerating and solidifying their role in shaping their education. And it was eventually accepted by the school board. Turns out, kids can govern, too.

Marty Strange is director of the Policy Program of The Rural School and Community Trust.