



The

Challenge

October 2000



Education enters campaign debate

Education finally emerged as a central issue in the 2000 gubernatorial campaign when Gov. Cecil Underwood made a surprise proposal for a distance learning pilot project as an alternative to closing Lincoln County's four small high schools.

The governor made his announcement in late

September while awarding a water grant in Harts, where community support for the local high school is overwhelming.

Underwood did not give any advance notice of his announcement, and no news media was present.

In fact, the entire statement may not have seen the light of day had it

not been for the video camera of Challenge WV's Thomas Ramey Jr., who taped the entire thing and shared those tapes with members of the news media.

"The announcement certainly doesn't mean that Gov. Underwood supports

small schools," Challenge WV co-director Linda Martin said.

"He's been governor for four years, and in that time, he has done nothing to suggest he wants to put a stop to the state-driven consolidation policy that
Please turn to page two

Endangered School



Hacker Valley School serves 90 students in grades K-8 in northern Webster County. It is the only school in West Virginia that was completely funded by Title 1. The original school on the Hacker Valley site was built in 1881. In 1966 seven schools closed to form the present Hacker Valley School, and the old two-room building became a library and lunchroom. Hacker Valley and Diana, the two smallest schools in Webster County, alternate as the schools with the highest test scores. In the photo above, residents of Hacker Valley are shown putting a new roof on the school in 1995. The group accepted donations and organized events to fund the project, which they completed in one weekend.

Rural Trust says State needs education reform

West Virginia is one of ten states cited by the Rural School and Community Trust as urgently needing to reform rural public school policy.

"Why Rural Matters: The Need for Every State to Take Action on Rural Education," points out that West Virginia has the second highest percentage of students in rural schools.

The report is "a wakeup call about rural education in America," said Kathy Westra, spokeswoman for the Rural Trust, which works with more than 700 rural K-12 schools in 35 states and with which Challenge WV is affiliated.

Westra said some national trends and proposals meant to help children actually hurt rural

students. For instance, she said, in the rush to build new schools with better technologies and expanded course offerings, some states and districts have closed older small schools and forced rural children to travel two hours or more each way to school.

"Fully one quarter of America's school-age children attend public schools in rural areas or small towns," says Marty Strange, policy director for the Rural Trust and co-author of the study. "But if you listen to the education policy debate, chances are you will not hear much about them.

"Every child, including every rural child, is important," said Strange.
Please turn to page four



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.

To start a chapter of Challenge WV, to inquire about the fellowship program or for more information, contact:

Linda Martin	Beth Spence
801 Gordon Drive	58 Frontier Road
Charleston, WV 25303	Alum Creek, WV 25003
304-744-5916	304-756-9191
LBM94@aol.com	bandb58@aol.com

<http://www.wvcovenanthouse.org/challengewv/>

Governor proposes distance learning project

has caused us to lose more than a fourth of our public schools during the last ten years.

“What it does mean is that he recognizes people throughout West Virginia want to keep their community schools. He knows many voters are upset with the current policy that forces school consolidation,” Martin said. She added that while Challenge WV as an organization does not endorse political candidates, the organization does support a discussion of the issue of small schools.

Democrat Bob Wise has kept silent on the issue of school consolidation, while Mountain Party candidate Denise Giardina and Libertarian candidate Bob Myers have both expressed support for small schools.

Underwood said the Lincoln County school situation provides “a good place to experiment” with distance learning. He estimated the cost of starting such a program at about \$700,000. The governor said he planned to call for a meeting with the state School Board, the Lincoln County Board and the governor’s Office of Technology to discuss a pilot project which would provide classes by satellite or over the Internet.

“The governor believes this is an option that needs to be fully developed. It could be a reasonable alternative to wholesale consolidation. He’d like to see it happen,” said gubernatorial spokesman Dan Page.

State Superintendent David Stewart said the state and county are proceeding with a plan to consolidate the county’s four high schools into one \$18 million facility. “We’re apparently caught in the middle of something here, but we’re going to work with that plan,” Stewart said.

Bill Grizzell, the superintendent appointed when the state took control of the county’s schools, agreed with Stewart.. “Schools are being consolidated not just for academic purposes, but for facility needs. Technology is not going to replace facilities,” he said.

Grizzell said plans for consolidation have not stopped

or slowed down since Underwood’s proposal.

Delegate Arley Johnson, whose district includes part of Lincoln County, called Underwood’s suggestion a “political promise” made prior to an election.

But Page said the governor has been an advocate of technology since he took office.

“The governor has said many times that distance learning can help reach rural high schools with classes. If it hasn’t been an alternative (to consolidation), maybe it’s time to consider it.”

A good small school story

The Associated Press reports a story about a small, over-budget low performing elementary school in Munson, Florida.

At a meeting where the Santa Rosa County School Board was expected to close the school, a former college president offered to come out of retirement and serve as principal of the school for a year – at the salary of \$1.

The Board accepted 76-year-old John Dunworth’s offer and gave him, his four hand-picked teachers and Munson residents one year to turn things around. The challenge was awesome – the school had the county’s lowest test scores and the operating costs per pupil were twice the county average. Enrollment had been projected to drop from 87 to 67.

Not only did Dunworth and company save the school, Munson recorded the biggest gain in test scores of any of the county’s schools and now ranks first in writing and second in math. In addition to the academic gains, costs were cut and enrollment stabilized at about 90.

“There was a group of parents and citizens in that community that wanted to have a good school,” Dunworth said. “They were willing to fight, and I was willing to stand beside them and we’d march together.”

This 'n that from around the state

• State School Building Authority members in September raised questions about a leaking roof, buckled floors and the malfunctioning heating and cooling system at Kanawha County's Riverside High School, the state's newest school. Principal Richard Clendenin told the SBA that some leaks are so bad that when it rains, water pours in like a river. He said he began asking for help from county maintenance workers when the school opened last September, but a year later the problems have not been addressed. The SBA, which allocated \$10 million to help construct the \$32 million school, sent a letter warning the county that the Riverside situation would be monitored. Earlier in the month, State School Board member Jim McKnight complained about the school being dirty.



classrooms. Nine other kindergarten classrooms face the same situation as Overbrook.

• The Kanawha County Board of Education rejected a proposal to hire an additional teacher at Overbrook Elementary. Overbrook parents complained about an overcrowded kindergarten class that has 34 students and two teachers. Another kindergarten class at the school has 23 students and one teacher. The board supported Superintendent Ron Duerring who recommended against hiring the additional teacher, saying it wouldn't be fair to fifteen other schools in the county that have overcrowded

• Jefferson County voters overwhelmingly rejected a \$39 million school bond, which would have been used to build a second high school in the county. School officials say the school system already is approximately 400 students over capacity. The bond also would have provided \$1.2 million for a middle school which is being built next to Jefferson High. The middle school project must continue because the School Building Authority already has awarded \$7.4 million, according to Superintendent David Markoe.

• The Harrison County Board of Education is spending \$70,000 for a special levy election Dec. 16 instead of putting the issue on the November general election ballot. The board wanted the levy to stand alone so it would not be confused with other issues, said Superintendent Carl Friebe. Opponents say the money spent for the election could better be spent in classrooms. The levy would provide more than \$11 million a year for five years, beginning in July 2001, to support extracurricular activities, music, art, special education, libraries, free textbooks, school bus maintenance and salary supplements.

Structural problems found with new schools

Inspections of 25 newer schools in West Virginia revealed leaking roofs, stress cracks and air quality problems.

Sixteen facilities were found to have indoor air quality and maintenance problems so severe that the overall environment was judged "not conducive to learning," according to a report in *The Charleston Daily Mail*.

The governor's school facilities committee conducted the evaluations during the past year in one-day visits to the schools. The committee looked only at facilities built during the last ten years. The inspections were requested by the School Building Authority, which provided funding for the new facilities.

The report evaluated schools in eight categories, including structural and mechanical health, facility maintainability, building safety and security, educational adequacy and environment for education.

Twenty of 25 schools failed at least two categories.

Clay Elementary and Clay Middle School failed four of the eight categories. Cabell Midland in Ona failed in two categories because of the ventilation system. But the principal said the school has much worse problems with ceiling leaks from condensation accumulating in ducts, forcing administrators to catch water in basins on the floor. Roof leaks also were cited as a problem

Most of the problems centered on heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems, which either were not turned on or which did not work properly. The situation often led to elevated carbon dioxide levels.

In the most extreme case, a teacher at Beckley Stratton Junior High School almost died from carbon monoxide poisoning, which had accumulated in the gym.

The principal said ever since the consolidated school opened two years ago, there have been problems: a porous roof, weak ventilation system, sewer pipe problems and a boiler mistake that caused the carbon monoxide poisoning.



Challenge West Virginia

A program of Covenant House, Charleston, WV

Linda Martin
Education Coordinator
801 Gordon Drive
Charleston, WV 25303

Beth Spence
Rural Coordinator
58 Frontier Road
Alum Creek, WV 25003

Non-Profit Organization
US Postage Paid
Permit 2673
Charleston, WV 25301

Challenge WV • We Support Small Schools • Challenge WV

Education reform . . .

“And every state can improve the policy climate within which its rural schools operate. While the rankings in this report are useful in identifying states where rural education is paramount to good schooling, they are also useful in identifying states where rural communities’ educational needs may be unjustly lost in the political shuffle of state politics. No child deserves to be lost in the shuffle.”

The report used 1997-98 school year data to rank states on such factors as pay for rural teachers compared with a state’s other teachers; the ratio of teachers to students in rural classrooms; the percentage of rural teachers who taught subjects they were not trained for; the percentage of funding for rural schools that went to school lessons; and the percentage of rural schools that had Internet access.

The report said half of West Virginia’s public schools are rural, but only 13 percent of the students go to those schools.

More than a fourth of rural students live in poverty and nearly half qualify for free school meals. The state ranks in the top 10 in the percentage of rural adults with less than 12 years of schooling, percentage of rural schools

with declining enrollment and percentage of teachers teaching out of field who serve rural schools.

“Rural education is crucial in West Virginia, and the need for policy attention is urgent,” the report stated.

The report was released in August as Education Secretary Richard Riley visited schools along the Mississippi Delta.

“School matters to the people of these communities,” Riley said. “We need to pull together in a responsible, bipartisan way, to make sure every child has access to a quality education.”

To order the report

You can find parts of “Why Rural Matters” on the Rural Trust website at <http://www.ruraledu.org>. You can order the full report for \$10 by sending an email to whyruralmatters@ruraledu.org, and including your name, address and the number of copies you would like. You also may order a report by calling the Rural Trust at 202-955-7177.