



The Challenge



October 2005

Jay Cole recognized for supporting community schools



Linda Martin presents the Challenge Award to Jay Cole, Governor Manchin's education policy adviser and Deputy Director of the WV Dept. of Education and the Arts. The award was presented at Challenge's annual Fall Conference. Martin said, Challenge is grateful for Cole's understanding about the value of community schools and eliminating long bus rides.

Paine blames Lincoln board for poor performance, Grizzell "gags" local members

Lincoln County superintendent of schools William Grizzell placed a gag order on the elected members of the local school board, requiring them to sign-up to speak at their official meeting.

Lincoln board president Carol Smith said "This truly is botched democracy, the state is running our schools into the ground, academically and financially."

"They have failed to perform. Who is going to hold them accountable?" Smith asked.

Grizzell's gag order followed a statement by State Superintendent of Schools Steve Paine, who was angered that the Lincoln board criticized the superintendent after test scores and performance have plummeted since the state took over the system about five years ago.

After five years, three out of four Lincoln schools did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress.

Paine blamed the local school board for the mess, saying members are going to have to learn to work with their

superintendent. Until that happens, he said he may look for ways to further limit their authority.

The Lincoln board, which has been fighting school consolidation and long bus rides, had requested the state department to return partial control of the system to the local board.

Paine told state school board members in Charleston that he has received two letters from the Lincoln County Board of Education asking the state to restore some of its authority.

Paine says he has no intention of returning any power to the Lincoln County Board of Education because the board has been uncooperative with state efforts to improve the school system.

Board president Smith said "It's a far stretch to blame our school board. About the only decisions we make (since takeover) is regarding field trips."

The state board cited a low college-going rate and poor academic performance when it seized control in 2000. The local board alleges the state-appointed

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"No research says bigger schools educate better," Challenge Conference creates dialog



Challenge members had a conversation with panel members (L to R) Del. Larry Williams, Dr. Howard O'Cull, Jay Cole and Linda Martin

Challenge WV's Annual Fall Conference was held at Embassy Suites in Charleston, October 21st. The conference centered on creating a dialog about community schools and eliminating long bus rides.

The theme was "Our Communities, Our Schools," with a number of Challenge members participating in what coordinator Linda Martin said was "a good conversation."

One-hundred and twenty one West

Virginia schools are still on the block to be closed, mostly elementary schools.

Jay Cole, representing Gov. Manchin's office said the Governor would like to see seamless education, a connection between education and economic development, in addition to technology as a key to access and quality.

Cole said "I was profoundly disturbed by the drop in reading scores, a total of nine points since 2002."

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Courts rule against consolidation cases

West Virginia courts have not decided favorably in many cases surrounding school consolidation, mostly because legislation that has become law sets the standard for decisions.

The recent suit in Mingo County, filed by school board members opposed to consolidation, was lost, but attorney Jim Lees has said the suit will be re-filed.

The state Supreme Court has refused to hear a lawsuit challenging the consolidation of Lincoln County high schools.

It was the last case stemming from the state takeover of the school system in 2000.

The state school board cited shoddy buildings, illegal hiring practices and low student test scores when it seized control of the school system.

The state board voted in 2003 to consolidate the county's four high schools despite protests from county school board members, parents and students.

The Supreme Court ruled unani-

mously not to hear the appeal filed by county residents against the state schools superintendent, state Board of Education and Lincoln County Superintendent William Grizzell.

The county residents had challenged procedural issues surrounding the high school consolidation.

Kanawha County Circuit Judge Charlie King had ruled in favor of the state, and the court's vote in effect upholds his ruling.

WV public school students have made no progress in math and slipped in reading since 2003

While Lincoln County school board members complained about plummeting performance since the state took over their system five years ago, the problem appears to be widespread around the state.

West Virginia public school students have made no progress in math and slipped in reading since 2003.

Fourth-graders scored an average 231 in math on the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress, the same as in 2003 and lower than the national average of 237.

Eighth-graders' math scores dipped from 271 in 2003 to 269, nine points below the national average of 278, according to 2005 results just released.

Fourth-graders' average reading score slipped four points, from 219 in 2003 to 215, and was below the national score of 217. Eighth-graders scored 255 in reading, down from 260 two years ago.

The NAEP is a federal test considered the best measure of how students in every state perform on core subjects.

Under federal law, all states must take part in the test every two years. About 2,500 to 3,000 West Virginia children were tested this year, according to the state Department of Education.

In math, students tackled measurement, geometry, data analysis and probability and algebra. The reading test measured whether students could form a gen-

eral understanding, develop an interpretation, make connections to the text and examine content and structure.

Twenty-five percent of West Virginia fourth-graders could handle challenging material in math, a slight improvement from 2003 when 24 percent reached that "proficient level." Only 18 percent of eighth-graders reached the "proficient level," down from 20 percent in 2003.

Reading proficiency also was down. Twenty-six percent of fourth-graders reached that level compared to 29 percent in 2003. Twenty-two percent of eighth-graders reached the "proficient level," down from 25 percent two years ago.

Matewan instructor "Teacher of the Year"



Bridget Call, an English teacher at Matewan High School, was selected as West Virginia's Teacher of the Year. Call was honored for her accomplishment in a ceremony at the Charleston Marriott. She was one of seven finalists chosen from a list of 50 nominees.

Call has been an English teacher at the community-based Matewan High School, on the list to be closed.

"It's my distinct privilege to honor such a fine educator in our state's public school system," said state schools Superintendent Steve Paine. "Mrs. Call exemplifies the meaning of a highly qualified teacher not only by her leadership skills, but also by displaying an extraordinary dedication to her students."

Hancock County voters defeat school board

Hancock County voters defeated a \$34 million dollar school bond linked to school consolidation.

The bond money was to have been used with \$16 million dollars already allocated by the West Virginia SBA to consolidate Oak Glen and Weir High Schools into a new, centrally located high school. Money also would have reorganized elementary schools.

4,745 people voted against the bond and 1,853 voted for it.

Tom Tompos of Save Our Schools, an organization opposed to the bond, says the vote was a great victory for Hancock County and the children of Hancock County.

Challenge WV spoke recently to the group opposing school consolidation.

New rule, boards can determine where students go

The West Virginia Board of Education has approved a new rule for school consolidation that says that county boards of education can designate which schools children can be moved to, even if parents want to send their kids somewhere else.

The rule came about following problems over the closure of Gauley Bridge High School. "Anytime we see where there is a need for more clarity, we want to address it," said Bill Elswick, director of the Office of School Facilities.

Paine blames continued from Page 1

ed superintendent has abused his power, mis-managed and focused on the construction of a new consolidated high school at the expense of existing schools.

"Our school system is worse off under Grizzell's management and the state take-over," said Smith. "Even worse, is what's happening to our students."

Linda Martin, Coordinator of Challenge WV, said the tampering with community schools and the construction of one of the most expensive consolidated high schools at Hamlin, could throw the county system into bankruptcy.

Grizzell, who is paid \$90,000 by the state, was using a county school vehicle to drive to and from work to another county, and central office workers complained he is often absent from the county office.

Lincoln residents signed a petition asking for his removal.

Small schools activist and member of Challenge WV, Thomas Ramey, said "Mr. Grizzell is incapable of sparking the progress we need and he should be removed from his position or resign."

"Using their bloody hammer, the

state has promised to reduce costs through consolidation and improve the quality of education for our kids. They have told us a lie in order to win," Ramey said.

Martin said "It is time someone is held accountable."

Dr. Howard O'Cull, Director of the WV School Board Association, said research shows only three state take-overs in the US have been productive.

While the State Board cites performance problems and audits, the counties taken-over in WV have been contentious over consolidating their local schools.

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Cole said the governor is on record supporting community based schools, after being confronted that Manchin seems to be backing away from community-based education and eliminating long bus rides.

Challenge member Jana Freeman of Preston asked why the governor does not appoint state school board members in favor of community-based education.

"There has to be a way for you (Challenge) to get your ideas into the mainstream of public policy," said Howard O'Cull, Director of the WV School Board Association.

O'Cull said "Public education needs its external critics and its internal heretics."

He spoke about accountability, saying "With a professional system it is more difficult for citizens to make an impact," saying what school boards do is act upon laws passed by the legislature and rules passed by the state board, "they are not constitutional bodies.

"It would take a systemic shift to change things," he said. "When court cases involve community sentiment (like school consolidation) the court uses judicial precedent and the law."

Marge Bragg, a Challenge member from Clay County, said "The state has starved our community schools, dangling 'bigger is better' like a carrot."

O'Cull spoke about how the current school aid formula promotes school consolidation, as did Del. Larry Williams, vice-chair of the House Education Committee from Preston County.

Both Cole and O'Cull want to shift

to a research-based model of decision making regarding public education in West Virginia.

Responding to a question from Mingo School Board president Bill Duty regarding checks and balances with the state department, O'Cull said "They make rules that are mostly accountable to themselves and constitutional law. They can arbitrarily decide, saying we don't like what they (local boards) are doing and therefore intervene."

O'Cull says legislators have become very comfortable with the school funding formula, which promotes consolidation.

Williams expressed concern about how it has come to pass that appointed officials have authority over elected officials, who represent their community concerns.

"Maybe we should elect state board members," he said, or at least appoint them to shorter terms. "We need to find a way to keep local schools that work."

Williams said there is a better way to address the consolidation problem by changing the school formula.

"There has got to be a way for funding to kick in to keep local schools," rather than to keep closing them, he said.

Williams said money is being spent on transportation that could be placed toward maintaining community schools, expressing concern about focusing on college-bound preparedness creating a drop-out problem.

Linda Martin of Challenge said "It is amazing to me how educated officials ignore the research about small commu-

nity schools working better."

"Challenge has always based their actions on hard research," she said. "We're not nostalgic, we want education to be cutting edge, it's what works."

Martin reminded the panel that property taxes pays for education in WV. She said "Corporations own 51% of the states surface and 76% of its minerals. They only pay 16% of the property taxes. You and I pay 84%. West Virginians pay about \$8,600 per student, with the state 39th in achievement.

Martin said Challenge's research shows that WV increased the money spent on education, among the highest in the US, and the money mostly went to the top, administration and bus transportation, not teachers or instruction.

"With 15 Ph D's in the state department, they can't produce accurate numbers about kids exceeding the guidelines for long bus rides," Martin said. There were 36,000 kids exceeding the guidelines, according to the state, in 1996.

"Last year the state put out bogus numbers claiming only 18,000 exceeded the guidelines, after they closed more than 50 schools."

She said children 3-5 years old in early education programs are encountering long bus rides, many over an hour each way, others one-and-one-half hours.

"Then there are the lies that school consolidation saves money. It has never saved a dime," she said.

Martin said Challenge members want what's best for public education, and praised the group for their grassroots participation.

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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