



The Challenge



October 2007

SEAL'S FOUR WHEEL RIDIN', DOPE SMOKIN', ALCOHOLIC REDNECKS

The West Virginia Board of Education has declined to take action against Kenna Seal, who heads the state Office of Education Performance, for comments he made in Lincoln County.

The top education official said Lincoln county citizens are "four-wheel ridin', dope-smokin', alcoholic rednecks," describing a lifestyle that impedes student progress.

Seal contends his comments have been taken out of context.

Seal was speaking before a group of Lincoln County principals and educators, after he had been invited by the school board to discuss problems about low test scores and improving the county's system.

*"I used those words, but I didn't call the people in Lincoln County that."
- Kenna Seal*

Seal and State School Superintendent Steve Paine have blamed the Lincoln school board for the low performance, although the school board has been neutered for seven years while the state has been in charge.

With the state operating the system, it has hit rock bottom with student performance at 55th.

Challenge WV coordinator Linda Martin said the take-over has been a dismal failure, closing the county's high schools and creating long bus rides to the new consolidated school at Hamlin.

"There have been problems in Lincoln County, but those problems have worsened under state control," said board member Thomas Ramey.

Seal denied his statement, saying "I used those words, but I didn't call the people in Lincoln County that. I used those words to describe a lifestyle that I have noticed in places across the country and even in West Virginia."

DAMAGE CONTROL FALLS FLAT

Seal's effort at damage control fell flat. Lincoln school principals and some central office employees signed a letter rebutting Seal's explanation of his comments.

The letter says "It is apparent that we must have attended a different meeting as our accounts are very different than yours Dr. Seal."

Board members voted to issue a letter to Seal and others asking that he not take part in any upcoming audits of the county's school system. The members feel Seal is biased toward the county.

The principals in attendance said Seal "mockingly"

asked if they knew about computers, while talking about information available on the Internet.

"You all do know what computers are here in Lincoln County, don't you?" Seal asked officials, according to a Lincoln principal. "He went on to ask if any of us had computers in our schools," said another official.

The principals also said that Seal said the county had no chance of gaining back control of its schools next year.

Lincoln Board of Education member Tom Ramey said "He directed those comments to Lincoln County, specifically, and in fact made similar comments about the county during another meeting in Harrison County."

In a letter to county administrators, Seal said the meeting was an "urgent call

for action" and that his comments were meant to "inspire" the educators, saying that he was misunderstood.

Seal says he suspects there's still some sour grapes in Lincoln over the state's take-over seven years ago.

OFFICIALS ARE OFFENDED

Members of the State House of Delegates say they support the administrators, teachers, students and parents within the Lincoln County School System.

Delegates Jeff Eldridge, Ralph Rodighiero, Ted Ellis and Lidella Hrutkay have sent a letter to the leader of the West Virginia Office of Education Performance Audits expressing their displeasure.

Part of the letter reads: "We are offended that a state official would make these remarks about any citizens in our state. We have to deal with the media using this stereotype of West Virginians. We certainly should not have our state officials using the same labels on our citizens."

The state Board of Education met behind closed doors to discuss Seal's comments.

After a two-hour executive session to discuss the controversy, State Board of... Education president

Delores Cook came back with a short statement that did not address Seal specifically: "We are anxious to move past this event and continue with the important work of ensuring the students of Lincoln County receive a high-quality education to prepare them for life in the 21st century."

Following that meeting, Seal continued to say his comments were misinter-

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"A Community Conversation" - Leaders say they support community schools

A number of state education leaders and legislators participated in Challenge WV's annual conference in October, held at Charleston's Covenant House. The theme was "Challenge for Educational Equality."

The guest panel included representatives from Gov. Joe Manchin's office, the State Board of Education, the WV School Building Authority and the WV Legislature.

Dr. Mark A. Manchin, the executive director of the state's School Building Authority, said "I want to dispel that the SBA is driven by the economies of scale model. Funding is available, tell local boards to submit their projects, we look at all of them."

"Consolidation is primarily a local board issue," Manchin said.

Several individuals during a Q&A session asked Manchin if there could be a disconnect between local school boards, who disagree regarding the influence of the SBA.

Manchin said he supports community-based schools.

"It's all about children and their safety and welfare.

They all deserve an equal, quality education. The heart of the issue is how do we change long bus rides and keep our community schools," he said, not mentioning the state's school consolidation rampage of several years.

First Lady Gayle Manchin, who was appointed to the state Board of Education in March 2007, could not attend because of the new WVU president's inauguration.

"We know small schools offer many advantages. The governor and I remain strong in our stance to promote our small community schools. With on-line and Distance Learning being readily available, lack of teachers or curriculum cannot be an excuse," she said.

House Majority Leader Joe DeLong (Dem) said "Change begins with the community and the community needs to demand change from the legislature."

"Schools are the lifeblood of the community, I feel strongly about small schools, and tight knit communities."

"One of the biggest failures in WV schools is that 'Vo-Techs' are being used as dumping grounds for kids who are wanted out of the regular classroom," DeLong noted.

*"It's all about children and their safety and welfare. They all deserve an equal, quality education."
- Dr. Mark Manchin*



Conference participants discuss the Challenge for educational equality"

Barbara N. Fish, a member of the West Virginia Board of Education since December 2000, also serves as secretary of the West Virginia School Building Authority.

She said "State Board of Education can do a better job monitoring (bus) ride-time guidelines."

"I appreciate Challenge WV for being a 'watchdog' for WV education and what's best for the children. We need to incorporate distance learning and other available technology to community schools," Fish commented.

Sen. Donna Boley (Republican) from St. Marys, a long-time advocate for community-based education, said "Communities dry-up after school closings. How can we expect children to learn, after long bus rides, some up to an hour and 45 minutes?"

"There is no reason that we cannot keep our rural schools. Anything I can do to get local community schools to stay open, I'm all for," she told the conference.

Del. Stan Shaver, who is also a principal at Fellowsville Elementary School in Preston County, is a member of the House Education Committee.

Shaver said "Good things happen in small schools. I'll be glad to sponsor any legislation Challenge proposes in support of small schools. Just because a school is old, doesn't mean it can't be clean and safe."

Senator Ron Stollings (District 7) who is on the Senate Education Committee, told conference members that "Utilizing virtual classrooms may be the key to teacher shortage and bringing test scores up to par."

Challenge's Linda Martin reminded the leaders that most West Virginians are paying attention to what is being done

to their community schools.

Martin said leaders often give lip service to the importance of community schools, but turn around and move toward merging, centralizing and consolidating.

"Many certainly ignore the research about what works, and then start blaming when the outcomes keep hitting the bottom," Martin said.

*"Good things happen in small schools. I'll be glad to sponsor any legislation Challenge proposes in support of small schools."
- Del. Stan Shaver*

Flemington Elementary - Small School With Big Success

Taylor County West Virginia's, Flemington Elementary School is a shining example that small schools can achieve great things.

The 'Exemplary School' with only 120, K-4 pupils had a 97% attendance rate last year ... 100% of the school's 4th grade students made mastery or higher on the West Virginia Writing Assessment.

As a result of WESTEST scores, FES has been an Exemplary School for the years 2002-2003; 2003-2004; 2004-2005; 2005-



2006; 2007-2008. Ninety-six percent of FES 3rd and 4th grade students made "Mastery" or higher on the 2007 WESTEST.

Flemington Elementary was a Distinguished National Title I School in 2006 and a Distinguished West Virginia Title I School for 2007. Fif-

ty-two percent of the FES 4th grade class received the rare score of Distinguished on their WV Writing Assessment Essay. Only 5% of West Virginia's 20,000 4th graders achieved a distinguished score.

WV lags behind nation in education assessment scores

In a state where more money is spent per capita on education than most, performance results are sketchy.

Elementary and middle-school students across the country are making gains in math and reading.

But West Virginia's fourth and eighth-graders, while they've improved in math and remained about the same in reading, still lag behind the rest of the USA.

The average math score for West Virginia's fourth graders taking the National Assessment of Educational Progress was 236 in 2007. That's an increase of five points over 2005. The national average in

2007 was 239.

Eighth-grade math students in West Virginia improved from 269 in 2005 to 270 in 2007, well below this year's national average of 280.

Reading scores for fourth- and eighth-grade students in West Virginia remained steady at 215 and 255 respectively. The national average was 220 for fourth-graders and 261 for eighth-graders.

The national averages rose two points for both fourth- and eighth-graders in math between 2005 and 2007. In reading, fourth-graders improved three points nationally, and eighth-grade scores rose one point.

Study says WV schools are 'dropout factories'

A new study says about 1,700 regular or vocational high schools around the country are "dropout factories."

The study says these are schools where no more than 60 percent of students who start as freshmen make it to their senior year.

The study was conducted by Johns Hopkins University.

It found four such schools in West Virginia - Robert C. Byrd High School in Harrison County, Duval High School in Lincoln County, Big Creek High School in McDowell County and Matewan High

School in Mingo County.

Two of the schools, Duval and Matewan, have been under the control of the State Department of Education for several years.

At Robert C. Byrd High School, 131 of 270 freshmen entering the class of 2000 made it to their senior year. That's less than 50 percent.

Harrison County Superintendent Carl Friebe says that number is misleading because the school has a high number of students who transfer to other schools rather than drop out.

Teacher shortages in math, science, foreign languages

Teacher shortages may be yet another reason used to consolidate schools, said Challenge WV fellow Thomas Ramey.

Office of Professional Preparation Director Nathan Estel says West Virginia faces math, science and world language, teacher shortages.

About 10 percent of the teacher [job] openings for the 2006-2007 school year were not filled by educators licensed in those specific areas.

In some subject areas, the problem is worse: 56 percent of the chemistry positions were left unfilled during that school year.

The President of the West Virginia Education Association says the need for teachers across the state is not limited to areas that are considered in critical need.

SEAL'S...

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preted, saying "I apologize if words were taken out of context and if I, in any way, contributed to someone thinking that I offended someone."

Ramey said virtually everyone at the meeting is on-record about Seal's comments. "Based on what Dr. Seal said about Lincoln County, he is no longer welcome in Lincoln County as far as I'm concerned," he said.

Ramey concluded "For the state school board to continue to sweep the remarks under the rug is insulting."

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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