



The West Virginia Challenge

October 1999



Challenge addresses school violence

Challenge West Virginia members from three counties participated in a symposium on school violence at West Virginia University in August sponsored by U.S. Sen. Robert C. Byrd.

The Challenge members – Jana Freeman and Keith Larew of Preston County, Jenny Selin of Monongalia County, and Craig Manns and Thomas Ramey, Jr., of Lincoln County, told panelists small schools are safer and benefit children more than the large consolidated schools being built across the state.

“We spoke to a lot of people, including Sen. Robert Byrd and Sen. Lloyd Jackson,” said Ramey, a Challenge WV fellow from Lincoln County. “We tried to push the point that smaller schools are safer and more efficient for the rural students in the state.”

Ramey noted that the keynote speaker, James Alan Fox, also said small schools and small class sizes are effective strategies for coping with youth violence.

Fox, a national crime expert and former dean at Northeastern University in Boston, said the growing tide of antisocial behavior among children can be stopped with what he called “difficult but effective” strategies.

Fox said the policies and practices that seem to be most attractive on the surface “are the easy and quick fixes, bad ideas that simply won’t work or may cause more problems than they solve.” Among the bad ideas, he said, are metal detectors, more cops in the hall, locking all school entrances, arming the faculty and school uniforms.

On the other hand, Fox said, there are several effective and lasting strategies that “may take time, effort and money to implement, but are the most promising in order to reduce the scourge of schoolyard bloodshed.”

Those effective strategies, Fox says, include decreasing school size as well as class size. “Schools like Columbine High, with well over a thousand students, fail to capture any sense of community. Short of a basketball



Challenge WV members Keith Larew, Craig Manns, Thomas Ramey, Jr., Jenny Selin and Jana Freeman are shown with Sen. Byrd.

championship to rally the students, only a tragic shooting seems to bring everyone together. **Schools limited to about 500 students are far better in fostering collective environment, though they may cost a bit more.** The choice is ours: Pay for the schools now or pray for the victims later.”

In North Carolina, Governor Jim Hunt has stepped forward in support of smaller schools as a means for improving school safety. According to a report in the *Raleigh News and Observer*, Hunt said that North Carolina’s large high schools, which frequently house 1,600 students, should be cut in half.

The governor argued in favor of schools small enough “so principals could know most of their students by name.” Otherwise, he said, students may feel anonymous and form small cliques.

Monongalia County fellow Jenny Selin, whose three children are elementary students, said, “You have fewer discipline problems if kids feel like they belong at a school. Smaller schools make kids feel connected.”

The statement presented to Sen. Byrd by Challenge WV members is on page three. More information about the symposium may be found on Sen. Byrd’s website at: <http://byrd.senate.gov>



Challenge West Virginia

The West Virginia Challenge is published by Challenge West Virginia, a statewide organization committed to maintaining and improving small community schools.

If you would like to become involved in Challenge WV, please contact the fellow who lives nearest you or Linda Martin or Beth Spence, whose numbers are listed on the back page.

Challenge 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.



This 'n that

• Residents of Webster County formed the third county chapter of Challenge West Virginia at a meeting at Hacker Valley School on September 17.

We'll have a photograph of them in the next issue of the WV Challenge.

• Dr. Rachel Tompkins has been appointed the new president of the national Rural Challenge. Rachel is a West Virginia native, a professor at West Virginia University and she has long been involved in efforts to promote the value of small schools.

Many members of Challenge WV are familiar with her work and have met her at some of our meetings. We wish her every success.

• It's now official. As we reported last month, Judge Arthur Recht has been named to once again oversee the the lawsuit that bears his name.

The lawsuit, brought by Lincoln County parent Janet Pauley, challenged the way the state funded schools. Judge Recht found that financing schools based on a county's property tax revenues was unconstitutional.

The judge now will examine how the state has implemented the decision. He told The Charleston Gazette he plans to schedule "a conference with the attorneys to determine where they've been, where they're trying to go and how we're going to get there."

• The McDowell County Chapter of Challenge West Virginia has elected officers for the coming year.

They are: Mike Lushbaugh, president; Franki Patton-Rutherford, vice president; Jeanette Craighead and Jennings Boyd, board members.

McDowell County Fellow Eddie Harman said a third board member will be added at a later date from a county district not currently represented in the organization's leadership.

Challenge WV Fellows

Clay County
Joyce White
304-548-7821

Jeanette Craighead
304-862-4752

Clara L. Sears
304-286-3754

Mingo County
Phyllis McCoy
304-475-4244

Fayette County
Pam Boles
304-632-9844

Beverly Workman
304-475-2447

Betty Jo Neil
304-632-0321

Monongalia County
Jenny Selin
304-598-9650

Lincoln County
Thomas Ramey Jr.
304-855-3930

Preston County
Jana Freeman
304-735-3411

Steve Ruby
304-756-3692

Ritchie County
Patty Deak
304-869-3462

Logan County
Christine Spaulding
304-752-6056

Terri Weiford
304-477-3076

McDowell County
Eddie Harman
304-875-4202

Webster County
Cindy Miller
304-493-6369

Challenge WV Chapters

Preston County
Jana Freeman
RR1, Box 214A
Aurora, WV 26705
304-735-3411

McDowell County
Eddie Harman
HC 32, Box 585
Caretta, WV 24821
304-875-4202

Webster County
Cindy Miller
1085 Replete Road
Hacker Valley, WV 26222
304-493-6369

Community-based Schools: A Solution to Violence

Please don't Wal-Mart our Children

This statement was presented to Sen. Byrd by members of Challenge West Virginia:

We are members of **Challenge West Virginia**, a state-wide organization committed to maintaining and improving our state's community-based schools. We have come today to talk about our community schools and their unique role in providing a safe environment for our children. The author Jonathan Kozol, who for many years has written about education issues, once said that our public schools are often "*prisoners of minds.*" Unfortunately, today, schools are starting to *look* more and more like prisons. Increasingly the solutions offered to address school violence are metal detectors, identification tags, iron bars and police officers.

We think it is important to take a step back and try to determine the conditions that lead to school violence. A 1977 study by the New Jersey Schools Boards Association concluded that size is the most important predictor of school violence. One of our members in McDowell County noted that McDowell has two small high schools and a large consolidated high school which was created by the merger of three small schools. The school where the metal detectors have been installed is the consolidated school. They're not needed at the small schools.

It should be noted that the state of West Virginia is in the midst of a school consolidation movement that has resulted in the closure of 323 public schools since 1989. As one Challenge West Virginia member said, "**Our schools aren't in any communities now. They're all out on the four-lane roads like Wal-Mart's. We're Wal-Marting our children.**"

At this time, county school systems are involved with updating comprehensive school facilities plans. In county after county, Challenge West Virginia members report that those committees are being pressured to consolidate even more schools. Already many of our children are on school buses for three hours each day — time that could be spent reading, playing, sharing experiences with supportive adults, hiking in our mountains or working at part-time jobs or as community volunteers.

One member of Challenge West Virginia who attended a consolidated high school and rode a school bus for 90 minutes in the morning and another 90 minutes in the afternoon for four years wrote: "Thirty-two percent of my school day was spent on a bus. At an average of three hours a day on the bus, assuming an 180-day instructional year, for the years of 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades, I logged at least 2,160 hours of my life on a bus. That works out to 54 forty-hour work weeks."

At this time the primary targets of school consolidation efforts are elementary schools. Increasing numbers of children as young as five will be on buses for three hours each day. State officials try to minimize the numbers of children whose daily commute exceeds their own guidelines, but our preliminary research shows that many children throughout the state are spending vast portions of their childhoods on yellow buses.

Current research almost overwhelmingly demonstrates that not only are small schools safer, they provide students with a better education.

Mary Anne Raywid, respected professor at Hofstra University and the University of Hawaii at Manoa, has conducted a thorough search of the literature concerning small schools. Professor Raywid concludes that students are more satisfied with small schools, fewer of them drop out and they behave better in small schools. In addition, she says that disadvantaged students particularly need the small school setting.

Researcher Craig Howley of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory in Charleston, WV, notes that school size exerts a "unique influence on academic accomplishments with a strong negative relationship linking the two: the larger the school, the lower the student achievement rates." He also found that students were more satisfied with small schools because of their ability to participate in more activities and because of greater parent participation in school events and as volunteers.

Kathleen Cotton, a researcher with the School Improvement Program at the Northwest Regional Education Lab in Portland, Oregon, came to many of the same conclusions. She found that "students in small schools drop out less and create less social disturbance and that they participate in extracurricular activities at significantly higher levels" than at large schools. Students feel that they are needed to play with the school band, write for the newspaper, participate on sports teams, serve as student officers. In short, they are part of the fiber of the community when they attend small schools.

We would respectfully request that you consider the importance of community schools, both for student achievement and student safety, and that you support our efforts to maintain and improve our state's community schools for the sake of all of our children.

Signed by: Jana Freeman Thomas Ramey Jr.
Craig Manns Jenny Selin
Keith Larew



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

Our Communities, Our Schools

It's not too late to make plans to attend Challenge WV's conference on community schools Friday, Oct. 8, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Cedar Lakes Conference Center near Ripley.

"Our Communities, Our Schools" is for everyone who supports small community schools. To reserve your place, please return the form at right by Oct. 1.

Speakers include Dr. George H. Wood, principal of Federal Hocking High School in Stewart, Ohio, Dr. Stan Maynard of Marshall University, Dr. Van Dempsey of West Virginia University and Marty Strange of the Rural Challenge.

Please clip and return this form:

Name _____

Address (please include zip code) _____

_____ Phone _____

Conference fee, includes lunch

\$10

Overnight Accommodations, October 7

Holt Lodge (1 or 2 people) \$54

Motel rooms (1 or 2 people) \$40

Dormitory \$12 per person

Breakfast, October 8, \$5 per person

Total: _____

Make check payable to **Challenge West Virginia** and send to Linda Martin, 801 Gordon Drive, Charleston, West Virginia 25303. If you have questions, call 304-744-5916.