



# The Challenge



September 2004

## Challenge conference set for Oct. 22

• Education woes around the country and NCLB to be focus of annual event

Nationally recognized speakers will headline Challenge West Virginia's annual fall conference this year.

The conference has been set for Friday, October 22, at the Charleston Embassy Suites hotel, starting at 9:30 a.m.

The keynote speaker will be Marty Strange, Policy Director for the Rural School and Community Trust, a national organization which is closely related to Challenge West Virginia.

Strange will address the current issues facing West Virginia's public school system and explain how those issues are quite similar to those being faced by other states.

In addition to Strange's presentation, Dr. Lorna Jimerson will address the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Jimerson's portion of the program will focus on how the Act is impacting West Virginia schools, communities and — most importantly — West Virginia's children.

In a third presentation, Jude Binder will discuss how art is a key element in the development of young children.

The annual event also has an entertainment aspect.

Through lunch, Karen Vuranch will perform "Coal Camp Memories".

The conference is expected to

last until approximately 3:00 p.m.

The cost of attending the conference is \$20 per person.

The registration fee includes the cost of lunch.

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

Anyone interested in attending the Conference should complete the registration form on page three of this issue, and/or contact Linda Martin by phone at (304) 744-5916 or by e-mail at LBM94@aol.com.

The conference is open to any interested party and not just those associated with Challenge WV.

## Report: Mezzatesta letters were fakes

According to an investigation ordered by the Speaker of the W.Va. House of Delegates, staff members of former House Education Committee Chairman Jerry Mezzatesta manufactured a back-dated letter in order to help him get out of trouble with the West Virginia Ethics Commission.

The questioned letter was used to help convince an investigative panel of the Ethics Commission that Mezzatesta, (D-Hampshire) did not violate a promise not to solicit

grants from the State of West Virginia when he took a central office administrator's position with the Hampshire County Board of Education.

Specifically, the letter purported to assure West Virginia Superintendent of Schools David Stewart that Mezzatesta was not soliciting funds for Hampshire County in particular, during a prior conversation between the two about state Department of Education grants.

Mezzatesta, his wife Mary Lou

and Delegate Larry Williams claim that Mezzatesta actually sent the letter to Stewart on January 13, 2004.

Mary Lou Mezzatesta is employed by the Legislature and Williams is the vice-chairman of the House Education Committee.

Committee staff members say that, after an ethics complaint was filed against Mezzatesta, he ordered them to find a copy of the letter. The staff members say that, when an original copy of the letter could not

See Ethics on Page 3

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# This 'n that from around the state

- The West Virginia School Building Authority has announced that it will not fund any more school construction projects this year. The agency says it is facing a \$63 million budget deficit. According to Clacy Williams, executive director of the School Building Authority, the agency has current obligations to provide construction funding in the amount of \$228 million. The funding includes money for hotly contested new schools in Lincoln and Mingo counties, both of which are being billed as the most expensive, state of the art schools in the state. Lawsuits against the new schools in both counties have not been resolved to date. Due to a bill, which House of Delegates Education Committee Chairman Jerry Mezzatesta pushed through the legislative process within hours of its introduction, the School Building Authority must provide \$19 million to match a \$43 million federal grant for building new consolidated schools in McDowell County. The McDowell County Board of Education had rejected the proposal, but, within hours of the board's action, Mezzatesta had gotten the legislation passed, forcing the plan on McDowell County.



- McDowell County school officials say the county has lost 231 students since the 2003-2004 school year. McDowell County Superintendent of Schools Mark Manchin says that, over the past several years, the county has averaged a loss of 357 students each year. A very poor economy and frequent flooding problems are two of the factors which have contributed the most to the loss of students. Control of the McDowell County school system was seized by the State Board of Education in 2001. Manchin was appointed by the state board to manage the school system after the takeover. Since then, 500 students have left the county.

- Due to Mezzatesta's antics, the West Virginia Board of Education will begin reviewing all grants from the West Virginia Department of Education to county boards of education. The board has ordered state Superintendent of Schools David Stewart to provide it with monthly reports on all such grants. Furthermore, the board has restricted Stewart's power to award discretionary grants from a special fund which he controls. Any expenditures of \$1,000 or more must now be reviewed by the state board. The annual amount of money involved in this process is approximately \$8 million. Mezzatesta is alleged to have improperly used his influence as House Education Committee chairman to bring additional funding to his real life employer, the Hampshire County Board of Educa-

tion. When Mezzatesta took his current job as a "grant writer" he promised the West Virginia Ethics Commission that he would not seek any state funded grants for Hampshire County schools. Mezzatesta said he'd only solicit grants from the federal government and private sources. A review of Hampshire County records by *The Charleston Gazette* revealed evidence indicating that the only grants Mezzatesta had ever solicited on behalf of Hampshire County schools were grants from the state.

- In another issue, not unrelated to the Mezzatesta controversy, the Center for Public Integrity has given West Virginia a failing grade for the lax ethics and financial disclosure laws applicable to our public officials. In its survey, released on September 23rd, the center gave West Virginia an "F" and ranked the state 43rd in the nation. Some states were tied, but only Tennessee, Wyoming, New Hampshire and Utah fared worse than West Virginia in the study.

- Three West Virginia Schools have been named "No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon Schools" by the U.S. Department of Education. The three schools are Suncrest Middle School in Monongalia County, Riverside Elementary School in Mingo County and Frametown Elementary School in Braxton County. Nationwide, 142 elementary schools, 29 middle schools and 32 high schools received the same recognition.

- A Pleasants County High School teacher has been named West Virginia's Teacher of the Year for 2005. The award was presented on September 8th, to Jason Hughes, an agriculture education teacher at St. Mary's High School. Pleasants County is one of West Virginia's smallest school systems, with approximately 1,400 students in two elementary schools, one middle school, one high school and a vocational school. Each year, either Pleasants County or Gilmer County receives the smallest amount of state aid of all West Virginia's 55 counties.

- Even though 38 West Virginia schools were recently designated as failing to make adequate yearly progress under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and ordered to allow students to transfer to other schools, few students are taking advantage of the opportunity. State school officials say that county school systems are reporting very few such transfers. Final numbers will not be ready for a few more weeks. So far, the largest number is 20 in Harrison County.

# ETHICS

be found, they re-created the letter on July 1, 2004, and backdated it to January 13, 2004.

Mezzatesta and others then submitted affidavits to the Ethics Commission, claiming that he never solicited any grants for Hampshire County from the State of West Virginia.

After *The Charleston Gazette* discovered that the letter had been printed on stationery that did not exist on January 13, 2004, Speaker Kiss ordered an internal investigation.

When the *Gazette* broke that story, Mezzatesta had an excuse ready.

At that time, the delegate claimed that letters were frequently

written on blank sheets of paper and then copied onto stationery. He said that the letter in question was found in a file, written on a blank sheet of paper and members of his staff copied the blank sheet onto the stationery that existed at that time and sent it to the Ethics Commission.

According to the investigation report, Shelda Howard, a House of Delegates staff member who was temporarily assigned to the House Education Committee, told Speaker Kiss that the letter was a fake.

Howard said that Mary Lou Mezzatesta dictated the letter to her after it could not be found in the Education Committee's files.

Another House staff member told the same story to investigators and Mary Lou Mezzatesta also admitted that the letter was a fake.

In her statement to investigators, Mary Lou Mezzatesta said that she did not coerce any House staffer to assist her in the endeavor. She claims that she did not instigate the incident, but joined two other staff members in a "conspiracy" to help one of the staffers who was "ill" and "frantic" over the alleged loss of the original letter.

Mary Lou Mezzatesta is also claiming that her husband knew nothing about the scheme.

The day before Kiss held his press conference releasing the report, Mezzatesta publicly announced that he is afflicted with prostate cancer.

The Kanawha County Prosecuting Attorney's office is investigating the incidents as well as the Ethics Commission.

## Challenge West Virginia 2004 Annual Fall Conference

"Our Communities, Our Schools"

**October 22, 2004, at 9:30 a.m.**

Embassy Suites, Charleston

### Topics of discussion include:

- Education issues in West Virginia and the nation — by Marty Strange
- The No Child Left Behind Act in West Virginia — by Dr. Lorna Jimerson
- Art in education — Jude Binder

### Entertainment:

- "Coal Camp Memories" performed by Karen Vuranch

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Total Number of Attendees: \_\_\_\_\_

Registration Fee \$20 per person

Total Registration Fee: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

List names of others who will attend with you:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
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## *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

A program of Governor House of Charleston, WV

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# We Support Small Schools!

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