



The Challenge



September 2005

Challenge's conference will look at future of WV education

Challenge West Virginia's Annual Fall Conference - "Our Communities, Our Schools: A Community Conversation" - is scheduled for October 21 at Charleston's Embassy Suites from 10 a.m. until 3 p.m.

Among the principal speakers, Howard O'Cull, executive director of the state's School Board Association; Jay Cole, Education Policy Director for Gov. Joe Manchin; Larry Williams, vice-chair of the House Education Committee and Sen. John Unger from Jefferson County.

Challenge coordinator Linda Martin said the conference will focus on creating a dialog regarding directions of education in the Mountain State. (See registration form on page 3)

Lincoln scores hit rock bottom after state take-over

After five years of administration by the State Department of Education, Lincoln County students are falling through the crack.

"The system is hitting rock bottom," said Linda Martin, coordinator for Challenge WV, the state is using abusive power over community schools.

When the state took-over the system in 2005, they cited the county's abysmal college-going rate of 44% as one reason for their actions.

Since then, the rate has dropped to less than 40%, likely the worst in the state.

McDowell County, taken-over by the state in 2001, has the second worst college-going rate in the state, showing dismal progress.

Thomas Ramey, a Challenge WV fellow and Lincoln County small schools activist, told state officials, "There is not only a lack of improvement, it has gotten much worse."

Under state control, local officials say the system is being thrust into bankruptcy.

Ramey called for the resignation of state-appointed superintendent William Grizzell. Hundreds of Lincoln County residents have signed a petition calling for his removal.

"Mr. Grizzell is incapable of sparking the progress we need and he should be removed from his position or resign," said Ramey.

Grizzell is paid at least \$90,000 for running the system. An auditor recently denied his use of a school vehicle for his private transportation, while county school officials complained that he is often absent from the county office.

After five years, three out of four Lincoln County schools did not meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), with one school having the lowest test scores in WV.

Challenge's Martin said, "If Lincoln's numbers warranted a takeover for being so bad, and now those numbers are even lower, who does Mr. Grizzell and the state answer to?"

"It is time for someone to be held
See Lincoln... on Page 3

Mingo school consolidation nixed?

The recent sale of strip mine property in Mingo County that a coal company had promised for the site of the county's proposed consolidated school has been sold.

Mingo County school superintendent Brenda Skibo says the proposed location for the new school is now in doubt, along with the closure of the community schools, Burch, Williamson and Matewan.

All three schools were constructed in the late 70s and early 80s.

Skibo says she does not know where the site for the proposed new high school will be, since Nicewonder Coal has sold the property and a lawsuit issued by three members of Mingo's school board slowed down the consolidation process.

Mingo board president Bill Duty has contended that the school board was never given title to the property, asking board members to build a building on property the board did not own.

"We were aware of the sale of (coal) property, but based upon the judge's stay

order, we weren't allowed to participate in anything," said Skibo, saying the company removed their site preparation equipment after three Mingo board members brought a suit against the state for taking over the system.

Duty has maintained the state's take-over is a constitutional violation, state education administrators over-ruled elected officials, an argument still being contested in a Kanawha County court.

The strip mine site that was being
See Mingo school... on Page 3

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Examiner upholds state's take-over of Mingo schools

A hearing examiner has ruled that the State Department of Education was obligated to act after receiving complaints from Mingo County residents.

The State took over Mingo schools for the second time, citing financial reasons, poor curriculum, management and performance.

Three school board members say the reason was to close community

schools and build a central consolidated high school.

Mercer Circuit Judge David Knight said the three school board members failed to prove the state acted arbitrarily and capriciously when it ordered an audit, stripped the county of its accreditation and took-over the system.

Beyond the administrative hearing, the case will return to Judge Paul

Zakaib's court in Kanawha County.

Consolidation proponent Dr. J. W. Endicott claims that the three board members who oppose consolidation are providing inadequate leadership.

He, and board member Dee Kapourales, have filed a suit against those members with the support of coal baron Buck Harless.

Rising construction costs will slow SBA plans

The State School Building Authority signed-off on an increase to the square foot cost assigned to school building projects.

"We're seeing a huge increase in the cost of steel, concrete, conduit, roofing, you just name it. And the costs have just gotten out of reason," says executive director Clancy Williams.

Williams says it's costing more to have those supplies delivered because of higher gasoline costs.

Increases for elementary school construction from \$114 a square foot to \$142, middle schools from \$130 to \$164 and high schools from \$120 to \$161.

Williams says the Authority will have to "revisit projects that have already been approved" and supplement the money already made available to those projects to make up for the higher costs.

"We have commitments to projects that are currently either in contract or are being designed," he said.

Tightening of PROMISE requirements could reduce program

Budget cuts of the highly successful PROMISE scholarships suggested to the WV legislature could leave the program short.

Del. Harold Michael (D-Hardy), the state's "king of pork," believes the program's budget needs to be pulled back.

Michael has diverted millions of dollars to his home county, including educational funding.

While the success of the program is being acclaimed around the USA, some legislators want to cut the budget or tighten requirements, making fewer students eligible.

Hampshire board denies superintendent's buyout

Hampshire County Board of Education members, in a unanimous decision, denied a \$275,000 contract buyout for Superintendent David Friend.

Friend was a long-time supporter for Jerry Mezzatesta, a former chairman of the House Education Committee and a former employee of the Hampshire board.

Friend, whose contract was to run from 2004 through 2008, has been on medical leave for nearly a year.

Jill Parker, who was recently appointed assistant superintendent, is now serving as acting superintendent.

Meanwhile, a group called Citizens for Quality Education in Hampshire County wants Friend removed for alleged misconduct and is also pressing for the resignations of board members Helen Heatwole and Brenda Pyles.

Both Heatwole and Pyles took part in the unanimous vote against the buyout.

Mezzatesta continues to legally protest charges brought against him by the State Department of Education and the State Ethics Commission.

He is still the subject of on-going investigations.

Harrison superintendent says money and results don't add-up

Dr. Carl Friebel says Harrison County is spending about \$8,500 a year on each student.

The results of this Spring's WESTEST definitely weren't up to par with a school system spending that much money, especially on the math exam.

"I was rather surprised at some
See Harrison... on Page 3

Overcrowded classes lead to transfers, long bus rides

Taylor County has too many students in some classes and is moving kids around the county.

Some students are starting the year at a different school at the other end of the county, because of a requirement set by the state.

The state sets limits for the number of students allowed in a class.

Even if there is one extra child in a class, they may have to transfer to another school.

A Taylor County newspaper said even though the Smith family can see the flag at Flemington Elementary School from their front yard, Brian Smith can't attend third grade there.

He's instead, taking an hour long bus ride to Pruntytown Elementary School.

"He doesn't want to go. He loves this school. All his friends are there. He's really upset. He doesn't understand why they are picking on him and making him move," said his mother, Rachel Smith.

Brian was the 26th student in a class allowed to have 25 children. State Law limits class size to 20 students in Kindergarten and 25 in grades one through four.

"This is a very difficult issue for counties because often times it's one or two children that need to be transferred to comply with the law," said Taylor County Superintendent Jane Reynolds.

Superintendents say their hands are tied when it comes to the transfers. If they don't follow the law, the schools could lose state funding.

"Every year since the law was passed, superintendents in West Virginia counties have requested the legislature remove the cap because it makes it difficult for us to operate within the state aid formula. We have not been successful in removing those caps," said Reynolds.

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accountable. It is time for new leadership," she said.

"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.

"Look at the numbers. Our kids have lost, lost, lost," he said. "We need someone that cares about education, and not just multi-million dollar buildings and creating super-long bus rides for our

children."

Members of the elected Lincoln County Board of Education are ready to resume control of personnel matters, says board president Carol Smith.

Smith says the state now plans to employ a former assistant superintendent to work on the county's five-year plan at a cost of \$300-per-day.

"We have consistently told them that their appointed superintendent has wrecked the finances of the county," said Smith. "We are going to be worse than bankrupt by the time he (state-appointed Superintendent William Grizzell) gets through," she said.

Smith says the school board has no intentions of taking back financial control, until the state takes care of the matter. "We certainly don't want the financial mess."

Grizzell told state media he came to Lincoln County to take care of the consolidation problem.

Smith has always contended the state used alleged shortcomings as "excuses" to consolidate the county's four high schools.

The Lincoln County school board, all five members, have petitioned the state to hire a financial consultant to help correct the problems.

Mingo continued from Page 1

donated is located in a remote area about ten miles up Red Jacket Mountain, with no access road. The site is near the proposed King Coal Highway.

Challenge WV has contended the multi-million dollar school project has been linked to land development projects, which have been kept quiet and would benefit local investors, in addition to the coal company.

The School Building Authority does not provide money for site development. Skibo says the local school system may now have to "bare the brunt," with the county having \$18 million for building construction.

Duty says most Mingo County residents are opposed to losing their community schools and creating long bus rides.

"There is no evidence that school consolidation has helped our children's education," he said.

Harrison continued from Page 2

of the schools," says Friebe. "Some that have traditionally done well kind of fell flat. I could understand that in the first year of a testing program. But this is the second year and I was hoping for a little better results," although more Harrison schools made Average Yearly Progress.

Challenge West Virginia's Annual Fall Conference

"Our Communities, Our Schools; A Community Conversation"

Friday, October 21, 2005

Embassy Suites, 300 Court Street, Charleston

10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

\$20.00 (includes lunch)

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

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