



The Challenge



September 2006

“A Community Conversation” Challenge WV Fall Conference

Challenge West Virginia’s annual Fall Conference “A Community Conversation,” will be held Friday, October 20 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Covenant House, 600 Shrewsbury Street in Charleston.

The registration fee is \$10 which includes lunch, payable at the conference. Please make your reservation no later than October 14 by contacting Challenge WV Coordinator, Linda Martin at 304-744-5916 or LBM94@aol.com

First Lady Gayle Manchin will be an honored guest at this year’s conference. In addition to her current duties as West Virginia’s First Lady, she serves by appointment for the National Education Commission of the States and the West Virginia Commission for National and Community Service.

Among other appointments and duties Gayle is the Chair of the Governor’s Healthy Lifestyles Coalition, Vice Chair of the Governor’s Cabinet on Children and Families, Citizens Advisory Council and a Co-Chair on the Governor’s 21st Century Jobs Cabinet.

She is a partner on the WV Partnership to Promote Community Well Being Commission, and serves as the Nominating Chair on the executive board of The Education Alliance. She became the West Virginia Director of the AmeriCorps Promise Fellow Program. Gayle, under the Office of Secretary of



Robert Plymale



Tom Campbell



Larry Williams



Jenny Phillips



Jay Cole



Gale Manchin

Education and the Arts, implemented the WV PASS (West Virginia Partnerships to Assure Student Success) initiative.

Conference panel members will be Senator Robert H. Plymale, Senate Education Committee Chair. Senator Plymale is a member of 7 Senate and 14 Interim committees.

Delegate Thomas W. Campbell, House Education Committee Chair. He is the assistant Majority Whip,

and is a member of 2 House and 7 Interim committees.

Delegate Larry A. Williams, House Education Committee Vice Chair, and the assistant Majority Whip. Delegate Williams is a member of 4 House and 11 Interim committees.

Jenny N. Phillips, State Board of Education Member. Phillips was appointed to the West Virginia Board of Education in June 2005 by Governor

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Joe Manchin III. Included in Ms. Phillips' work experience is time with the White House Office of Public Liaison, Office of Import Administration, and the United States Department of Commerce.

Jay Cole Director of Education Policy, Office of the Governor. Cole has served as Deputy Secretary of the West Virginia Department of Education and the Arts since 2001. He pre-

viously worked as an education researcher with the RAND Corporation, a research associate with the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, a policy analyst with the U.S. Department of Education and a coordinator of service-learning programs.

Challenge WV Fellows and Coordinator, Linda Martin as well as attendees will have an opportunity to participate in the "community conver-

sation" with panel members.

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Challenge WV'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 promise of a bright future.

State superintendent Steve Paine overstepping power?



Steve Paine



Carol Smith



Butch West

State Superintendent of Schools Steve Paine has blamed the Lincoln County Board of Education for low test schools, although the state has operated the system for six years.

Now, a private phone call from Paine to Lincoln school board president Carol Smith has prompted some elected officials to demand a public apology.

Paine called Smith when he found out she was slated to speak at a Mingo County Board of Education meeting.

Paine told Smith he wanted to know what she was going to discuss before he authorized her to go.

Paine's message said "I think what goes on in Lincoln County needs to stay in Lincoln County," urging Smith to say nothing but positive things about the school system at the meeting.

"When he called, he acted like he could tell me what to do," Smith said. "I say good things about our school, but I don't have anything good to say

about state takeovers and forced consolidation."

"Dr. Paine certainly overstepped his authority. Besides, I'm not married to him," said Smith, calling it "a major example of bullying."

Both counties have undergone similar state takeover situations that have involved major school consolidation battles.

Smith and Mingo school board President Charles "Butch" West both say Paine needs to apologize. West has publicly called for an apology at Mingo county's September 5 board meeting.

Department of Education Spokeswoman Liza Cordeiro said the fallout from the phone call was "a case of miscommunication."

"Anybody, including Carol, can go to a public meeting and discuss any topics they want," Cordeiro said, but indicated all actions in the county still are under state control.

Cordeiro said Paine phoned Smith

because he was curious how she ended up on another county agenda. Technically, all actions in the county are still under state control, she said.

Smith, along with board member Thomas Ramey, were scheduled to attend the meeting as West's guest. West said he wanted Smith and Ramey to visit Williamson to discuss the new Lincoln County High School and problems that could happen regarding construction.

Smith said she couldn't go to the Mingo meeting because of a meeting of her own. She fully intends to visit another meeting, she said.

In a letter to Paine, West indicated more suits may be in the wings over such behavior, saying "I intend to consider my rights, both as a member of the [Mingo County Board of Education] and as a disenfranchised voter from Mingo County, whose will I believe you violated ..."

West said "Clearly, you have no authority, discretion, or jurisdiction to infringe upon or violate the rights of Smith and Ramey ..."

Members of both boards of education have feuded with the state since their respective takeovers, including the filing of lawsuits.

State courts have ruled against the suits, based on constitutional power given the state over county school systems by the West Virginia Legislature.

Consolidation study lacking, auditors say

State lawmakers want to know if school consolidation has helped or hurt student achievement in West Virginia.

The Legislature created the School Building Authority 17-years ago to replace and repair aging school buildings, giving the agency a lot of power.

During the 1990s, local and state school officials closed about one-quarter of all West Virginia schools in a massive consolidation drive. More are on the block, particularly elementary schools.

The closures resulted in long bus rides for thousands of rural children. In return, students were supposed to do better in new, consolidated schools.

The state has not completed a study to determine whether that actually happened, according to a report just issued by the Legislative Auditor's Office.

During the last legislative audit, the School Building Authority was told to study whether consolidation affected student achievement.

The agency hired Marshall University to do a study, but that study did not compare consolidated schools to smaller schools.

Instead, they did a general study looking at whether students in large high schools score better on standardized tests than students in small high schools.

Challenge WV coordinator Linda Martin says all the national research shows that children do better in small-

er schools located in their own communities.

The Marshall study found that school size had no significant effect on student test scores in West Virginia. In other words, students in small high schools, on average, did as well as students in larger high schools.

Legislative auditors said the report was not specific enough. They thought that a larger study that compared consolidated schools to ones that were not consolidated, would be better.

"The study did not accurately evaluate the situation," said Martin.

Martin said the State Department of Education is yet to come up with an accurate study regarding long bus rides. "They've fudged the numbers," she said.

"With the amount of money the state is spending to consolidate schools, we should have some idea whether it is helping or hurting academic performance," said legislative auditor John Silvia.

Lawmakers agreed that a study is needed, perhaps a joint effort of education schools at Marshall and West Virginia University. They voted to take the issue to legislative leadership and ask for funding for the study.

Dave Sneed, interim School Building Authority director, said his agency does not decide to consolidate schools. That decision lies with local school boards, he said.

Martin says "Sneed is delusional,"

saying the bloody-hammer is held over the heads of school board members, and in some cases, takeovers result.

Agency rules reward counties that consolidate schools, Martin said. The state Board of Education has consolidated high schools in several of the counties where it took control from locals, including Mingo, McDowell and Lincoln counties.

A 2002 investigation by the Charleston Gazette found during the consolidation push in the 1990s, twice as many children were forced to endure daily bus rides of two hours or more.

Martin says that many of the advanced classes promised never materialized at consolidated schools, and most school districts ended up spending more money after they consolidated schools than before.

"Such takeovers rarely improve education, and they certainly have not reduced costs," said Lincoln board member and Challenge WV fellow Thomas Ramey, who has expressed fear about the financial stability of the Lincoln system.

"School consolidation has not saved the taxpayers a single dime," he said.

"The power structure, bolstered by legislation, is destroying community-based schools and taking control from local elected officials and parents," Ramey said.

"It is a scary thought that Dr. Paine is 'globalizing' education," he said.

Mezz and Friend indicted on federal charges

The once powerful House Education Chairman Jerry Mezzatesta and former Hampshire County Schools Superintendent David Friend have been indicted on federal charges in Martinsburg.

Mezzatesta and Friend are accused of defrauding the school board and misappropriating public funds.

If convicted on both counts, each face up to 15 years in prison.

The charges center on a \$75,000 grant Mezzatesta sought in 2003 for Hampshire

County schools, where he "doubled-dipped," working as a school administrator.

In 2004, Friend asked state officials for permission to spend the money instead on Red Cross and emergency services facilities. About \$35,000 went to a library and six volunteer fire departments, which Mezzatesta reportedly handed out.

The indictment alleges that Mezzatesta, a nine-term Democrat, diverted the money to gain an advantage in his 2004

re-election campaign.

He was not re-elected.

Mezzatesta was found to have violated state ethics rules and was convicted of a state charge of destroying legislative computer records in an alleged cover-up.

Friend resigned from the school system in January.

Mezzatesta and a handful of legislators worked closely with the State Board of Education to consolidate hundreds of West Virginia schools, promising financial savings and a better education for children.

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Challenge West Virginia

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