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# **‘If this is democracy, then I missed the bus’**

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The story of small schools advocates  
who were blocked from participating in  
facilities planning in West Virginia

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**A Challenge West Virginia document  
written by Beth Spence**

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**This publication is the result of a series  
of conversations with Challenge WV  
members led by  
Coordinator Linda Martin**

*Cover: Residents of Hacker Valley in Webster County put a new roof on their school. The community provided volunteer labor for the project and paid for the materials.*

# Democracy held hostage

## Public not welcome in school facilities planning process

When the West Virginia School Building Authority in 1998 gave every county in the state the chance to apply for a \$20,000 grant to create a Comprehensive Education Facilities Plan (CEFP), ordinary citizens had every reason to believe they would have a voice in developing those ten-year plans.

In fact, the SBA – the agency charged with deciding which counties get money for new and renovated schools – included a provision for community participation when it drew up the guidelines for the Statewide Planning Initiative of 1998.

In theory, the comprehensive education facilities planning process would offer a systematic approach to funding school facilities, allowing each county to provide the best education for each student within the parameters of available national, state and local resources. Every school district was required to submit a plan in order to compete for the school construction dollars controlled by and awarded by the SBA. Each school district also had to contribute an equal amount to the planning process. The Statewide Planning Initiative called for community involvement “to help improve the validity and effectiveness of the CEFP that each school district will develop.”

It didn't turn out that way, according to many people who spent hours attending tedious meetings officiated over by school planners certified by the state. Across the state, participants complained about the process, especially those who believe small community schools best serve West Virginia's children. Many came to believe the Statewide Planning Initiative stymied, rather than encouraged, citizen participation. The end product, they said, was already pre-determined and the process rigged so that the only acceptable plans would be those that called for large consolidated schools.

“My opinion of the whole thing from the concept to the finish was that it was a collusion of architects,

**‘ . . . it was a collusion of architects, engineers, designers, the School Building Authority, the state School Boards Association and local school boards.’**

engineers, designers, the School Building Authority, the state School Boards Association and local school boards,” said a former school board member from Preston County. “You just don't question because the SBA has these guidelines and this authority to tell you what you can and what you can't do. So why bother us people in the community. They tell you right up front, you can't do this, you can't do that, because of economies of scale. If that's democracy, then I missed the bus.”

In December 2000, Challenge WV asked Concordia, Inc., to evaluate the mandatory ten-year Comprehensive Education Facility Plans for five counties – Lincoln, Logan, Preston, Ritchie and Webster. Concordia, a nationally recognized and respected planning firm, specializes in educational and civic facility planning and has projects scattered throughout the nation, including many in rural areas.

At the same time, Challenge WV conducted a survey of those who served on the CEFP committees in the five counties. The survey was designed by Concordia officials, and gave all committee members the opportunity to share their thoughts about the planning process. In order to assure as much fairness as possible, a graduate student at Ohio University, who had no prior involvement with school planning in West Virginia, conducted the interviews. While the survey had a 44 percent response rate, none of the school planners

agreed to be interviewed. (Williamson, Shriver, Gandee Educational Facilities Planning was employed by the largest number of counties in the state, including four of the five counties evaluated by Concordia – Preston, Ritchie, Lincoln and Logan. The Southeastern Planning Group with Roy Blizzard, Jr., and J. Dan Snead, Architects and Associates, consulted with Webster County.)

Concordia found major flaws with the planning process, some of them involving democracy at its most basic level. In four of the five counties (Logan, Lincoln, Ritchie and Webster) the majority of those named to the committee by the local school board were school board employees. Few parents and almost no students were involved in the process. Preston County did not provide enough information to determine who or what the committee members represented.

“CEFP committees did not equitably represent all stakeholders,” the report found. “For the most part members were school employees and (committees) often did not include many people opposed to the existing school policies. Public hearing comments often spoke of frustration at CEFP and school officials for not listening to community wishes. Lack of community participation calls into question the accuracy and validity of the whole planning process since it is part of the School Building Authority’s mission to fulfill the needs of the communities it serves.”

For example, in Webster County, 17 of 29 committee members were board of education employees. Only nine parents and three other community members – and no students – were named to the committee. Concordia noted that “this mixture of people does not adequately represent the community-at-large in its diversity or balance.”

Only one public hearing was held, and community members of the committee felt the decision to build

**(committees) often did not include many people opposed to the existing school policies.**

a new consolidated middle school was already made before the committee ever began its work. A participant said, “Consultants held meetings, but from the beginning (it) seemed to be going toward their agenda. The consultants said from the beginning we should go with a new middle school.”

In Lincoln County, a committee made up primarily of school board employees was named. After that, a number of community representatives were named to the committee and participated in the planning process. But when it came time to approve or reject the plan, those who were added to the committee were told they wouldn’t be part of the process. Only the “original” committee members could vote, they were told. “My vote was not counted,” one woman said. “They picked out people who favored their position.” Only eight people (out of the approximately 50 people named to the two committees) voted for the plan, which called for widespread school consolidation.

Concordia was not able to confirm that Logan County even held public meetings, although state law requires verification of public notices, advertising and a synopsis of public hearings regarding the facilities plan. A young mother in the county was forced to file a Freedom of Information Act to find out who had been named to the committee and what actions the committee was taking.

A committee member in Preston County summarized the frustration, “I do not believe that this plan represents any consensus of Preston County at all. According to the (Morgantown) Dominion Post of Sept. 12, the committee lost two-thirds of its membership before the plan actually came up for a vote. I believe the plan ended up representing the philosophy of the Superintendent of Schools, and as committee members could see that they were going to have very little input into the actual development of a plan, they simply chose not to participate.”

Among other complaints lodged by CEFP members who participated in the Challenge WV survey and who related their experiences with facilities planning to Challenge WV:

- Those who support small schools were left out of the process or ignored if they tried to introduce evi-

dence supporting small schools. A Ritchie County committee member said, “Studies seem to clearly show that larger schools are not as good. I asked the consultants to show studies of the benefits of large schools.” No evidence was offered in support of large schools, but the committee never had a real chance to discuss small schools. A Lincoln County participant said “research that was presented was always on the pro-side of large consolidation. The committee tried to bring up a study that was anti-large school, but it was not elaborated on.”

- **The consultants appeared to be more interested in what the SBA would fund, rather than what the community wanted.** A Preston County committee member said, “Every time you tried to make them aware of the small schools concept, they would shoot you out of the saddle because of economies of scale. The SBA won’t approve that.” A committee member in Ritchie County said the committee was told it had total freedom to develop the plan, but “if we went with consolidation, we would receive funding for an elementary; if we don’t go with consolidation, no state money.”

- **Committee members were told not to share information with PTA members and other interested stakeholders.** “We were told on several occasions not to share information with the public,” said a Preston County committee member. She said committee members were told not to discuss possible scenarios that were developed and not to let the public know about cost estimates. Lincoln County committee members also were told not to share information, according to a participant. “They said if the public wanted to know, they should have been involved from the beginning.”

- **Citizens didn’t really have a voice in deciding what plan would be presented to boards of education**



*Challenge West Virginia members are willing to participate in decisions affecting community schools. Here Jon Frist, Paul Hamrick, Linda Martin and Jana Freeman present a program at an Appalachian Studies conference.*

**in some counties.** A Webster County committee participant said planner Roy Blizzard told the committee it did not have the final decision on the plan “because his name was on it.” In Logan County, a committee member said the superintendent and the Board of Education altered the plan approved by the CEFP committee and submitted the altered plan to the State Department of Education as if the committee had approved it.

- **Community concerns about long school bus rides were ignored.** In Webster County, where many high school students ride buses for three to four hours a day, a committee member said, “West Virginia is number one in the nation in the cost per student for transportation. That tells me we are spending too much money out of the schools and learning. In this day of modern technology, there is no reason why children should have these long bus rides. The money spent on busing should be spent on buildings and learning.” But the plan developed included a consolidated middle school that would force younger children to endure the three-to-four hour daily bus commute now experienced by high school students. In Lincoln County, a committee member said, “We offered geographic information and driving distances for children. It fell on deaf ears.”

## ‘Looking back, it seems the decision had already been made. They just had the committee to comply with the law.’

The Concordia report also raised questions about:

- **the sufficiency of the information provided the committees.** Concordia’s community analysis indicated that education professionals did not provide enough information for good planning and good decision-making.

- **the funding levels for the different counties.** The five counties Concordia examined cover a wide range of student enrollments and number of facilities. Yet Lincoln, Logan, Preston and Ritchie County each got only \$20,000 from the state. Webster County’s state grant was \$17,500. The consultant contracts ranged from \$35,000 in Webster County to \$55,000 in Logan County.

- **the potential for conflict of interest.** The report pointed out that conflict could arise when professional planners are associated with architects that could potentially receive design contracts for renovations and/or new construction. The report questioned whether the planners actually represent the SBA, the local school board or the community.

Concordia found that “overall, community members felt that the local and state boards of education and local and state superintendents made decisions without input from the community.” When citizens did try to express any opinion contrary to that of the consultants, they were told the county would get no funding at all.

“This is the proverbial tail wagging the dog,” the Concordia report concluded. “The end-user stakeholders must pay for something they do not want by paying state taxes that fund the SBA.”

Concordia concluded that while the School Building Authority has a difficult task in allocating limited resources for facilities to the state’s 55 counties, it isn’t

helping itself if it helps create a climate that discourages local support for school facilities.

“If citizens do not feel they are part of the planning process and if they see the SBA and local school administrators and board members supporting policies that they do not support – such as school consolidation – then they will not vote to support bond levies,” the report stated.

On the other hand, Concordia predicted that if “committee members understand the existing conditions and financial constraints, and know about innovative projects, they will in turn create appropriate solutions for their communities. They will then support implementation of these plans. The community should drive the resulting goals of the plan, not the SBA guidelines, which were and are supposed to serve the community.”

As it was, many who participated say the 1998 Statewide Planning Initiative left a bad taste in their mouths. A Ritchie County parent said, “I was upset with the whole process because there wasn’t any public input until the process was nearly completed and only because the guidelines said they had to have public hearings.”

A Webster County participant added, “Looking back, it seems the decision had already been made. They just had the committee to comply with the law.” Added a Preston County resident, “We were told what the State Board of Education would approve. It was like a used car lot with only one car.”

So, at the end of a long, convoluted process which involved a sizeable amount of taxpayer dollars, ordinary citizens were understandably frustrated. They felt they had been used so officials could say they had complied with the law; abused by planners and school officials who told them what they had to choose; and then ignored when they tried to offer alternative suggestions. In the final analysis, a process created to insure citizen participation did just the opposite. Committee participants were left with the belief that the democratic intent of the CEFP process had been violated and the facilities plans belonged not to the community but to planners and school officials who knew what they wanted before the process started.

# Preston County

## A committee steered by planners

A small schools advocate in Preston County had no illusions about a facilities planning committee that was supposed to include community members and reflect community concerns.

“Throughout the whole process they (architects from the Gandee Firm) let us know they had contracts with a majority of West Virginia school systems, and they had inside information from the SBA as to what the SBA would and what they would not accept,” said Teresa, as she will be called here.

But even Teresa was shocked about the closed nature of the CEFPP process. “We were told on several occasions not to share information with the public. At the beginning of the process, we came up with several scenarios of what we would like to see happen in our county. We were told at that point not to share these scenarios with the public. Further on in the process, when we got to the point where we discussed cost estimates for the different schools, we were told once again not to share these cost estimates with the public.”

A teacher who also was on the committee chastised a committee member who started to discuss the CEFPP with members of her PTA.

“She said, ‘No, you’re not supposed to share this with the public.’ The PTA was effectively kept from discussing what we felt should have been discussed with communities,” Teresa recalled.

Later on, the planners denied that they ever tried to squelch public comment, according to Teresa. “At the very last meeting we had, when a decision was made, a committee member brought up the fact that we were told not to share information. Other members said, ‘Oh, no, that never happened.’ These people were so slick that people agreed with them and made excuses for them.”

Teresa said the consultants brought inaccurate information about facilities to the meetings. “All of that information was taken from the county office. Basically, when they determined the capacity for each of the



*Preston County young people came to the Legislature to lobby for small schools, but most students didn’t have a voice in county school planning.*

schools, they went to the principal and asked how many kids he thought their school would hold. If a classroom that had been designed for a full class of 25 was being used for five special ed students, it was considered being fully used. If it was used two days a week for music class, it was considered fully occupied.”

Committee members also were shot down when they tried to suggest that renovating some buildings would be more economical than building new facilities. They were told it is more expensive to renovate a building than to construct a new facility.

Another parent agreed with Teresa’s assessment of the process. “The committee developed the scenarios, but under the strict scrutiny of the consultant. We were told what the State Board of Education would approve. It was like a used car lot with only one car,” he said.

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*The stories recounted in this document were gathered from interviews conducted by Challenge WV and from a survey designed by Concordia, Inc. The names of participants, where known, have been changed.*

## ‘It was like a used car lot with only one car.’

They also felt they weren’t permitted to discuss small schools. “Every time you tried to make them aware of the small schools concept, they would shoot you out of the saddle because of the economies of scale. The SBA won’t approve this, won’t approve that,” explained yet another committee member. “We very much wanted to see an elementary school reestablished. They said they couldn’t do that. That school was closed and that’s history.

“My opinion of the whole thing from the concept

to the finish was that it was a collusion of architects, engineers, designers, the School Building Authority, the state School Boards Association and local school boards. That whole group came up with this idea of having these ten-year comprehensive facilities plans. And it’s collusion. The architects are scratching the contractors’ backs; the contractors are going to reap the benefits of all this money that’s being expended.

“You just don’t question because the SBA has these guidelines and this authority to tell you what you can and what you can’t do. So why bother us people in the community. They tell you right up front, you can’t do this, you can’t do that because of economies of scale. If that’s democracy, then I missed the bus.”

## Ritchie County Totally left out of the process



*Betsy Nelson and Kelly Spangler stand in front of Creed Collins Elementary, one of five elementary schools in Ritchie County scheduled for closure under the county facilities plan. The community of Pennsboro has already lost a high school and a middle school.*

Michelle, a Ritchie County mother, found out about the county’s comprehensive facilities planning committee in the spring of 1999 when she and her husband went to pick up their son after school. The committee had already met and made recommendations.

“The principal asked us if we would like to stay for a meeting with the teachers and a newspaper editor to discuss the CEFP and its proposals,” she recalled.

At that meeting Michelle learned for the first time what the CEFP was and that Ritchie County’s plan would close all the elementary schools in the county.

“We also found out that there was not any representation from our school as far as teachers and principal. There was one parent, but it was a parent who did not represent the feelings and concerns of the school as a whole,” she said.

A parent from another small elementary said of five communities which would have been affected by the plan, the two smallest had only one representative each on the committee – and neither of those committee members had children in the school system.



A teacher who supports small schools said only one teacher from the county's five elementary schools was named to the committee – a teacher known to support consolidation.

"The people who know the needs of the schools more than anyone else were totally left out of the process," he said.

Michelle said she and others at the meeting were told that the county superintendent, G.A. McClung, and the consultants, Dan Dancu and Joe Evans of Gandee and Associates, steered, led and pressured the committee members into choosing the plan for one school and closing all five elementary schools.

A committee member who shared information about the CEFP at the elementary school said, "We were told we had freedom with the plan, the options were up to us and our judgment. We were told if we went with consolidation, we would receive funding for an elementary; if we don't go with consolidation, no state money."

When they left the meeting, Michelle and her husband were determined to let parents in Ritchie County know about what was going on and "what this CEFP committee was going to do to our schools and our children."

They got on the phone and called as many people as they could. Michelle researched data on the Internet and "came up with stacks and stacks" of documented research data that supported small schools both in size of the building and in numbers of students.

"The benefits of small schools by far outweighed larger schools," she said. "I also searched to find research data that supported larger schools in both size and number of students. I could not find any such data."

More than 200 people showed up at a meeting at the end of May 1999 to voice outrage about the plan.

"Some of the testimony was very emotional and parents cried at the thought of their children having to endure longer bus rides than they have now," Michelle recalled.

Michelle and other parents and teachers who shared her concern decided to call for a public meeting on the consolidation of elementary schools. They invited the superintendent, members of the board of edu-

**' . . .if we went with consolidation, we would receive funding for an elementary; if we don't go with consolidation, no state money.'**

cation and legislators. A school gymnasium was packed to the rafters with parents upset about the proposed consolidation plan.

"After the public meeting and after talking individually to several committee members, the CEFP committee decided to start over," Michelle said. "It also was decided that since there was not fair representation from all schools, new members would be added."

Ironically, Michelle, whose actions had prompted the public outpouring, was not invited to join the committee. "Mr. McClung knew he would have opposition in passing the one school plan because he knew I had the research data to counter anything he or Mr. Dancu or Mr. Evans had to say," she said.

But Michelle went to the meetings anyway and insisted on having input even though she was told she had to wait until the very end of the meeting, raise her hand and wait until after all committee members had spoken.

A committee member said the superintendent turned the meeting over to the consultants. "The only facilities research that was presented was demographics, school populations and funding formula data. No information was presented to the committee on how school size affected education," he said. "Studies seem to indicate that larger schools are not as good. We asked the consultants to show studies of the benefits of large schools, but they didn't. Important issues of school environment were not addressed. We were not allowed to bring them to the table."

A parent who was named to the committee was shocked to find out she was expected to vote on a plan at the first meeting when the committee reconvened.

She said she expected a thorough discussion of issues raised in the public hearing. “And what about all of the education issues? School violence and parental involvement in small schools? Long bus rides and the fact that children feel more at home in small schools where they are known? Not one of these things was ever mentioned.”

The committee considered five scenarios, but “Mr. Dancu quickly eliminated all but a two-school plan by saying that the only other plan (besides a one-school plan) the SBA would look at would be a two-school plan,” according to Michelle.

It was clear to Michelle that the plan had been pre-determined by McClung, Dancu, Evans and the SBA. “I was upset with the whole process because there wasn’t any public input until the process was nearly completed and only because the guidelines said they had to have public hearings.

“The members of the committee should be very upset because they were only used as scapegoats. The entire CEFP committee and process is a big farce, a joke and an insult to the intelligence of the citizens of Ritchie County and, especially our children.”

## Lincoln County

### Whose vote counts on this committee?

A recent graduate of a Lincoln County high school got involved in the facilities planning process because he wanted to help save his high school, which had been targeted for closure. What he found was a tightly controlled process with precautions built in from the very beginning to ensure the desired outcome.

“I got involved in our process pretty late,” said Randall. “Throughout the process they picked two different committees.”

The first committee was made up primarily of county school officials and their relatives, Randall said.

“The original committee members were chosen by our superintendent (Rick Powell) after he was only superintendent for two months,” according to Randall. “He really didn’t know the county’s layout or the community. I think there were 26 or 30 people on the original committee, and I think 80 percent of them were school board employees.”

Another community member who served on the committee said low-income people were not included. “This is a poor community and the poor weren’t represented,” she said. The parents who were on the committee, she said, were business, professional or school-related.

A problem arose when the people who were named to the committee didn’t want to come to a se-

ries of meetings that would take place over a period of more than a year. A student member reported that fifty people were invited to be part of the process, but only an average of five or six people showed up for meetings. So a second group of people were asked to join the committee. In time, these people became known as members of the “new committee.”

“I came in late and they added me to the list, but I was not added to the original committee,” Randall said. “Nobody invited me. I just went to a regular board meeting, and the superintendent saw I was involved in the school system and asked me if I’d like to be on the CEFP.

“I didn’t know what the CEFP was, but I told him, sure, I’d like to see what’s going on. I went to a meeting and at that time I was added to the list. I thought that I would have a voice in whatever took place.”

Randall was wrong. After the committee spent months deliberating and the time came to vote on a proposal to present to the Board of Education, he learned that he wouldn’t be allowed to vote.

“Our names were thrown out,” Randall said of the people from the so-called new committee. “There were people who were involved from the beginning who went to every single meeting who weren’t on the original committee. They were on the new committee so they



*Parents sell items to support Guyan Valley High School in Lincoln County.*

couldn't vote. They had attended every single meeting and their names were thrown out. They were very upset."

"We didn't understand that there was a problem until the night of the final vote," said Randall. "The people that were on the new committee, which I was on, weren't allowed to vote that night because we weren't the original committee members."

A woman who participated elaborated, "When I went to meetings, my vote was not counted. They picked out people who favored their position. The committee absolutely did not vote to approve the final plan. Who knows who did. The plan that exists was not voted on by the committee."

Eight votes were cast, seven of them by central office employees. Two of the eight were not even listed on the original committee, Randall said.

"The reason they said they were not on the mailing list was because they could hand their votes to them personally. But there were six others on the list who did work for the central office so it didn't make sense," he said.

Throughout the planning process, meeting dates changed. Randall said someone raised the issue with

Superintendent Peggy Adkins, who said she knew there were a lot of date changes, but she didn't know why.

Committee members also were told not to share any information from the CEFP meetings with anyone in the public. "They said if the public wanted to know, they should have been involved from the beginning," Randall said.

A number of committee members felt their suggestions were ignored.

"The consultants and board would shoot down ideas from community members," a student complained. "Nobody listened to parents' concerns. I fear long bus rides will hurt student enrollment, causing dropouts. Nobody listened."

An insurance salesman said "research that was presented was always on the pro-side of large consolidation. The committee tried to bring up a study that was anti-large school, but it was not elaborated on."

A utility company employee said school officials offered budget information and attendance charts. "We offered geographic and location, driving distances for children," he said. "It fell on deaf ears. It was kind of political – they were after a political agenda and not what is right for the people."

# Logan County

## What is a facilities planning committee anyway?

The attempts by a young mother in Logan County to locate basic information about the CEFP process became a giant struggle that taught her more about the tangle of politics and education in the school system than it did about school facilities.

“I didn’t know anything about facilities planning committees until I came to Challenge WV, so I wanted to know what was going on in Logan County,” said Caroline, a soft-spoken woman who was interested in the CEFP process because her only child was just beginning kindergarten. “I went back and started calling. I couldn’t find any answers. Nobody had ever heard of it.”

Caroline began her efforts to get information by sending a letter to Superintendent Ray Woolsey politely asking about the facilities planning work in the county. The letter was not answered.

She made several trips to the board of education office in additional unsuccessful attempts to obtain information.

Instead of throwing up her hands, Caroline followed up with another letter to Superintendent Woolsey. This time she stated she was requesting information on the Comprehensive Education Facilities Plan pursuant to the West Virginia Freedom of Information Act. She said she wanted to conduct a file review with someone from the Logan County Board and that she wanted copies of whatever had been made available to people named to the CEFP committee as well as records of actions taken at the facilities planning meetings.

**This time she stated she was requesting information pursuant to the West Virginia Freedom of Information Act.**

She asked for a list of committee members and reminded the superintendent that under the West Virginia open meetings law, the CEFP meetings should be public. “I also asked if and when they planned to hold a public hearing and how come I had not seen it in the papers,” she said.

Caroline received a packet of information by certified mail from the assistant superintendent. It contained a list of parents who were supposed to be members of the committee. She wrote a letter to all the parents and asked them what had been going on at the facilities planning meeting.

“I received one response and that was from a lawyer who is a friend of the superintendent and a friend of a member of the board of education,” she said. “He told me the meetings were publicized, that they occurred in Logan, Man and Chapmanville and he appreciated my concern over the matter. He let me know he supported Mr. Woolsey.”

But of ten parents that were listed on the form, the lawyer was the only one who responded. Caroline got on the phone and called the supposed committee members and asked them about the letter she sent. “They didn’t understand what it was,” she said. “They asked, ‘What is a facilities planning committee?’”

Caroline made repeated trips to the Board office to try to meet with Superintendent Woolsey. “He was always too busy or he would set a date and call and reschedule. Then I met him a couple of weeks later at a grade school where my office was doing a program. He came up and says, ‘Oh, have I met you before? My name’s Mr. Woolsey.’ I had met the man probably ten times in the previous couple of weeks, and he was pretending he didn’t even know who I was.”

Caroline was told the planning committee meetings were publicized in The Logan Banner, the county’s daily newspaper, and on local radio station WVOW. “I receive the Banner every day and I listened to WVOW every day,” she said. “I never saw or heard anything pub-

lished. No one in my community had ever heard or seen anything. I talked to maybe 25 people.”

She spoke with a school bus driver and a teacher who served on the committee. The driver said he attended only the first meeting where officials discussed what the committee would be discussing. The teacher attended the same meeting, saying that people were divided into groups in such a way that “the wrong things wouldn’t be said.” Neither of these two committee members ever heard from county officials after that first meeting.

A principal who did participate in the process told Challenge WV’s survey that the plan that was adopted was not the plan developed by the committee. “Schools that we thought would be closed weren’t,” he said. “I felt politics was involved. The final results did not make sense.”

Caroline said the county never had a public hearing on the proposed plan. “They claimed they did, and that I missed it and that it was publicized, she said. “I don’t know what planet I was on because I didn’t hear about it.”

## Webster County

### The decisions had already been made

“At our meetings, the chairs all faced the superintendent with the consultants sitting in the front. It seemed more like the committee was receiving instructions. I’m not sure if it was intentional, but it didn’t

seem conducive to getting good participation,” said Bill, a parent who served on the Webster County Comprehensive Facilities Planning committee.

“Looking back, it seems the decisions had already been made. It seems like a waste of time and money for consultants when the SBA already knew what the plan was going to be,” he said. “They just had the committee to comply with the law.”

Bill said the committee never voted on the final plan. He said architect Roy Blizzard, who ran the meetings, told committee members he would make the final decisions because his name was on it.

“It seemed like a conflict of interest for an architect who builds middle schools to be giving opinions on whether or not we need a new middle school,” Bill complained. “At the public forum, nobody spoke in favor of the middle school.”

The committee took an unofficial vote against the middle school, but, as Bill said, “it was the plan.”

A minister concurred with Bill. “The consultant said from the beginning that we should go with a new middle school. They held meetings, but, from the beginning, it seemed to be going toward their agenda. My opinion, the consultants had a plan and the community was just window dressing.”

Webster has only one consolidated high school. Students from the northern end of the county have bus



*Cindy Miller and daughter Andrea look over books distributed in Webster County Schools by Challenge WV. Across the state, Challenge WV gave \$1.5 million worth of books to schools and students in 2001.*

rides of up to two hours a day each way during their four-year high school careers. Parents from that end of the county were adamantly opposed to fifth graders enduring bus rides that long.

A retired teacher said, “People don’t want their children to have to spend so much time on buses. Some of their kids will be riding four hours a day for eight years.”

Blizzard’s process was exasperating for parents, according to Mary, a mother of two young children. “Any idea we came up with Dr. Blizzard would just shoot it down and say, ‘That’s not input, I want input.’ We would give some other options. ‘That’s not input, I want input.’ The only thing he would consider input would be something that is in accordance with SBA guidelines on economies of scale. Anything else he would not consider to be input.”

The people from the northern end of the county hung together. “We were at every meeting,” said Mary. “He finally did admit at one meeting that we could put in a request to get a hardship waiver because of our mountainous terrain. He said the SBA probably wouldn’t approve it, but we could put it in.”

Nevertheless, the parents were determined, and Mary said that was how it came to be that a hardship waiver was included in the CEFPP to allow Hacker Valley to keep its school. But it also was written that the community would have to find its own funding to maintain the K-8 school.

Community funding of school projects would not be anything new for Hacker Valley parents and com-

**‘They held meetings, but, from the beginning, it seemed to be going toward their agenda. My opinion, the consultants had a plan and the community was just window dressing.’**

munity members. Bill said when the county evaluated its 1990 facilities plan, two improvements to Hacker Valley were noted – a new well drilled for the school and carpet in the kindergarten room.

The northern Webster County parents were astonished that the Board of Education had taken credit for these improvements.

“The well was drilled by Put Children First, (the local group trying to save the school),” Bill said. “The carpet was paid for by popcorn sales. Neither improvement had even been in the 1990 plan, much less paid for by the county.”

The plan pushed by the planners would have consolidated Hacker Valley, Diana and Webster Springs pre-K through five in the Webster Springs area, Bill said.

“It’s two mountains away from, very steep, very slick in the winter. It takes about 45 minutes for a bus to get from Hacker Valley to Webster Springs. No one in Hacker Valley or Diana wants any of our children traveling that far. Our current high school is in Upper Glade, which is about an hour and a half away (from the school). Don’t take our little kids.”

Mary said committee members pointed out that their small school has vast community support. “But that didn’t matter to him. He said the SBA would not okay volunteerism to maintain a school.”

The plan was approved by the school board without the signatures of committee members, Mary said.

In the end, it didn’t matter that Hacker Valley had the county’s highest test scores or the lowest dropout rate. It didn’t matter that community volunteers come in daily to work with children and help with special projects. It didn’t matter that ten-year-olds would be riding school buses more than an hour each way every day. All that mattered was economies of scale.

Bill summed up the frustration. “Roy had gotten his plan approved. The committee, the board, parents and the rest of the county had been only spectators, powerless to act on our own behalf. The SBA had paid dearly for this consultant, and he had given them exactly what they wanted.

“I wish the school students of Webster County had \$40,000 to hire a consultant to work for them.”

# Challenge West Virginia

Challenge West Virginia is a state-wide organization committed to maintaining and improving small community schools and reforming education policy in West Virginia so that all of our state's children have the opportunity to receive a first-class education and the promise of a bright future.

The latest research indicates that children – especially low-income, at-risk children – have greater success in small, community-based schools.

Unfortunately, boards of education across West Virginia have closed more than a quarter of our state's public schools during the past ten years. More than anything else, education policy has been guided by "economies of scale," a concept borrowed from industry, which has meant putting the maximum number of students in the

minimum number of schools with the minimum number of teachers. What this has meant in practical terms is the loss of our state's smallest schools, a majority of which were located in its poorest communities.

Challenge members are convinced that changing public policy, keeping our community schools and helping parents become full partners in the education system are necessary if we are to realize a future where our children believe in themselves, value their communities and receive the best possible education.

Challenge WV is a program of Covenant House, an independent, non-profit organization in Charleston, WV.

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