



## ***“CLOSING COSTS”***

### *A Summary of an Award Winning Look at School Consolidation in West Virginia, a State Where It Has Been Tried Aggressively*

*Few states have pursued consolidation of rural schools more aggressively than West Virginia. With the promise of broader curriculum and huge tax savings, the state has closed more than 300 schools, one in every five, since 1990. In 2002, the Charleston Gazette investigated the outcomes of the state’s consolidation efforts in the series, “Closing Costs.” Its authors, reporters Eric Eyre and Scott Finn, won the 2002 Education Writers Award for best series for a newspaper with circulation under 100,000 and the Fred M. Hechinger Grand Prize for Education Reporting. “Closing Costs” can be found at <http://wvgazette.com/section/Series/Closing+Costs>.*

Since 1990, West Virginia has closed well over 300 schools. Among the results, “Closing Costs” reports the following:

#### **COSTS**

- The state has spent more than \$1 billion on school consolidation.
- School Building Authority Executive Director, Clacy Williams, acknowledged in September 2002 that school closings didn’t save taxpayers money.
- West Virginia counties statewide spend a higher percentage of their budgets on maintenance and utilities now than they did five years ago, despite consolidation.
- The number of local administrators has **increased by 16%** in the last 10 years despite a 13% decrease in student enrollment (41,000 fewer students) and closing of over 300 schools.
- The number of state-level administrators increased and their salaries nearly doubled between 1990 and 2002.
- West Virginia spends more of its education dollar on transportation than any other state; rising transportation costs have forced counties to slash funding from classrooms, offices, and cafeterias.

#### **BUSES**

- Elementary bus ride times are longest in counties with only one high school.
- The number of children who ride buses more than two hours a day doubled between 1992 (3908 students) and 1996 (7938 students), even though 25,000 fewer children rode buses. Seventy more schools have been closed since 1996.
- 20,000 elementary students, 11,000 middle school students and 5000 high school students take one-way bus rides longer than state guidelines of 30 minutes for elementary, 45 minutes for middle, and 60 minutes for high school. By comparison, the average American adult commute is 26 minutes.

- Referring to state guidelines for student bus rides, State Transportation Director Wayne Clutter said, “The times are too idealistic. It gives people false hope.”
- To save costs, West Virginia now retires buses after 12 years instead of 10.

#### STUDENT WELL-BEING

- Students (and adults) interviewed for the series report that students are stressed and exhausted. Their grades slump. They participate in fewer after school activities. They have less time to spend with their parents.
- A Yale University study found that diesel bus fumes may be to blame for the dramatic rise in childhood asthma in the U.S. Students who ride buses breathe five to 15 times more particulate soot than children playing outside.

#### ACADEMICS

- School officials promised advanced courses, but many courses never materialized or were soon eliminated. In several counties, consolidated high schools offer fewer courses than the small schools offered prior to consolidation.
- The reporters studied documents in 10 sample rural counties and found that 100 advanced classes promised through consolidation had not been offered in the previous two years.
- Many counties dropped Advanced Placement and foreign language classes several years after consolidation.
- The statewide increase in students taking Advanced Placement classes rose only 0.5% in the last six years, and fewer than half of students who took AP exams last year passed them compared with 56% who took them in 1997.

#### OTHER FINDINGS

- The state has shredded most of its documents pertaining to the 300 school closures since 1990.
- In Pendleton County, a total of \$10 million in renovations and new construction was spent to close Circleville School. Students were bused over a 4,000 foot mountain to school in Franklin, the county seat. Meanwhile, Circleville residents renovated the old Circleville School as a community center for just \$200,000.
- Twenty-five new courses were promised for the consolidated high school in Franklin, but only one, drama, has been offered. No Advanced Placement courses are offered, despite promises to offer five.
- Several Circleville students riding to school in Franklin were seriously injured in January 2002, when a tractor-trailer truck forced the bus off a mountain road.

*Compiled by: Rural School and Community Trust*