Reconnecting McDowell Achieves Significant Accomplishments in First Year

- Broadband Internet service to all McDowell County public schools and 10,000 homes through a $9.7 million investment by Shentel Communications.
- 4,500 free books provided to McDowell County children through First Book.
- New band instruments valued at $30,000 for Mount View High School from the VH1 Save the Music Foundation.

These are just a few of the accomplishments achieved through the Reconnecting McDowell initiative launched just one year ago—and there is so much more to come.

Reconnecting McDowell launched on Dec. 16, 2011, as a comprehensive, long-term effort to make educational improvement in McDowell County the route to a brighter economic future.

Nearly 40 original partners from the business, foundation, government, nonprofit and labor sectors committed to the collaborative effort to seek solutions to the county's complex problems. There are now more than 110 partners and friends, which gives you a sense of the interest and impact that Reconnecting McDowell is generating.

Many state and local businesses and organizations are Reconnecting McDowell partners, including Grace Bible Church, Pioneer Community Bank, Southern Highlands Community Mental Health Center and the West Virginia National Guard. The National Guard works in the county in many ways, from providing disaster relief and school-based anti-drug programs to promoting economic development.

“I take a lot of hope from the reaction of the high school students I meet who see many opportunities for them and their communities because of Reconnecting McDowell,” says Col. James Runyon of the West Virginia National Guard. “They see Reconnecting McDowell making big, positive changes, as well as inspiring them to get involved to make their county more livable.” Col. Runyon is a member of Reconnecting McDowell's Jobs and the Economy subcommittee and is assisting Peni Adams of the McDowell County Economic Development Authority with a comprehensive SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis to help county businesses and nonprofits work together more effectively and efficiently, and to improve the business culture in the county.

One of those McDowell students willing to roll up her sleeves is Phyllis Waldron, a senior at River View High School. At a recent student roundtable convened by the U.S. Department of Education, she noted that “you can’t complain about what you don’t have, if you don’t give back.” Several other high school students echoed that sentiment and said they want to return to McDowell County after attending college to start businesses, health clinics and serve as role models for younger students to stay in school and graduate.

The students also noted that teacher and school staff turnover has been hard on them during their school years and that this problem must be addressed.

Many people, not just students, point to the long-standing teacher shortage and high staff turnover rate in McDowell as an impediment to school improvement. Combating this problem will require multifaceted solutions that focus on housing, transportation and technology. “Reconnecting McDowell is still exploring all possibilities to create a teacher village and other high-quality affordable housing options; establishing a teacher-in-residence program in partnership with Concord University; and increasing recreational, dining and shopping choices for all residents of McDowell County to attract and retain a robust teaching corps,” says Bob Brown, project manager for Reconnecting McDowell.

The work has just begun
Here are some of the projects that Reconnecting McDowell partners are continuing to implement:

- McDowell County Innovation Zone: Thanks to legislation passed unanimously by the state Legislature, McDowell public schools will have the flexibility and authority to use cutting-edge strategies to raise academic achievement. The legislation calls for community-based decision-making on programs and budgets to best fit the needs of schools, students and educators.

- Teacher-in-Residence Program: In 2013, McDowell schools will be able to participate in this program to fill open teaching positions, while attracting well-prepared local teachers to the county schools.

- Family Literacy Centers: Centers with books from First Book and reading tips for parents will be established in 10 locations throughout McDowell, including schools, early childhood education centers and a WIC center.

Many other projects are on the horizon to help improve McDowell County's education system, community services and economic prospects. Stay tuned and get involved. By working together, we can make McDowell a better and easier place to live, work and grow. As AFT President Randi Weingarten said at the Reconnecting McDowell launch: “McDowell County is an American story that deserves a new chapter. Given the challenges, being conventional won’t be good enough. We will be flexible, creative and entrepreneurial, and will take risks.”
Reconnecting McDowell Partners and Friends

American Federation of Teachers
West Virginia
Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin
Gayle Manchin, vice president of
West Virginia Board of Education
AFL-CIO Housing Trust
AFT-West Virginia
Alliance for Excellent Education
Alpha Natural Resources
Appalachian Power
Arch Coal
Benedum Foundation
Bluefield State College
BlueGreen Alliance
Bowles Rice McDavid Graham & Love
Building America Community Development Enterprise
Catholic Charities West Virginia
Children’s Home Society of West Virginia
Christian Community Development Association
Cisco Systems Inc.
City of Welch, West Virginia
Coalition for Community Schools
College Board
Communications Workers of America
Concord University
Council of the Southern Mountains
Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library
DonorsChoose.org
Education Alliance
Edvanta
Edwards Educational Services
Epsilon
FACES
First Book
Frontier Communications
Globalaria
Grace Bible Church
Harvard University—Advanced Leadership Initiative
Highland Community Builders
Highmark West Virginia Inc.
Hope Community Development Corporation
Human Resource Development & Employment Inc.
Human Resource Development Foundation
Huntington Area Food Bank
IBM Corp.
Joe Ford, Mayor of Iaeger
KaBOOM!
Kellogg Company
Marshall University’s June Harless Center for Rural Educational Research and Development
McDowell County Board of Education
McDowell County Commission
McDowell County Commission on Aging
McDowell County Economic Development Authority
McDowell County Juvenile Drug Court
McDowell County Redevelopment Authority
Mountaineer ChallenNGe Academy
New River Community and Technical College
Office of Management and Budget/Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs
Ohio-West Virginia State YMCA
Pioneer Community Bank
Preston Scheffenacker Properties
Rahall Appalachian Transportation Institute
Reba Honaker, Mayor of Welch
Robert C. Byrd Center for Rural Health
Save the Children—U.S. Programs
SEIU District 1199
Share Our Strength
Shenel Communications
Silver Lining
South Central AFL-CIO
Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College
Southern Highlands Community Mental Health Center
Stop the Hurt Inc.
Tug River Health Association Inc.
United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Local 400
United Mine Workers of America
U.S. Department of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Education
U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin
U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller
Vera Institute of Justice
Verizon
VH1 Save the Music Foundation
Wastewater Treatment Coalition of McDowell County
West Virginia AFL-CIO
West Virginia Association of Student Councils
West Virginia Board of Education
West Virginia Bureau of Senior Services
West Virginia Center for Professional Development
West Virginia Council for Community and Technical College Education
West Virginia Delegate Cliff Moore
West Virginia Delegate Mary Poling
West Virginia Department of Commerce
West Virginia Department of Education
West Virginia Department of Education and the Arts
West Virginia Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management
West Virginia Education Association
West Virginia GEAR UP
West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission
West Virginia Housing Development Fund
West Virginia National Guard
West Virginia PTA
West Virginia School Boards Association
West Virginia School Service Personnel Association
West Virginia Sen. H. Truman Chafin
West Virginia Sen. John Pat Fanning
West Virginia Sen. Robert Plymale
West Virginia State Police
West Virginia Supreme Court
West Virginia University
West Virginia University School of Journalism
Widmeyer Communications
World Wide Workshop Foundation
WV FREE
Youth Enrichment Services

Want to get involved or learn more?
For more information about Reconnecting McDowell or to find out how you can get involved, contact AFT-West Virginia staff member Debra Elmore at delmore@aftwv.org or 304-552-5766.