Reconnecting McDowell Project Begins


The partnership is a long-term effort to make educational improvement in McDowell County the route to a brighter economic future. More than 40 partners from business, foundations, government, nonprofit agencies and labor unions have signed a covenant to seek solutions to McDowell’s complex problems. Each partner has agreed to provide services, money, products and/or expertise to lift McDowell County’s schools, students and their families.

“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,” AFT president Randi Weingarten said. “The AFT’s mission is to help all kids get a quality education, regardless of ZIP code, race or family income level, and we know that means tackling a wide range of issues in a coordinated way to help revitalize the community.”

Educational improvement is the centerpiece of the five-year effort. The AFT will work with local educators, administrators, parents and the citizens of McDowell to make education what it should be: a lifelong gateway to opportunity. Efforts will include intensive preparation for prekindergartners, a well-rounded curriculum for academics and social development, guidance and other support services, parental engagement, and improved college and career readiness for high school students. Gov. Tomblin said he was pleased to partner with the AFT in the effort to revitalize McDowell County.

“Just like in many areas of our country that are plagued by the global recession, educational and employment opportunities are not where they should be for McDowell County residents,” Gov. Tomblin said. “This collaboration will further strengthen my existing dropout prevention and substance abuse initiatives by engaging a revitalization effort throughout the county. This public-private partnership has the power to change lives for the better in rural West Virginia and inspire other communities throughout the nation to follow suit.”

The project was initiated at the urging of Gayle Manchin, vice president of the West Virginia Board of Education and former West Virginia first lady.

“This impressive partnership will bring much expertise to dealing with problems inside and outside of the schools, including finding creative ways to invest in housing, technology and broadband, transportation, recreation and infrastructure,” Manchin said.

Gov. Tomblin Announces $1 Million State Grant for McDowell

In his State of the State address, Gov. Tomblin announced $1 million in state funds for literacy and early childhood education programs to be administered by Save the Children, which is a Reconnecting McDowell partner.

One of the first Reconnecting McDowell projects to get under way, the Save the Children venture has trainers on the ground in three county schools to work with students and families to raise literacy rates, strengthen early childhood education opportunities and increase parental involvement in student learning.

During his speech, Gov. Tomblin also proposed making McDowell a “County Innovation Zone Pilot Project” to allow teachers, school staff and administrators the regulatory and legislative flexibility they need to improve struggling schools.

Judy Hale, president of AFT-West Virginia and an AFT vice president, and Jackee Long, president of the West Virginia School Service Personnel Association, praised Tomlin’s contributions, noting that they will help Reconnecting McDowell become a model for transforming rural education programs.

Stay Connected with McDowell

McDowell County is an American story that deserves a new chapter—one filled with promise, with goodwill, with the type of shared commitment that offers solid reasons to believe in a brighter future. Be a part of this historic partnership and show your support for McDowell’s children and the greater community by joining the effort at www.reconnectingmcdowell.org.
Look for these Reconnecting McDowell projects breaking ground:

- To address the acute housing shortage in McDowell, the West Virginia AFL-CIO donated the money to begin digging water lines to a new housing development.
- Frontier Communications has committed $100,000 to Globaloria, a social learning network, where students learn science and technology skills by designing and programming their own digital educational games. Look for this software to be available to McDowell students by February.
- The West Virginia Department of Homeland Security is laying fiber-optic lines throughout the county to bring broadband Internet access to all McDowell schools.
- Shentel, a Virginia-based communications company, will be providing broadband Internet access to 10,000 homes in McDowell County.

First Book
Mercer-McDowell Counties Advisory Board Looking for Members and Volunteers

First Book, a Reconnecting McDowell partner that already has donated 14,000 books to McDowell students and families, established the First Book Mercer-McDowell Counties Advisory Board in 2001. If you would like to help McDowell students and schools have access to thousands of books at up to a 90 percent discount, contact Myra Blake, chair of the advisory board, via e-mail at mercermcdowell_wv@firstbook.org.

List of Reconnecting McDowell Partners

American Federation of Teachers
West Virginia Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin
Gayle Manchin, vice president of West Virginia Board of Education and former West Virginia first lady
AFT West Virginia
Alliance for Excellent Education
Alpha Natural Resources
Benedum Foundation
Blue Cross Blue Shield of West Virginia
Building America Community Development Enterprise
Cisco Systems Inc.
College Board
DonorsChoose.org
First Book
Frontier Communications
Globaloria
Grace Bible Church
Hope Community Development Corp.
Marshall University’s June Harless Center for Rural Educational Research and Development
McDowell County Board of Education
McDowell County Commission
Rahall Appalachian Transportation Institute
Save the Children – U.S. Programs
Silver Lining
Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College
United Mine Workers of America
U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin
U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller
West Virginia AFL-CIO
West Virginia Del. Cliff Moore
West Virginia Del. Mary Poling
West Virginia Education Association
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
World Wide Workshop Foundation

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.