

Reconnecting McDOWELL

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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.

Grant Opens Up a World of Dance

The nearest dance studio to most McDowell residents is outside the county and more than an hour and a half drive away. But thanks to a Title I school improvement grant, that drive has been eliminated entirely for more than 160 students in grades 3-8 who are now taking dance classes in the three McDowell schools—laeger Elementary, Welch Elementary and Southside K-8—that qualify for these federal funds.

The dance initiative, the Mountain Dawn Dance Program, is being taught by Lisa Ann Colombo, a professional choreographer who has taught dance arts for 37 years and is originally from Gary, W.Va.

"The importance of this program is not only about learning to dance and the mathematic connections involved, but the self-confidence and feeling of accomplishment that comes along with learning to perform," Colombo says.

The classes involve a lot of physical activity, including stretching, warming up, and setting fitness goals. Colombo also incorporates positive self-esteem and body-image activities throughout the classes. Creating opportunities for McDowell residents to participate in recreational and physical activities is a top priority of Reconnecting McDowell.

Mountain Dawn dance students will have a chance to show off their new skills at school and countywide performances for other students, families and friends. The theme for all the performances is "Seasons of Life in Southern West Virginia."

The dance program is being integrated into several classes, involving other students who aren't dancers. For example, the performances' theme song, "Mountain Glory," will be performed by the schools' choir students. English and art students are working on theme-related poems, drawings and paintings that will be presented at the performances, which will be held this spring.

"The dance program has made a huge difference in the students' attitude toward school," says Amanda Fragile, Title I director for the McDowell County Schools, who helped secure the grant funding. "Students are more excited to come to school and more engaged in all their classes. Research shows that students involved in kinesthetic activities perform better academically, and I see the proof in the students taking the dance classes."

Donations needed

Although the grant covers the cost of providing a dance instructor for the classes at all the Title I-eligible schools, Fragile is looking for donors to help provide leotards, tights and ballet slippers for upcoming student performances. "I want to ensure that all students can participate in the performances, and not burden the families with the cost of having to purchase the dance clothing," says Fragile.

"Through the dance program, we are opening up a whole new world of dance, not only to the students, but the greater McDowell community," adds Fragile. "We are hosting a public performance of the West



Virginia Dance Company in the coming weeks. The purpose is to provide an opportunity for all McDowell residents to see the beauty of dance and that being a professional dancer is a viable career option for our students."

"This is a project of great importance. It's an opportunity for all students to express themselves through the art of movement as well as other artistic outlets," notes Colombo. "I look forward to seeing each of my students on stage in the spring—as they are filled with pride and a wonderful sense of accomplishment. May this only be the beginning."

Would you like to make a contribution to the Mountain Dawn Dance Program so that all enrolled students can perform? Contact Reconnecting McDowell staff member Debbie Elmore at delmore@aftww.org or call 304-552-5766.

Family Literacy Centers Offer Free 'Keeper Books' for Parents

Thanks to the collaborative work of many Reconnecting McDowell partners, including Verizon, First Book, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and the McDowell County Public Schools, 10 family literacy centers are about to open their doors, providing convenient and cozy places in McDowell for parents and their children to have easy access to books, reading tips and parent/kid-friendly events to encourage them to read together.

Every time a parent comes to a family literacy center, signs the log, and reads to or with their children, they will receive a free book to take home.

"The family literacy center will provide a resource within the school community to help promote literacy, increase parent involvement and instill a love of reading in children, says Melanee Harman, a family literacy assistant from Fall River Elementary School who will be helping parents use the school-based center. "This center will provide



families with keeper books to help build their own family libraries that parents can continue to share with their children."

Family literacy centers are situated in all seven McDowell County public elementary schools and three Welch community locations: the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Clinic, Small and Thoughtful World (the licensed day care facility), and the Southern Highlands Community Mental Health Center.

"We chose a mix of school and community locations to house the family literacy centers because we wanted to expose families to reading and books where they go," explains Amanda Fragile, McDowell County Schools Title I director, who is helping coordinate the family literacy centers.

Melissa Gillespie, director of Small and Thoughtful World, is excited to make the family literacy center books available at her child care facility. "The family literacy center is a great way to introduce reading and books to my infants and toddlers," Gillespie notes, "as well as reinforce strong literacy skills in the school-age students who attend the before- and after-care programs at my facility."

Fragile also hopes to expand the family literacy centers by partnering with Welch Community Hospital to distribute reading packets in the maternity ward. "We want to provide free books and reading materials to help new parents feel comfortable reading and engaging with their newborns," she says. "It's never too early to start children on the path to learning!"

High-Speed Internet Helps Create Digital Libraries in McDowell Schools

Not too long ago, when students were taking their online Spanish classes at Mount View Middle School, no one else in the school could go online because the Internet connection was so slow.

"Students, teachers and administrators would have to wait until the class was over to download a video or open an e-mail attachment," says Carolyn Falin, McDowell County Schools assistant superintendent.

But the situation has improved greatly. West Virginia Network has provided high-speed Internet access to all the county schools, and Reconnecting McDowell partner Shentel is in the final stages of expanding access to nearly 10,000 households in the county.

"Many of the things we have wanted to do for a long time, such as video conferencing for homebound students, to improve teaching and learning opportunities are now possible thanks to

the improved technology," Falin says.

McDowell schools are now offering many more virtual classes, including AP world history, French, forensics and geometry.

Another new feature made possible by the expanded bandwidth is the availability of digital libraries in all McDowell schools.

"The digital libraries will greatly increase students' access to books and other digital materials to deepen and broaden their understanding of the content," Falin says. "For example, a student reading a book about Rosa Parks can click on a video on the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott."

Each McDowell school has its own link to the digital library, and the link is listed on each school's website, notes



Falin. "This allows schools to add their own resources as funding becomes available."

And the learning and reading don't have to stop at school. "Thanks to Shentel's efforts to greatly expand the county's overall broadband service, students can access the digital library on their home computers or iPads," Falin continues. "All McDowell students will be issued their own password and can use the digital resources to complete homework assignments or do research for class projects."

For a list of Reconnecting McDowell partners, visit <http://www.reconnectingmcdowell.org/>

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.