



Rural

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Linking Education and Economic Development

A Very Local, Very Rural Vignette

By Carol Kreck
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— The first in a series of papers on rural education issues —

McDowell County, West Virginia, had fallen on hard times.

When coal mining left in the 1950s, the state's southern-most county went from a population of 100,000 to 22,000. More than 70% of its children now live in households where no adult is employed; the median income is \$21,000. McDowell County has the highest rate of accidental deaths from narcotic pain killers in the United States and the highest rate of teen pregnancy in West Virginia—more than twice the state average, according to the KIDS COUNT Data Center. Isolated and mountainous, rains make its roads treacherous.

Eleven years ago, the state took over the county's schools. Little improvement resulted. Appalled at that, State Board of Education Vice President Gayle Manchin reached out to Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), in the fall of 2011. The two women developed a vision and enlisted a coalition of labor unions, nonprofits, governments, and Fortune 500 companies to make that vision a reality. Now called Reconnecting McDowell, it is a five-year effort some consider to be the first of its kind.

McDowell, once considered a wasteland, may become a beacon for other rural communities in dire straits.

Reconnecting McDowell started in December 2011 with 40 partners committed to making education in McDowell County the path to a brighter economic future; there were 80 partners by the end of March 2012, and 110 by December. Each signed a covenant: "In sum, our pledge is to create a new reality, starting with our commitment to the children of McDowell County—to help their community build a new personal, institutional, and programmatic infrastructure for success. And it is our promise to one another to work together to achieve that goal."

As Manchin pointed out at the time, the State Board of Education alone couldn't untangle the web that was McDowell. Problems of poverty,

The Governmental Role

West Virginia Board of Education: Approved plan devised by the American Federation of Teachers and selected McDowell County Schools to get a dropout prevention program called Innovation Zone.

West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin: Contributed \$1M in state funds to Save the Children for early childhood/literacy programs.

West Virginia Legislature: Passed bill making McDowell County Schools a county-wide innovation zone.

economic decline, drug and alcohol abuse, housing shortages, limited medical services, and inadequate access to technology and transportation were interconnected. At the end of 2011, for example, then-Superintendent Jim Brown said he had 27 teacher vacancies, but there was no place for them to live. Teachers were driving in from Virginia.

Teachers who were there couldn't reliably use the Internet. "Even though we were new, our school had bad Internet connection," said Trey Lockhart, now a 19-year-old student at Concord University in Athens, West Virginia. "There were times we couldn't go to the lab or use the Internet because other classes were working on virtual schools and things like that. If too many people got on the Internet, it would completely shut down and would not work for at least a week." Last year, Lockhart was the West Virginia Board of Education's student member.

"There really wasn't much teaching going on either," he said. "In the county (at one point), there were 33 vacated teaching positions. At that time, we didn't even have that many subs to fill in. I've spent many days sitting in another teacher's classroom while she taught because there were no teachers for my class."

"Now fast forward a year," said Lockhart.

Among the long list of efforts in the project's first year:

- *Reconnecting McDowell* built several new houses hoping to attract teachers, a result of the AFL-CIO paying for water lines to be laid. They are looking at old buildings to turn into apartments.
- Plans are in the works for a Big Sandy/Roderfield Water Extension Project, which will bring clean water to 500 McDowell families.
- Also helping to alleviate the teacher shortage, Concord University is placing senior-year student teachers in McDowell classrooms, where they will be offered paid positions on graduation.
- All McDowell County schools now have broadband—classes can get on at the same time, thanks to Frontier Communications. Also, 10,000 homes which had dial-up or no Internet connection now are being exposed to high speed. "As a matter of fact, my family just signed up for it today," Lockhart said. That was installed by Shentel Communications, based in Virginia.

Partial List of McDowell Partners and Their Contributions

American Federation of Teachers:

Led the effort, recruited partners, provided professional development.

American Federation of Teachers Educational Fund: \$100,000.

Concord University: Places student teachers in McDowell schools, which had a severe teacher shortage. When they graduate from Concord, they can go back to McDowell and work for pay.

First Book: Provided free books for every student in the county.

Frontier Communications: \$100,000 for improving online learning.

Imagination Library: Provided books for younger children.

Music Channel VH-1: \$30,000 for instruments and band support at Mount View Middle and High Schools.

Rural Utilities Service: \$2,689,000 grant and \$500,000 loan for clean water for 500 McDowell families.

Shentel Communications: Installed fiber-optic cable throughout county to connect thousands of homes.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: \$465,000 grant for clean water.

Verizon: \$100,000 to First Book for distributing free books while overhauling county libraries.

West Virginia AFL-CIO: Funded digging of water pipes so new homes could be built because teachers had no places to live.

West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection Grant: \$6,446,000 for clean water.

- Governor Earl Ray Tomblin handed \$1 million in state funds to Save the Children, whose trainers worked with students and their families in three McDowell schools to implement early childhood and literacy programs that started while mothers were pregnant and continued to school, during the day and after school.
- First Book contributed new books to every student in the county while Imagination Library gave out books for younger children. The Music Channel VH-1 donated \$30,000 for musical instruments and band support at Mount View middle and high school.
- The West Virginia Board of Education approved the AFT plan for McDowell and selected the county to take part in its drop-out prevention initiative, Innovation Zone, which is a three-year, \$100,000 effort that includes hiring a new social worker for one of the high schools. The West Virginia legislature passed a bill to approve Concord University’s teacher-in-residence program, and passed another bill to create a McDowell-wide Innovation Zone, which freed the school board to address specific problems outside state policy restrictions.
- Courtesy of the West Virginia Supreme Court, a drug court for juveniles was installed. The success rate for West Virginia’s other juvenile drug courts is 76%, and since McDowell led the country in overdose deaths, the drug court made a lot of sense.

Judge Lisa Clark, one of the juvenile drug court’s first judges, said, “The McDowell County Juvenile Drug Court has been accepting participants for several months now. We have eight referrals so far and they are doing well.”

Clark said participants are screened several times a week for drugs and sign a contract regarding their behavior and participation. They have counselors and their parent/guardians are counseled as well. A Juvenile Drug Court probation officer meets with them almost daily, visiting their homes and schools. In-home services and transportation to and from counseling and medical appointments are available. The kids work through four phases, each allowing more freedom. After a graduation ceremony, juveniles can get two more years of aftercare.

“I have previously worked with the juvenile drug court in Mercer County,” Judge Clark said. “We did see a good bit of marijuana use, but the drugs used in this county are wide-ranging.” Before the juvenile drug court, drug use accounted for 70% of student expulsions. Clark anticipated the new court would depress expulsion rates as well as dropout rates.

Lockhart, who is majoring in pre-med biology, intends to become a doctor.

“Once I reach that goal, I hope to return to McDowell and put in a practice.

Overall, I hope to build back the county that helped build me.”

What’s next?

McDowell still needs a good road, and clinics with nurses, dentists, and counselors. But “in the first year and a half, we’ve seen a great deal of progress,” said middle-school principal Flo McGuire. “Plans are in place for a teacher village in Welch and Reconnecting McDowell has made a commitment to support a community center in the Big Creek district.” McGuire said she’s working on two projects—a community center and building a partnership with the local fire department. “Both projects are long-term commitments, but I feel the partners are committed to the work.”

College student Trey Lockhart envisions a park at Wilmore Hollow, one of the oldest hollows in the area once used as a logging road. Over the years a dam was built there where people now fish. “I hope to put in a park that would bring families together for outdoor fun and introduce kids to the wildlife there.”

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Equipping Education Leaders, Advancing Ideas

A year and a half after the launch of Reconnecting McDowell, McDowell County Schools regained full control of its school system, according to a May 8, 2013, press release from the West Virginia Board of Education. “The McDowell County School System has faced challenges but today teachers, parents, and students should be proud of what they have accomplished,” said State Board President Wade Linger.

Gayle Manchin, vice president of the Board, added, “It is never easy to answer all the issues in any county. One lesson we have learned is that no one can do it alone. Improving a school system is truly about a community building capacity.”