



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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Reconnecting McDowell

Randi Weingarten, President
American Federation of Teachers

Randi Weingarten is president of the 1.5 million-member American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, which represents teachers; paraprofessionals and school-related personnel; higher education faculty and staff; nurses and other health care professionals; local, state and federal government employees; and early childhood educators.

Prior to her election as AFT president in 2008, Ms. Weingarten served for 12 years as president of the United Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 2, representing approximately 200,000 educators in the New York City public school system, as well as home child care providers and other workers in health, law and education. In 2013, the *New York Observer* named her one of the most influential New Yorkers of the past 25 years. *Washington Life* magazine included Weingarten on its 2013 Power 100 list of influential leaders.

From 1986 to 1998, she served as counsel to UFT president Sandra Feldman. Ms. Weingarten taught history at Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood from 1991 to 1997.

Ms. Weingarten's column "What Matters Most" appears in the *New York Times'* Sunday Review the third Sunday of each month. She holds degrees from Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations and the Cardozo School of Law. She is an active member of numerous professional, civic and philanthropic organizations.

For the past several decades, since "King Coal" went all but bust in McDowell County, West Virginia, the communities in this rural, isolated, mountainous slice of Appalachia have struggled mightily. The public schools have floundered, and the county's extreme poverty and economic decline have led to severe and chronic problems involving high unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, housing shortages, limited medical services, and inadequate access to technology and transportation. Over the years, some programs were brought in to help, but without systemic and sustainable changes, McDowell County has remained a very troubled region.

At the urging of former West Virginia First Lady Gayle Manchin, the American Federation of Teachers assessed the situation and decided to spearhead an unprecedented public-private partnership, not only to enhance educational opportunity for all McDowell children, but to address the underlying problems caused by the severe and unrelenting poverty.

Reconnecting McDowell was launched in December 2011 and now is a growing and vibrant partnership of more than 100 partners from national, state and local businesses, government agencies, lawmakers, nonprofit agencies, foundations, labor organizations, community groups and individuals.

The McDowell community has a heightened sense of optimism because of what Reconnecting McDowell has been able to accomplish in a short amount of time, focused on three main areas: education, health and social services and economic development. A productive workforce and economic development depend upon a continuously available corps of well-educated, healthy men and women.

In a significant sign of progress, the West Virginia

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State Board of Education voted unanimously on May 8, 2013, to return control of the McDowell schools back to the county, ending 12 years of state supervision. It noted improvements on many educational fronts, and board president L. Wade Linger Jr. cited the current and proposed work of Reconnecting McDowell in that effort. The state board of education also approved a district-wide community schools plan to provide a variety of coordinated services at every school for students and their families, such as extended learning programs, health and dental clinics, family and early childhood support services, and parent and community engagement programs.

Thanks to Reconnecting McDowell partners, McDowell County now has many new programs and services in place that will help reinvigorate its communities, students and families. They include:

- Expanded broadband in every county school for full Internet access, and access to the Internet for nearly 10,000 McDowell households.
- Reduced Internet rates for families with children in school.
- Distribution of 4,500 books to McDowell's 3,600 students, with the promise of 18 more books per child per year for the next five years.
- Creation of 10 Family Literacy Centers throughout the county.
- Ten Little Tikes Young Explorer computer kiosks at county early childhood development programs.
- After-school programs for about 200 students in three elementary schools, emphasizing literacy skills.



Students playing new band instruments at Mount View High School

- New band instruments at Mount View High School.
- Fifteen new National Guard jobs at the Armory in Welch to repair all military tents used abroad.
- United Mine Workers' career training for laid-off coal miners. At least 14 people have completed the training and are gainfully employed.

We're also investigating several options for constructing teacher housing in McDowell – a county that has virtually no housing available currently – to encourage teacher recruitment and retention.

While we're proud of the progress that's been made, it's important to remember that this is a marathon, not a sprint. We want to make sure we do things right, not just get them done, so that the partnership leaves McDowell with sustainable programs that can be built upon for another generation.

We look forward to continuing our work with all of the partners in this groundbreaking effort to revitalize a rural community and create a template to re-energize other communities that have fallen on hard times. ▽



Expanded broadband in every McDowell County school provides full Internet access