

# Restoring Hope to McDowell County

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In America, a great public education is our primary opportunity agent for a better future. Yet as our economic struggles have reminded us, educational opportunity and economic prospects are inextricably linked, and in McDowell County, W.Va., as in many rural communities, the opportunities are exceedingly limited.

McDowell County, located on the southernmost fringe of West Virginia in what was once a thriving coal-mining community, is among the most disadvantaged areas in the United States. Poverty and unemployment are widespread, schools are struggling, health problems are pervasive, and hope is sorely tested. The severe terrain adds to the difficulties and isolation in McDowell, where steep mountains rise up from flood-plagued valleys and residents are cut off from adequate healthcare, social services, recreation, transportation and housing.

This is the backdrop for an unprecedented public-private partnership of close to 40 local, state and national groups that this week pledged to work together over the next several years to address the challenges confronting the people of McDowell County.

Called “Reconnecting McDowell,” this team effort is making education its centerpiece, and the American Federation of Teachers has been asked to take a leading role. The AFT’s West Virginia affiliate is the largest union in the state, and both our state and national unions have a long history of supporting schools to meet the educational and social needs of students. The AFT will work with local educators, administrators, parents, citizens and other partners to develop and implement a comprehensive plan that makes education what it should be: a lifelong gateway to opportunity for the amazing people of McDowell County, who are the most important partners in this effort.

McDowell’s educational challenges are inseparable from many other problems plaguing the region. Reconnecting McDowell also aims to address the multitude of out-of-school factors affecting

student success, and to revitalize the county through economic development initiatives, improved transportation, expanded technology capabilities and additional housing.

The partners in Reconnecting McDowell—including community development groups; labor unions; faith communities; foundations; technology, communications and energy companies; healthcare and social service agencies; institutions of higher education; and government agencies—signed a covenant pledging to work together, to see the challenges through with confidence that beyond the obstacles lies the type of opportunity that is the birthright of every child in America.

The hopes for this partnership in many ways are summed up in the stories of two high school students I met on my first

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visit to McDowell County—Shamecca and Trey, both of whom hope to become medical doctors. Shamecca dreams of being a pediatrician and envisions building a life outside of McDowell. Trey plans

to complete his studies and then return to McDowell to practice medicine if possible. The goal of our partnership is to enable Shamecca, Trey and all young people in McDowell not only to dream their dreams, but to achieve them.

Shamecca has a clear-eyed view of what McDowell is up against—and is hopeful that momentum for meaningful change is building. “It takes more than one person to create the change,” she says, “even though you can get it started by yourself.”

By working together to assemble, coordinate and sustain the educational, social and economic supports McDowell needs, we are confident that this resilient community will be on a path to realizing its hopes for the future.

Neither demography nor geography should determine destiny. Yet, too often, ability, ambition and hard work square off against circumstance—whether one lives in a place where opportunities abound or where they’re in short supply. Over the years, more than one billion pounds of coal have been extracted from the mountains of McDowell County. It is time to start giving back to the region, and we are proud to be a part of this effort.

Stay connected with McDowell County at [www.ReconnectingMcDowell.org](http://www.ReconnectingMcDowell.org).



McDowell County has been in economic decline for more than 30 years.