Housing Project Begins Construction!

Renaissance Village—Reconnecting McDowell’s project, which seeks to address the housing shortage that has made it difficult to keep teachers in the County—is now under construction. The building, which is the first new multistory structure in Welch in more than 50 years, will have two floors of apartments to house educators and other professionals, as well as two floors of retail/commercial space.

McDowell Educator Wins Classroom Resources

The American Federation of Teachers held TEACH (Together Educating America’s Children)—its biennial professional issues conference—July 11-13 in Washington, D.C. Nine educators were given Freedom to Teach awards at the event. Freedom to Teach is AFT’s campaign to enable educators’ success in the classroom by providing resources that will allow them to tailor their lessons to students’ needs. Thirty-five educators applied to the program, and nine were each awarded $1,000 credit on DonorsChoose.org, a website that helps teachers purchase classroom essentials.

McDowell County educator Terri Kennedy received one of the awards. Kennedy has taught at Welch Elementary for the past five years, and for two years has served as a certified special needs teacher for students who have moderate impairments; she works with nonverbal students who have a variety of learning capabilities. Kennedy says the award allows her flexibility in choosing the differentiated instruction every child needs. “Freedom to teach is not only important, it is essential,” she says. Her good fortune continued when she won a $50 gift card at TEACH’s political action booth.
Reconnecting McDowell Partner Spotlight: Project Aware

WV-AWARE (Advancing Wellness and Resilience Education) is a project funded by a grant from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, awarded in 2013 to the West Virginia Department of Education and managed by the Marshall University Autism Training Center. The purpose of the project is to increase awareness of the mental health issues throughout the state by training school personnel and other adults who interact with school-age youth on how to detect, respond to, and connect children and families who may have mental health issues with the appropriate services. The WV-AWARE grant focuses on students in prekindergarten through grade 12, ages 3 to 21, in West Virginia public schools. McDowell County is one of three counties that served as a demonstration site to guide the development of a statewide sustainable systems’ approach to improve mental health services. Berkeley and Wood counties were the other school systems.

Perry Blankenship serves as a school counselor and has been the Project Aware coordinator in McDowell County for the past two and a half years. He is responsible for coordinating mental health services provided by the schools and outside agencies. He has been working with school counselors and other essential personnel to build professional development around Tier I, Tier II and Tier III supports for mental health in the schools. The first tier is offered to all students; the second is for students who need additional services, which can usually be done via group sessions; and the third tier is for students who need individual interventions.

Project Aware has helped to train four employees in McDowell County schools to be trauma-focused therapists; the project has also trained school counselors in all of the County schools to implement the Too Good for Drugs & Violence program in grades 3-12.

Some of the project’s upcoming plans are to train bullying prevention teams, utilizing the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program; to implement a tele-health service for mental health therapy in the two McDowell County high schools, with the goal of eventually implementing it into all County schools; and to continue training community and school personnel in youth/adult mental health first aid. Project Aware is also helping to establish PBIS (positive behavior interventions and supports) in every school for the 2019-20 school year.

Project Aware is continuously looking to build relationships with the school system and community partners and to build capacity for sustainability. If you need further information, contact Perry Blankenship at perry.blankenship@k12.wv.us.