For Immediate Release  
May 8, 2013

Contact:
Janet Bass  
Cell: 301-502-5222  
jbass@aft.org  
www.aft.org

West Virginia Board of Education OKs Community Schools Plan  
For McDowell County Public Schools

Citing ‘Reconnecting McDowell” Efforts,  
State Board Also Votes to End State Control of McDowell Schools

Bradshaw, W.Va.—The West Virginia Board of Education today unanimously approved a community schools plan for the McDowell County Public Schools, marking one of Reconnecting McDowell’s most significant efforts thus far to improve the education, health and well-being of the county’s students and their families.

Reconnecting McDowell, a public-private partnership, was launched in December 2011 as a long-term effort to improve the floundering public schools and address unmet needs brought on by unrelenting poverty that affects student achievement. It now has more than 100 partners that contribute services, funding and/or expertise.

In another move signifying the progress being made by McDowell County schools, the state board of education also voted to relinquish the state’s 12-year control of the county schools. At the state board meeting, state board President L. Wade Linger Jr. cited Reconnecting McDowell’s work to improve the county’s schools.

“In my mind, some of the credit for McDowell County Schools’ progress to date, and progress yet to come, goes to the work of Reconnecting McDowell. It has been a driving force for positive, transformational change for schools, teachers, students and the community,” Linger said.

Under the community schools plan, community organizations and agencies will provide programs and services that will be coordinated at every county school, based on the school’s and families’ needs, starting this fall. They likely will focus on academic intervention, extended learning, health and social services, family and early childhood support services, and parent and community engagement programs.

The McDowell County Public Schools, the American Federation of Teachers and AFT-West Virginia—all Reconnecting McDowell partners—developed the districtwide community schools plan, which received a 78 percent vote of support from school employees. Developing community schools in West Virginia was authorized under a 2012 state law establishing “collaborative innovation zones.”

The Reconnecting McDowell board made other announcements that move the partnership’s efforts forward, including IBM’s donation of 10 computer centers for early childhood development programs throughout the county and Shentel Communications’ offer of discounted internet rates for families with children in school. AFT President Randi Weingarten said establishing community schools was a big priority for Reconnecting McDowell because of their wide-ranging potential.
“The evidence is clear that community schools greatly improve disadvantaged children’s chances of success because the services and programs help overcome the ravages of poverty that affect academic achievement. A variety of coordinated services will wrap around schools to ensure that all kids are healthy and ready to do well in school,” Weingarten said. The McDowell community schools plan was based on elements of successful community schools around the country.

The community schools approach has seen great success. For example, since every Cincinnati public school became a community school in 2001, student achievement and graduation rates have climbed, attendance rates have increased, and the achievement gap has narrowed. In Syracuse, N.Y., public schools use Say Yes to Education, a nonprofit foundation that links students and their families to needed services.

McDowell County Public Schools Superintendent Nelson Spencer said his teachers and other school staff will work throughout the summer with community groups to start establishing each school as a community school in time for the 2013-14 school year. “In addition to great instruction, the additional services and programs will be extraordinarily important to help students be successful, well-rounded and well-grounded,” Spencer said.

Gayle Manchin, vice president of the state board of education and chair of Reconnecting McDowell, said the community schools strategy is a key achievement in the continuing progress of Reconnecting McDowell.

“We have said from the beginning that we need to take a whole-child and whole-community approach to turning around McDowell County. Establishing community schools is a big step toward fulfilling that goal,” Manchin said.

Other Reconnecting McDowell accomplishments that were announced span education, summer activities for youth, economic development and housing:

- IBM has provided 10 Little Tikes Young Explorer computer kiosks for county early childhood development programs. The computers are intended to help children learn and explore math, science and language concepts.
- Shentel Communications is offering reduced internet rates to families with children in school. Shentel is in the final stages of providing internet access to nearly 10,000 households in McDowell.
- Several partners have donated funds to sponsor 29 McDowell youth to attend a weeklong 4-H summer camp. Sponsors include the United Steelworkers, Women of Steel, West Virginia South Central Labor Council and the AFT.
- Another partner, the National Guard, has received a tent-repair mission that will employ 15 people at the Armory in Welch to repair all military tents that have been used abroad, including those used in Afghanistan. The jobs are expected to begin in midsummer.
- The United Mine Workers is training laid-off coal miners for jobs in other fields. At least 14 people have completed the training and are gainfully employed.
- A consultant presented a report to the Reconnecting McDowell board on options for constructing teacher housing in downtown Welch. It is intended to encourage teacher recruitment and retention.

###