

Reviving Rural America

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Some of my fondest childhood memories are of strolling down Main Street in Nyack, N.Y., with my grandfather. From his dress shop, we'd run errands at stores that lined the street. He would greet everyone by name as we made our way to our final stop—the soda fountain in Koblin's Pharmacy. Nyack was a small town, but it brimmed with vitality.

I walked down another Main Street last week, in Welch, W.Va. Welch is the county seat of McDowell County, a rugged and beautiful mountain community where, for decades, coal miners toiled deep underground, earning a decent living for their families and making huge fortunes for coal companies. Welch's Main Street tells the story of the town's glory days, and of the difficult decades that followed. Block after block is lined with storefronts that once bustled with activity, but today are empty. As mining ebbed and coal companies left, so too did the shops, cafes, theaters and doctors' offices that sustained daily life in McDowell County.

Some will say this is simply the harsh inevitability of change. But the real tragedy is that nothing replaced the coal economy, and so into this vacuum came widespread unemployment, hardship and despair.

Almost 10 years ago, Gayle Manchin, then the first lady of West Virginia, asked me to visit McDowell County, which had become the eighth-poorest county in America. Out of that visit grew a partnership called Reconnecting McDowell, which focuses on bringing together unions, government, business, nonprofit organizations and the people of McDowell around economic and educational renewal. Today, every student has access to medical and dental care. The AFT and our partners are helping teachers and administrators strengthen children's education. We have brought high-speed internet to the county. And, last week, we broke ground on Renaissance Village in Welch, which will provide apartments for teachers so they don't have to live more than an hour away because of the lack of housing. We hope this housing and its commercial and community space will provide a long-overdue spark to Welch's Main Street.

McDowell's story reflects the plight of so many small towns and rural communities. As industries abandon these locations, the internet and big box corporations snuff out local businesses, and family farms get squeezed out by giant conglomerates (and now President Trump's tariff war), these communities pay the price. The tax base shrinks, services are cut, and many young people feel that opportunity exists only elsewhere. Therein lies a

downward spiral—less economic activity and tax revenue lead to the closure of schools, hospitals, and the shops and other centers of community.

Last week, the AFT and the One Country Project released a poll of residents in rural and small towns. The results reflect what I hear in McDowell, St. Lawrence County, N.Y., and Lordstown, Ohio: Americans in rural and small towns feel betrayed.

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They feel like their way of life has been kicked away and the American dream is slipping further out of reach. More than 70 percent of rural voters say Main Street is in decline in small towns across America. Nearly half of all respondents say their income is falling behind the cost of living. They universally agree that towns suffer when hospitals, post offices, grocery stores and other small shops shut down. They love their public schools and yearn for investment in their communities to sustain their way of life. When asked how local governments could spend \$10 million in their communities, the top responses were roads and bridges and public schools.

Recent elections have shown a widening divide between rural and metropolitan America. The teachers, public employees and healthcare professionals who belong to the AFT can play a key role in bridging this divide. As we have done in McDowell, we will work with partners to ensure that rural communities and small towns have equal access to high-quality education; up-to-date roads, bridges, energy and other infrastructure; affordable healthcare; reliable public services; and places where people can gather and forge community. Not one more school, hospital, post office or grocery store should close on our watch.

Our path in McDowell shows that communities that have been left behind can move beyond despair to hope. High school graduation rates in the county are soaring, and dropout rates have plunged. Community schools offer students everything from counseling to healthcare to computer coding classes. Recreational tourism and the unionized jobs for construction workers building Renaissance Village are seeds of economic development. Reconnecting McDowell is about the path to a better life.

We are hoping our work in McDowell and St. Lawrence County, N.Y., can spark similar efforts in other rural areas and small towns—so young people don't have to move away in order to get by and so the businesses and policymakers that have abandoned these areas see reason to invest in them. The rural way of life is worth fighting for.



Weingarten (center) and Reconnecting McDowell partners at the groundbreaking of apartments to house educators in rural McDowell County, W. Va.

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