



Stories of Hope in West Virginia

Anyone who lives in West Virginia will tell you that the 2013-2014 school year was a tough one. Fierce winter weather forced some school districts to close for more than 30 days. Water contamination left more areas struggling to get back on track and the legislative session resulted in some health advocates feeling defeated. These problems added to the challenges of a state already facing rising poverty, hunger, unemployment, and drug use.

The Alliance for a Healthier Generation identified West Virginia as having one of the highest rates of childhood obesity in the nation and began working to turn the tide in the state six years ago. Healthy Schools Program Manager Amy File has forged strong partnerships with teachers, non-profit organizations, and state officials. Her efforts have already reached more than one-third of all schools in the state to build strong wellness councils, adopt health-promoting policies, and evaluate and celebrate their achievements. She sees her role as connecting the dots; bringing people and programs together to maximize the impact they have on the health of students and school staff state-wide.

Despite their challenges, rural communities are showing signs of hope. The four stories below illustrate how people and organizations are making West Virginia a healthier place to live, work, and play.

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Devoted to Feeding Children: Richard Goff's Story

Office of Child Nutrition
Charleston, WV

Feed to Achieve will provide access to free breakfast and lunch to every student in public school (PK-12). When this bill goes into effect, West Virginia will be the first state in the nation to commit to feeding all children two meals a day during the school day, regardless of family income.

It's not hard to get Rick Goff fired up about his work. He is passionate about finding solutions to better nourish children in West Virginia and he is extremely proud of the efforts he has led as Director of Child Nutrition for the past eight years. He values the role that the Alliance for a Healthier Generation has played in supporting schools as they build strong wellness councils and implement new policies around nutrition and physical activity.

"Amy File once said to me, 'We are all climbing the same mountain,'" said Goff. "And I quote her often on that. We cannot have enough people like that here—people that sincerely want to help the kids."

Goff believes that recent times have been "the best time to be associated with feeding kids." He is surprised but grateful that his career has led him to this point. Twenty-eight years ago, he began as an auditor for the Office of Child Nutrition, but was quickly promoted to Assistant Director. He remembers the moment that changed his life: "I saw a little boy carrying his baby sister down towards one of our summer feeding sites. I watched as he hid the baby behind a tree while he got his food. He took the milk back to his baby sister." He realized then that feeding children was not just a job—it was going to be his mission to reduce hunger in West Virginia's children.

His proudest achievement to date is the passage of WV SB633, the groundbreaking Feed to Achieve legislation, which he co-wrote with State Senator and Majority Leader John Unger. This bill passed with almost unanimous support in both the West Virginia House and Senate in 2013 and will be fully enacted in 2015.



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Richard Goff, Director of Child Nutrition, West Virginia

The bill establishes nonprofit organizations that will raise money to help pay for meals not reimbursed by the Federal Government. Goff believes that companies and foundations will step up to the plate. He said, “People want to donate to kids in need. I want this to be as well-known as the Jerry Lewis telethon!” Goff hopes that the new funding strategy will help build the infrastructure to feed kids during out-of-school time as well. “Summer feeding provides a crucial safety net, especially in rural communities,” he said. “We really need mobile feeding sites. We are on spring break now and sure, some of our kids are off having fun at the beach, but many of our kids are sitting at home right now, hungry. I want solutions.”

Although more than 60 percent of students in West Virginia are eligible for free meals, only 25 percent take advantage of the free breakfast program at their schools—a fact that garnered support for the passage of Feed to Achieve. And those numbers have barely moved over the past 30 years. West Virginia became the first state in the nation to require all schools to offer breakfast. “We know breakfast is just as important as math and English. Some kids have no parents at home, or they live in neighborhoods with meth labs or violence. And we expect them to go to school and learn? We can’t control all of that but we sure as heck can offer them a good breakfast.”

But Goff recognized that there is a difference between offering and really serving breakfast. Over the past three years, Goff and his office have worked to achieve community eligibility status so that some districts could offer universal breakfast without all of the paperwork. They have implemented effective strategies such as breakfast in the classroom, breakfast after first period for older students, and “grab and go” breakfasts that reduce stigma and offer widespread access. Some schools employ multiple strategies. “Kids want to eat breakfast,” said Goff. “You just have to make it easy.” These efforts are starting to pay off. Statewide breakfast participation numbers have increased from 30 to 40 percent since 2011. He hopes that the full rollout of Feed to Achieve will lead to big increases in breakfast and lunch participation as it becomes the norm for every student to eat two meals at school every day.

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Richard Goff, Director of Child Nutrition, West Virginia

Goff understands that it is not enough to address food security and access; he also needs to pay attention to proper nutrition and adequate physical activity for West Virginia’s students. “In this economy, people look for cheap food, not healthy food.” He has fought hard for the last ten years to improve the food and beverage options available to students. West Virginia was one of the first states in the nation to adopt competitive food guidelines for schools in 1992, which limited the sugar and fat content in snack foods sold to students.



In 2008 the standards were updated to align with the 2007 Institute of Medicine Guidelines, putting the district in a perfect position to implement the USDA’s Smart Snacks in School standards effective July 1, 2014. The West Virginia guidelines go beyond nutrition standards for school meals and competitive foods to also address marketing, fundraising, staffing, local wellness policies, accountability, and compliance.

The Office of Child Nutrition’s book, *Let’s Party*, helps schools successfully transition to healthier school celebrations. Because of the strong standards already in place, schools in West Virginia are already in compliance with the new standards. “We don’t permit the sale of a la carte items, junk food vending, or unhealthy fundraising in West Virginia. We said ‘no longer are schools going to balance their checkbook on the backs of students’ health.’”

The only thing that threatens Goff’s vision for feeding children across the state is securing adequate funding. With the help of a grant writer and the Feed to Achieve Foundation, Goff hopes to fund the rest of his vision. In addition to securing mobile feeding sites during the summer months, he also strives to help all districts cook most, if not all, foods onsite from scratch. He is also a big supporter of farm-to-school efforts and wants to be able to source even more food from local farms. “I know we have made a dent in hunger here but we have to keep pushing forward while protecting the changes we have made.”

New School Year, New Achievements

Huntington East Middle
School, Huntington, WV

One of the school's most exciting features is the composter, which takes food waste from lunch trays and sends it through a maze of tunnels beneath the school to a composting machine that churns it into fertilizer pellets. Students at the vocational agriculture department at Cabell Midland High School use these pellets to grow food for middle school students to eat.

Lisa Riley has had a chaotic year. As Assistant Principal of the brand new Huntington East Middle School, she has shepherded efforts to consolidate two smaller schools and uprooted students and staff to a brand new school during the middle of the school year. Some of the teachers have even had to pack and move twice. Since her days at Enslow Middle School, the smaller school she led to a Silver Award from the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, the number of teachers has tripled and the number of students has quadrupled.

The new school building's advantages far outweigh the inconveniences of the move. Huntington East Middle School is the first school in West Virginia to be LEED certified by the U.S. Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design. Its students are bathed in natural light and its eco-friendly features help them see exactly how their decisions affect the health of the building and the earth. Screens in the hallway show how much energy the building uses each day through heating and air conditioning systems, lights, and water systems. The school tracks classroom energy outputs and students compete for the lowest use between the grades.

One of the school's most exciting features is the composter, which takes food waste from lunch trays and sends it through a maze of tunnels beneath the school to a composting machine that churns it into fertilizer pellets. Students at the vocational agriculture department at Cabell Midland High School use these pellets to grow food for middle school students to eat. The school also has a large greenhouse and will be adding planter boxes in the school building to grow vegetables for the salad bar. During peak growing seasons, most of the produce served on the salad bar and in the lunch line comes from the high school. To prove the school's commitment to sustainability—even the lunch trays (made out of sugar cane) are compostable!



Today the rest of the state looks to Cabell County as a model for returning to the basics—preparing healthy meals from scratch on site. Riley proudly showed how her students lined up for homemade salad dressings, local radishes on the salad bar, and roasted chicken and potatoes.

This Title 1 school is proud to serve free breakfast and lunch to all its students. Grant funds from Fuel Up to Play 60 enabled the school to purchase carts to help with the “grab and go” breakfast service, making getting a healthy breakfast more convenient than ever. Riley is proud that her new school is already meeting the Alliance’s criteria for the Bronze Award and hopes to ramp up efforts next year to reclaim the Silver Award she earned at Enslow. She knows this year has been stressful for her staff and wishes they had more employee wellness support—a guaranteed focus for next school year.

The Cabell County School District received a good deal of attention (most of it was not positive) when British chef and television star Jamie Oliver filmed his reality show in its schools in 2009. As reality shows tend to do, it sensationalized the negative and failed to recognize the positive strides that the district and the state had made. Soda and junk food were removed from schools statewide and Cabell County high schools bolstered their fresh vegetable options to students with salad bars. The district food service department, led by Rhonda McCoy, was already looking to increase the number of menu items prepared from scratch, but working with Oliver’s staff (who spent time training district staff after the filming ended) accelerated their process.

Today the rest of the state looks to Cabell County as a model for returning to the basics—preparing healthy meals from scratch on site. Riley proudly showed how her students lined up for homemade salad dressings, local radishes on the salad bar, and roasted chicken and potatoes. Over the past few years, Cabell County cooks have passed on their knowledge and skills to cooks in most of the counties throughout the state using various training opportunities. Cabell County is also considered to be a leader for their success implementing the Alliance for a Healthier Generation’s Healthy Schools Program framework. During the four years they worked intensively with Program Manager Amy File, ten schools earned the Bronze National Recognition Award from the Alliance and Enslow Middle School received the Silver. Lisa Riley also served as a National Ambassador for the Healthy Schools Program, sharing her work to improve the health of students and staff with other schools across West Virginia.

Structure and Funding to Support Children's Health: School-Based Health Centers

School-Based Assembly
West Virginia

"We talk with students about food, physical activity, and BMI levels. And we have such a good rapport with kids here. We are like family."

Terry Roberts, Nurse Practitioner
at a SBHC at Cabell Midland High
School in Ona, West Virginia

Although West Virginia has experienced a lagging economy like many other states, its school-based health centers (SBHCs) are booming! Over the last three years the number of SBHCs has doubled from 50 to 100, according to Kelli Caseman, Executive Director of the West Virginia School-Based Health Assembly. Funded by various healthcare systems across the state, these centers provide much needed access to healthcare for students in rural areas. While no one is turned away for lack of insurance, the centers are also eligible for reimbursement through Medicaid, Children's Medicaid (or CHIP), and private insurance companies.



Highmark, one of the private insurance companies accepted by SBHCs in West Virginia, has teamed up with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation to offer the Healthier Generation Benefit. Sixty-two thousand children in West Virginia are covered by Highmark, making them eligible to use this benefit, which reimburses for at least four follow-up appointments with a primary care provider and at least four visits with a registered dietitian.

Caseman is excited about the possibilities of bringing together the work of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation and SBHCs in West Virginia in an official partnership. Both Caseman and Healthy Schools Program Manager Amy File see great potential in having the SBHCs serve as "wellness hubs" for schools and communities. SBHCs are much like any primary care facility—they provide sick and well visits, immunizations, asthma and diabetes management, nutrition counseling, and sometimes oral and mental health services. Like other medical professionals, many SBHC staff wish they could do more to prevent the health problems they encounter on a daily basis.

Caseman wants SBHC staff to feel empowered to take a more active role in prevention during the school day. By teaming up with the Alliance, SBHC staff will have access to resources and professional development opportunities; they will also be encouraged to play a more active role on school wellness councils.

Sixty-two thousand children in West Virginia are covered by Highmark, making them eligible to use this benefit, which reimburses for at least four follow-up appointments with a primary care provider and at least four visits with a registered dietitian.

Caseman sees the value in the Alliance providing schools with a road map to follow so that everyone is on the same page when it comes to promoting healthier school environments across the state. “We are excited to join the Alliance because it is a connector,” she said. “The Alliance brings the right people to the table. There is so much potential.”

West Virginia has passed many health-promoting policies but Caseman says that when it comes to implementation, “counties sometimes feel like it is too much. Partners really have to handhold here. Intensive training is needed for everything.” That is why she feels that SBHC staff are key to turning policy into reality. “Our people are onsite. If something comes down the pike, we can go in to help with training.” In addition, low staff turnover in many SBHCs makes them ideal for sustaining programs over the years.

The Alliance’s model of moving people forward and tracking progress fits well within the SBHC approach. Their community school model brings medical and social services together to create a cohesive network. Caseman sees the need to expand that model to focus on prevention, nutrition, and physical activity in the school setting.

Many West Virginians view schools as hubs of community support and “the only way to protect kids and the future workforce,” according to Program Manager Amy File. Caseman would like to see SBHC staff attending school wellness councils meetings—if not leading them—to stay on top of current trends in health education and to look for ways to integrate. She knows that the SBHC provider staff have a long tradition being strong and vocal advocates for school health; they are important assets to make the case for new programs in schools.

Terry Roberts is a Nurse Practitioner at a SBHC at Cabell Midland High School in Ona, West Virginia, which is sponsored by Valley Health System. She says that all providers across the state have tried to use consistent language when it comes to talking about childhood obesity. Providers have adopted the 5210 campaign developed by the American Academy of Pediatrics and are encouraged to discuss the 5210 at every visit. The 5210 campaign asks physicians to tell patients to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables, have no more than two hours of screen time, at least one hour of physical activity per day and zero sugary beverages. “This is one of our passions,” said Roberts. “It is so rewarding when I talk about this with a kid and they say, ‘I can do that!’”

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Kelli Caseman, Executive Director
of the West Virginia School-Based
Health Assembly

Roberts, Michelle Linville, Nurse Coordinator at Cabell-Midland, and school nurse Robin Yearout make a strong team of providers trying to see as many students as possible. They feel fortunate to share space with a mental health counselor, the attendance officer, a vocational rehab counselor, and a school psychologist. Roberts sometimes works with the health occupations student club, but wishes they could do more to spread the clinic’s message of health. Because the clinic charges for services, she says “some teachers think we are here to make money. I want them to know what we are doing with health promotion.” Linville said, “We are always educating on what we do here.”



Linville and Roberts both agree that Cabell-Midland High School has made significant advances in nutrition promotion. “We have really gone back to cooking from scratch, and I don’t see processed foods anymore, which is great,” Linville said. “We always talk with the kids about eating fruits and veggies and it helps when the school cafeteria is sending the same message. We know it is more than just school food, though. It takes parents, healthcare providers, and the entire community to get on board.”

Roberts likes to show students free mobile apps they can use to track their physical activity or food intake. And Linville likes to encourage students to join the track and field team. “I love track and field because no one gets cut!” she said.

Roberts believes that educators and healthcare professionals have become more comfortable talking about obesity. “We talk with students about food, physical activity, and BMI levels,” said Roberts. “And we have such a good rapport with kids here. We are like family.” School-based health centers can offer a true “medical home”—a crucial element for children’s health in the most vulnerable communities.

360 Degrees of Wellness

Mingo County School District, Mingo County, West Virginia

“One of the most innovative things that Kay has done is place wellness coaches in each school. We found someone—a ‘sparkplug’—in each school that has the desire to promote physical activity and other wellness initiatives.”

Randi Keathley, Mingo County Schools Superintendent

“About four years ago we looked at the obesity rates of students in southern West Virginia and the health complications they will face as adolescents and adults,” said Mingo County Schools Superintendent Randi Keathley. “In our area there aren’t many bike paths, parks or other avenues for children to be active outside of school. We had to go back and take a look at how to make those possibilities available during the time that they are here.”

Child Nutrition Director Kay Maynard explained that this was around the same time as they started the universal breakfast and lunch program, switched to whole grains, and added more fruits and vegetables. “We realized that our poverty rate is 70 percent but only 30 percent of our students were eating breakfast. It all started to come together for us,” Maynard said.

When the Alliance for a Healthier Generation’s Healthy Schools Program Manager Amy File approached Keathley about joining the program in 2011, she decided that the whole district should join and work together to improve nutrition and physical activity for students and staff.

“One of the most innovative things that Kay has done is place wellness coaches in each school,” said Keathley. “We found someone—a ‘sparkplug’—in each school that has the desire to promote physical activity and other wellness initiatives. We found a teacher, Pamela Chapman, who wanted to lead the effort across the district. We provide a sub for her every Friday so she can visit other schools, provide ideas, and help troubleshoot. That has really turned out to be a good catalyst. She also works with Amy File to help schools apply for the Alliance’s National Recognition Award.”



Lenore PK-8 School has added “exploratory classes” during the school day such as yoga and Zumba. Students at Lenore can also stay after school for yoga classes, health lessons, or training for a 5k race.

Schools in the district have found many different strategies to increase physical activity. Lenore PK-8 School has added “exploratory classes” during the school day such as yoga and Zumba. Students at Lenore can also stay after school for yoga classes, health lessons, or training for a 5K race. The district arranged for transportation so that students that stay after school to participate in physical activity can still catch a bus home.

Schools have been encouraged to diversify afterschool athletic programs to appeal to more students. Some offer soccer, golf, archery, softball, and baseball. Students can grab a healthy snack after school (through the USDA’s Afterschool Snack Program) before participating in a sport or gardening program.

Partnering with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation has yielded many benefits. The partnership has provided technical assistance, data, and recognition to the schools in addition to a roadmap to help them meet their goals. Schools are using Alliance resources to increase physical activity in the classroom such as Paul Pierce videos, JAMmin’ Minutes, and others provided through the *Let’s Move!* Active Schools initiative.

Teaming up with the Mingo County Diabetes Coalition has also offered support and helped to increase their reach. Alexis Batausa, Health and Wellness Promoter with the Diabetes Coalition, visits Mingo County Schools with Pam Chapman on Fridays to offer support for schools to meet their wellness goals.

The coalition also incentivizes student fitness by giving away pedometers and prizes. They have sponsored two community 5K races, even providing buses to help students and staff participate during the school day. Batausa and Chapman



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have also organized health fairs for staff and students to help them learn more about playing an active role in their health. These efforts have increased excitement about physical activity, which is passed from students on to families. Some parents have joined students in community walks or runs. “We are doing anything we can to get people moving,” Maynard said. “We do the *Let’s Move!* dance routines, we have a Relay for Life team, a Fuel Up to Play 60 grant, and Xboxes for students to use. We also have many physical education electives in our high school.”



Keathley and Maynard report that since they joined the Alliance, started the universal breakfast and lunch programs, and increased opportunities for physical activity, they have seen a rise in test scores and graduation rates across the district. They have also noticed a decrease in discipline referrals.

Across the state, school districts such as Mingo County, are working to increase physical activity with support from the Alliance and other local organizations. Derek Belcher, an instructional designer with the Cardiac Project at West Virginia University, is responsible for maintaining a website that supports West Virginia’s Physical Activity Plan. This site offers web-based learning modules to promote physical activity in schools.

The site also tracks participation in the *Let’s Move!* Active Schools program in West Virginia, which the West Virginia State Department of Education actively promotes, to build momentum and support. Belcher said, “It gets more counties involved when they see that their neighbors are participating. It has been fun to watch it snowball as it rolls out across the state.”