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Final Photo-Essay, HON 251-005, Fall 2018

December 11, 2018

Youth, Community & Education in Appalachia

Evolution of the Appalachian Schoolhouse Since the Early 20th Century

Created by Javid Fathi

HON 251-005: Material Culture and Appalachia, Fall 2018

Background and Introduction:

Over the last 100 years, education in Eastern Kentucky has evolved from a collective of decentralized learning communities into a system for consolidated curriculum translation. Teaching in the Southern Highlands has become less of an art and more of a science – cold, calculated, and utilizing only the strategies found in peer-reviewed articles. But educators are not meant to be purely one or the other: they are meant to be a mixture of both.

Appalachian education is meant to empower children in the Southern Highlands to not only overcome their region's obstacles but also to cultivate new opportunities within their communities. For the last one hundred years, the American public-school system has taught students how to *seize* opportunity without ever teaching them how to *cultivate* opportunity, and the result is that – in small towns and hollers across Appalachia, educated young people have left their long-time communities to find jobs rather than create them. Now more than ever, rural teachers and rooting their classrooms to their communities, in the hopes of stopping massive out-migration from students searching for opportunities elsewhere. While it might be easy to blame this on a plethora of stereotypes, it has so much more to do with the way that education – as both physical and curricular infrastructure – has shaped and been shaped by rural Appalachian communities.

This project explores the evolution of the Appalachian schoolhouse since the early twentieth century, and how major paradigm shifts within the schooling system or within strategies has impacted the way that Appalachians learn. For the purposes of this photo-essay, Appalachia (specifically, West Central Appalachia) will be characterized by historical coal-mining communities and counties in Eastern Kentucky, with all information, images and oral histories being pulled from that region of the state. There will be a heavy focus on the structure of grade-school instruction and on the choices and mindset of "the educated Appalachian."

part one:

ROOTS

This is the image that most of America associates with the Appalachian schoolhouse.

In fact, this image may be a little too ‘clean’ for some people to ‘really believe’ that it’s an Appalachian schoolhouse.

All the same, this is where our journey begins, as it represents the fundamental heart of the educational experience in Appalachia: the one-room school, Bell County, 1945.

Through the 1960s, most grade students in Appalachia were taught in small buildings such as this one, with many being funded and constructed by the Works Progress Administration and the United Mine Workers Association. These schoolhouses, which were iconically crafted out of local wood, made just enough space for the capacity of the community. Sometimes, even less than that.

In the image above, one can very clearly find children sharing work-desks in the back row, implying one of two things – either the schoolhouse and the community are massively underfunded, or the community – and its coal mine – are growing quicker than ever. It may be one or then other, but its most likely both, and this can often be forgotten when looking at Appalachia before the War on Poverty.

One should also not confuse a lack of consumer goods to imply a poverty of education, as some might argue that education in a one-room school was perhaps one of the best ways for Appalachians to learn.

There was a retired teacher from Knox County, Kentucky who spoke with Dr. Kathryn Engle about his experience as a one-room educator during the Sixties:

> "I started teaching in 1960. And, uh...at that time, the one-room schools were still in operation: about all of them in Knox County - and, state-wide, believe it or not, it was- it was all over- s'was basically in Appalachia there…
>
> …But, I found, uhm...there was a lot of joy in teaching at a one-room school. Um...probably a lot learning, you know? …You had eight grades, so you had to- I learned real quick to…take that real smart student that was in the seventh or eighth grade, sixth grade- whatever. Make 'em your assistant.
>
> In my opinion, we almost had zero problems. If you had a fight at school, uh...we did occasionally - you settled it right there. But, if you had a real problem, you just stopped at the…child's house on the way out…
>
> They would trust me with those kids. Um...I'd take 'em to talent shows and things like that. I wanted to involve 'em as much as things- in as many things as I could, you know. And they'd trust you with 'em."

As to the actual structure of the one-room schooling experience, Mr. Warren's examples bring three words to mind: wholistic, enriching and immersive. The style of education that he described was one that rooted both the teacher and the student to their locality and encouraged both to interact their community.

Students learned concepts by teaching others in the classroom or reviewing an older student's classwork, rather than the teacher handling every student's question on their own. The material limitations of the classroom required this. As any modern teacher will tell you, it is nearly impossible to keep two-dozen children seated and focused for very long. Hence, by physically limiting the educator, the one-room schoolhouse presented the need for the students to cooperate and self-educate, creating what might be referred to today as a 'flipped classroom experience.'

Mr. Warren's attitude when it came to class activities is also interesting. He would 'involve his students in local activities and things' rather than simply 'giving' them things to do. He provided them with both an outlet and an example for their creativity and their intellectual development, showing the older students what they could be in their town once they were finished with grade school.

Like the settlement schools from which they evolved, one-room schools in Appalachia were purposed with keeping students in their community while still providing them with the best education possible. Students were taught how to challenge and cultivate their environment rather than 'anyone else's' – and so, one-room schools Appalachia have historically been considered standard-bearers of place-based education.

Ultimately, this is the style of instruction can be as archaic as it is innovative, but its success is not entirely dependent on the quality of the teacher, but also on the quality of the students – who, because of the material limitations of the one-room model – must function as miniature educators.

This is the model of education which has been rooted in Appalachia.

It is also the one which – over the course of a century – has been systemically uprooted.

part two:

UPHEAVAL

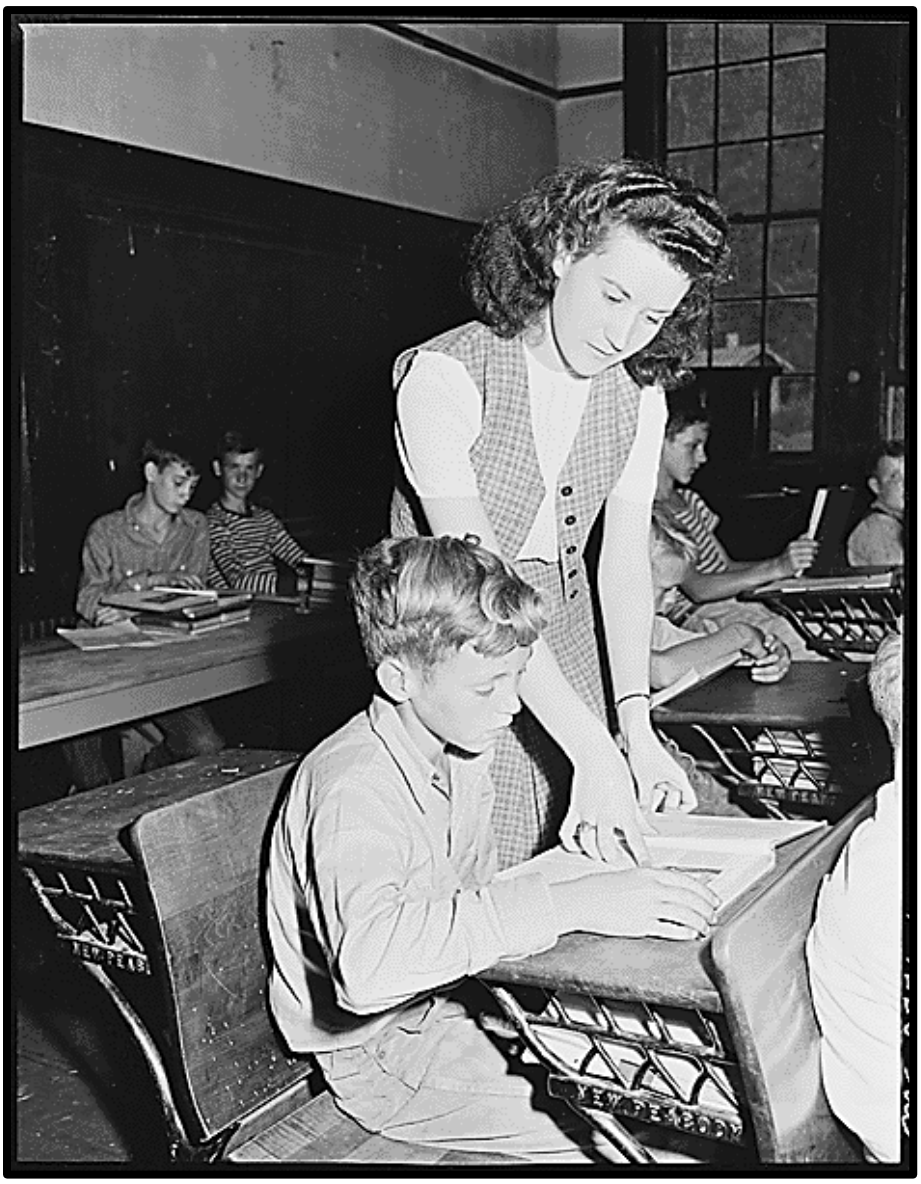
See if you can notice anything different between this photo and the previous one.

There still are not enough desks to meet the classroom's capacity, but the fundamentals of its instruction have drastically changed. Every student appears to be reading the same book, indicating that they are all at the same point in their education. The teacher is doing rounds about the classroom, and there is no student assistant to be seen. Every student wears a clean set of clothes, implying either that the students haven't been dismissed for recess yet or that the type of recess in which they partake is much less 'down-in-the-dirt.'

There weren't many reasons that these two photos should be drastically different – they were taken during the same year, in two adjacent counties no more than a day's journey between each other – except that one belonged to a one-room school and the other belonged to a public school.

Public schools began to play a major roll in Appalachian educational policy during the Great Depression, when centralization and accreditation became a concern for the state and local governments in Kentucky. For years, both the local schools and the public schools would coexist until state governments made clear that it was time to consolidate. As county populations in Eastern Kentucky began to fall from the 1950s onward, school boards took an increased interest in minimizing their school costs and consolidating their programs, often putting millions of dollars towards public school construction to act as *permanent replacements to the one-school programs.*

In reviewing the photo, one can easily see that the walls are made of concrete and the windows have been industrially produced, as if to imply that the school will be a permanent fixture within the community. There is also a piano in the background: an interesting allusion to the fact that public school students were required to study the culture and history of the nation at-large, rather than using the music curriculum to teach the students community proverbs. Ultimately, what becomes clear from the analysis of this image is the systemic *uprooting* of not just the Appalachian education system, but also the Appalachian way of life. Interviews with Mr. Bige Warren made clear that he believed Appalachia was a hopeless region – convinced by LBJ and the poverty-laced narratives of the contemporary Democratic Party. As an educator, he was consequential in providing students with a view and perspective of what life after school should like. More than anything else during his interview, he spoke about the lack of jobs in his community and said he's 'not really encouraged…with the future of (his community) Stinking Creek.' This is a perspective that was heavily purported in higher education, and – through both the school system and national media – has been passed down to and communicated to the students of Appalachia.



Here in the same classroom, the teacher helps Franklin D. Sergant read through his textbook. At thirteen years old, Sergant is still in the fifth grade and reportedly “anxious for the day when he can quit (school) and go to work in the mines.”

Unfortunately, he was likely among the last to succeed in this kind of career planning, as a young man twenty years his junior explains during the 1970s in the Whitesburg student film *Appalachian Genesis*. The statement speaks for itself.

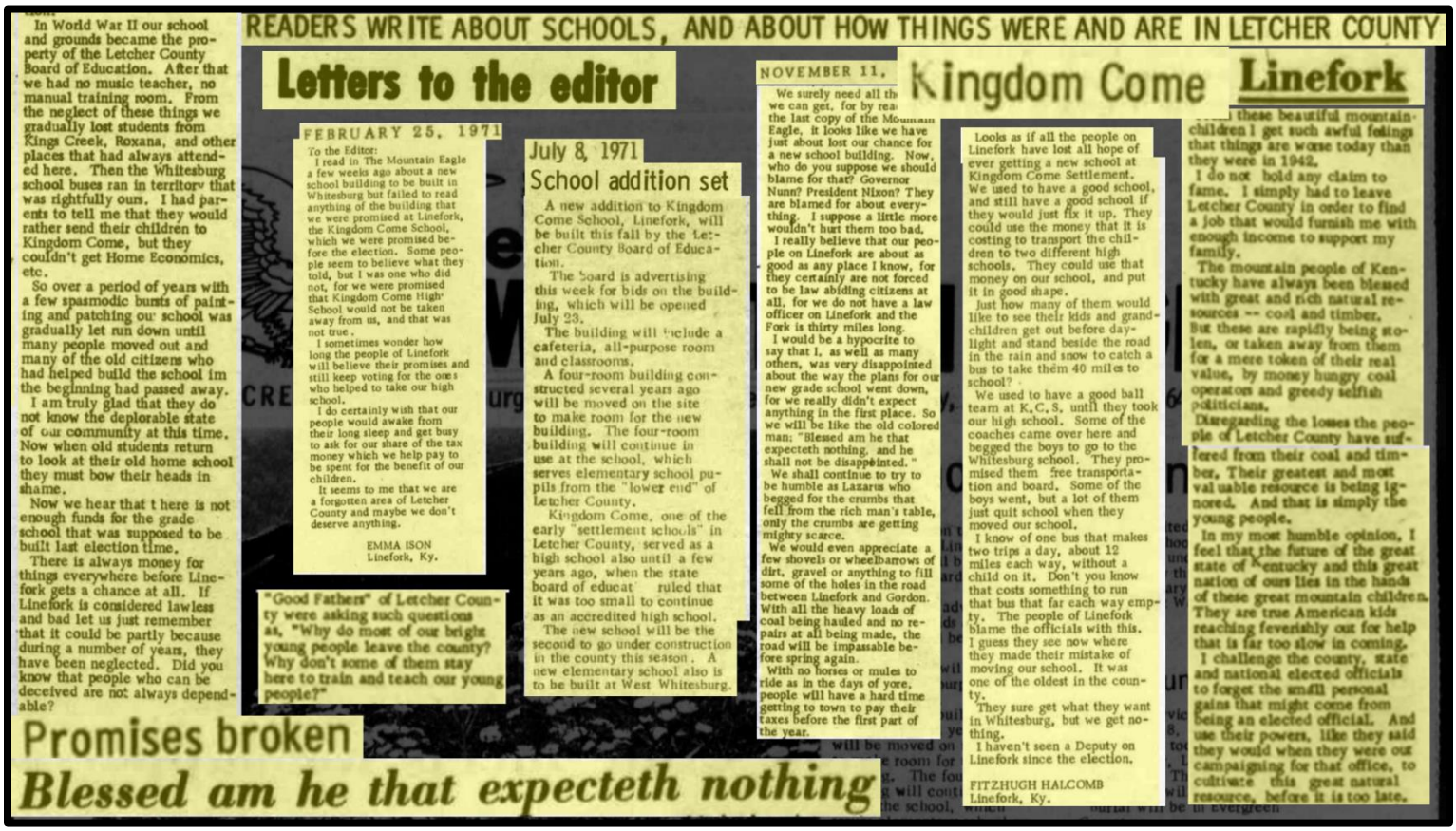
> "Oh, I graduated from Mullins School, and I graduated in '68.
>
> And since then I got out - uh, stayed around here 'bout a year.
>
> I laid some carpet - uh, did a few other things - and then I took off for Michigan, stayed a year there.
>
> And I didn't like it too good there - I come back - so after I got here, I've been laying around now for about uh, five or six months, nothing to do - can't get a job...
>
> ...And I guess I'll just probably stay this way 'till I go back to Michigan."

Young Appalachians felt as though they were forced out of their communities. The lack of jobs and community development had made it impossible to find new work, as was an inevitable result of the coal market's slow decline.

The issue is that, when a reliable market fails, it is the role of the education system to teach students how to create a new one – not simply to prepare them for the same kind of life.

Public education, at its core, fails to teach children how to innovate. At its core, public education fails to root students to their environment.

Rather than teach children how to cultivate opportunities, they just teach them how to seize opportunities. And in Appalachia, students seize their opportunities *elsewhere*.


READERS WRITE ABOUT SCHOOLS, AND ABOUT HOW THINGS WERE AND ARE IN LETCHER COUNTY

Letters to the editor

In World War II our school and grounds became the property of the Letcher County Board of Education. After that we had no music teacher, no manual training room. From the neglect of these things we gradually lost students from Kings Creek, Roxana, and other places that had always attended here. Then the Whitesburg school buses ran in territory that was rightfully ours. I had parents to tell me that they would rather send their children to Kingdom Come, but they couldn't get Home Economics, etc.

So over a period of years with a few spasmodic bunts of painting and patching our school was gradually let run down until many people moved out and many of the old citizens who had helped build the school im the beginning had passed away.

I am truly glad that they do not know the deplorable state of our community at this time. Now when old students return to look at their old home school they must bow their heads in shame.

Now we hear that t here is not enough funds for the grade school that was supposed to be built last election time.

There is always money for things everywhere before Linefork gets a chance at all. If Linefork is considered lawless and bad let us just remember that it could be partly because during a number of years, they have been neglected. Did you know that people who can be deceived are not always dependable?

Promises broken

FEBRUARY 25, 1971

To the Editor:

I read in The Mountain Eagle a few weeks ago about a new school building to be built in Whitesburg but failed to read anything of the building that we were promised at Linefork, the Kingdom Come School, which we were promised before the election. Some people seem to believe what they told, but I was one who did not, for we were promised that Kingdom Come High School would not be taken away from us, and that was not true.

I sometimes wonder how long the people of Linefork will believe their promises and still keep voting for the ones who helped to take our high school.

I do certainly wish that our people would awake from their long sleep and get busy to ask for our share of the tax money which we help pay to be spent for the benefit of our children.

It seems to me that we are a forgotten area of Letcher County and maybe we don't deserve anything.

EMMA ISON
Linefork, Ky.

"Good Fathers" of Letcher County were asking such questions as, "Why do most of our bright young people leave the county? Why don't some of them stay here to train and teach our young people?"

July 8, 1971

School addition set

A new addition to Kingdom Come School, Linefork, will be built this fall by the Letcher County Board of Education.

The board is advertising this week for bids on the building, which will be opened July 23.

The building will include a cafeteria, all-purpose room and classrooms.

A four-room building constructed several years ago will be moved on the site to make room for the new building. The four-room building will continue in use at the school, which serves elementary school pupils from the "lower end" of Letcher County.

Kingdom Come, one of the early "settlement schools" in Letcher County, served as a high school also until a few years ago, when the state board of educat ruled that it was too small to continue as an accredited high school.

The new school will be the second to go under construction in the county this season. A new elementary school also is to be built at West Whitesburg.

NOVEMBER 11,

We surely need all th we can get, for by rea the last copy of the Mou Eagle, it looks like we have just about lost our chance for a new school building. Now, who do you suppose we should blame for that? Governor Nunn? President Nixon? They are blamed for about everything. I suppose a little more wouldn't hurt them too bad.

I really believe that our people on Linefork are about as good as any place I know, for they certainly are not forced to be law abiding citizens at all, for we do not have a law officer on Linefork and the Fork is thirty miles long.

I would be a hypocrite to say that I, as well as many others, was very disappointed about the way the plans for our new grade school went down, for we really didn't expect anything in the first place. So we will be like the old colored man: "Blessed am he that expecteth nothing, and he shall not be disappointed."

We shall continue to try to be humble as Lazarus who begged for the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, only the crumbs are getting mighty scarce.

We would even appreciate a few shovels or wheelbarrows of dirt, gravel or anything to fill some of the holes in the road between Linefork and Gordon. With all the heavy loads of coal being hauled and no repairs at all being made, the road will be impassable before spring again.

With no horses or mules to ride as in the days of yore, people will have a hard time getting to town to pay their taxes before the first part of the year.

Kingdom Come Linefork

Looks as if all the people on Linefork have lost all hope of ever getting a new school at Kingdom Come Settlement. We used to have a good school, and still have a good school if they would just fix it up. They could use the money that it is costing to transport the children to two different high schools. They could use that money on our school, and put it in good shape.

Just how many of them would like to see their kids and grandchildren get out before daylight and stand beside the road in the rain and snow to catch a bus to take them 40 miles to school?

We used to have a good ball team at K, C, S, until they took our high school. Some of the coaches came over here and begged the boys to go to the Whitesburg school. They promised them free transportation and board. Some of the boys went, but a lot of them just quit school when they moved our school.

I know of one bus that makes two trips a day, about 12 miles each way, without a child on it. Don't you know that costs something to run that bus that far each way empty. The people of Linefork blame the officials with this. I guess they see now where they made their mistake of moving our school. It was one of the oldest in the county.

They sure get what they want in Whitesburg, but we get nothing.

I haven't seen a Deputy on Linefork since the election.

FITZHUGH HALCOMB
Linefork, Ky.

these beautiful mountain-children I get such awful feelings that things are worse today than they were in 1942.

I do not hold any claim to fame. I simply had to leave Letcher County in order to find a job that would furnish me with enough income to support my family.

The mountain people of Kentucky have always been blessed with great and rich natural resources -- coal and timber. But these are rapidly being stolen, or taken away from them for a mere token of their real value, by money hungry coal operators and greedy selfish politicians.

Disregarding the losses the people of Letcher County have suffered from their coal and timber, Their greatest and most valuable resource is being ignored. And that is simply the young people.

In my most humble opinion, I feel that the future of the great state of Kentucky and this great nation of ours lies in the hands of these great mountain children. They are true American kids reaching feverishly out for help that is far too slow in coming.

I challenge the county, state and national elected officials to forget the small personal gains that might come from being an elected official. And use their powers, like they said they would when they were out campaigning for that office, to cultivate this great natural resource, before it is too late.

Blessed am he that expecteth nothing

One thing that can make the communal importance of a local school clear is the removal of a school, and specifically how the local community reacts.

Nowhere is that reaction clearer in Letcher County history than in the comprehensive community documentation regarding Kingdom Come High School, a settlement school in Linefork, one of the least-populated communities in the county.

After losing a court case against the state Board of Education, the Letcher County school board was ordered to shut down Kingdom Come School and send its one hundred students to the recently constructed consolidation schools in Whitesburg, some forty miles from the isolated Linefork in the southeastern mountains of Letcher.

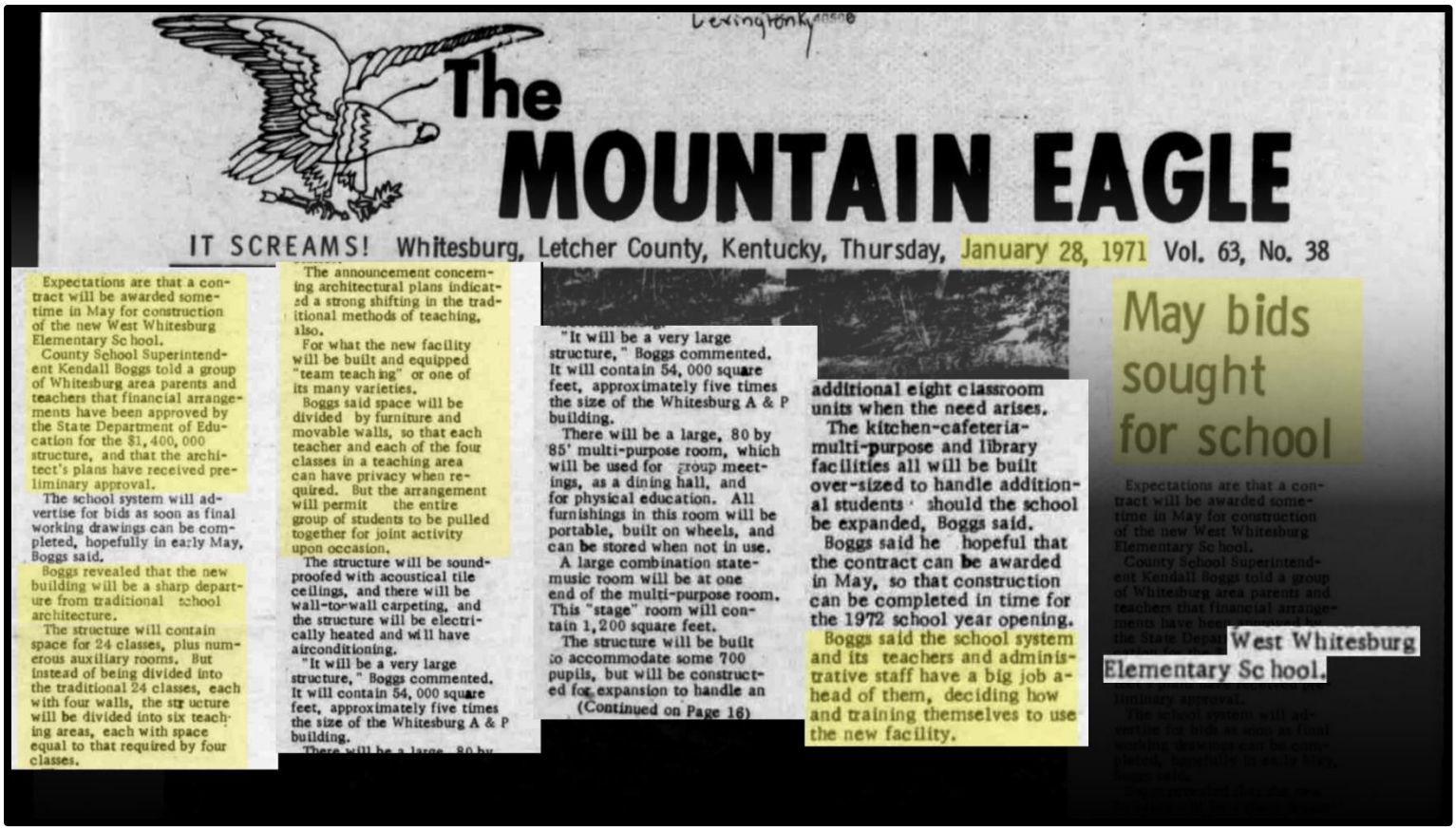
Through the county paper, locals extensively bemoaned the fact that buses had purposefully run into the settlement school's zoning for a year before hand, and that after the Superintendent promised that a public school would be built in Linefork, it took over a year for construction to *begin*. It is worth asking whether a school would have been built at all if the community had not complained to the county at-large. Some students moved to the consolidated school, other students quit school and some families quit Linefork altogether.

> "The people of Linefork now blame the officials with this. I guess they see now where they made their mistake of moving our school. It was one of the oldest in the country. They sure get what they want in Whitesburg, but we get nothing. I haven't seen a Deputy on Linefork since the election."

There is something to be said about how a community is torn apart when a school is removed – that the school is the epicenter of the community. In Appalachia, as the communities grew, and the coal companies left, this was proved to be absolutely true.

part three:

GROWTH



The MOUNTAIN EAGLE

IT SCREAMS! Whitesburg, Letcher County, Kentucky, Thursday, January 28, 1971 Vol. 63, No. 38

May bids sought for school

Expectations are that a contract will be awarded sometime in May for construction of the new West Whitesburg Elementary School.

County School Superintendent Kendall Boggs told a group of Whitesburg area parents and teachers that financial arrangements have been approved by the State Department of Education for the $1,400,000 structure, and that the architect's plans have received preliminary approval.

The school system will advertise for bids as soon as final working drawings can be completed, hopefully in early May, Boggs said.

Boggs revealed that the new building will be a sharp departure from traditional school architecture.

The structure will contain space for 24 classes, plus numerous auxiliary rooms. But instead of being divided into the traditional 24 classes, each with four walls, the structure will be divided into six teaching areas, each with space equal to that required by four classes.

The announcement concerning architectural plans indicated a strong shifting in the traditional methods of teaching, also.

For what the new facility will be built and equipped "team teaching" or one of its many varieties.

Boggs said space will be divided by furniture and movable walls, so that each teacher and each of the four classes in a teaching area can have privacy when required. But the arrangement will permit the entire group of students to be pulled together for joint activity upon occasion.

The structure will be soundproofed with acoustical tile ceilings, and there will be wall-to-wall carpeting, and the structure will be electrically heated and will have airconditioning.

"It will be a very large structure," Boggs commented. It will contain 54,000 square feet, approximately five times the size of the Whitesburg A & P building.

There will be a large, 80 by 85' multi-purpose room, which will be used for group meetings, as a dining hall, and for physical education. All furnishings in this room will be portable, built on wheels, and can be stored when not in use.

A large combination state-music room will be at one end of the multi-purpose room. This "stage" room will contain 1,200 square feet.

The structure will be built to accommodate some 700 pupils, but will be constructed for expansion to handle an additional eight classroom units when the need arises.

The kitchen-cafeteria-multi-purpose and library facilities all will be built over-sized to handle additional students should the school be expanded, Boggs said.

Boggs said he hopeful that the contract can be awarded in May, so that construction can be completed in time for the 1972 school year opening.

Boggs said the school system and its teachers and administrative staff have a big job ahead of them, deciding how and training themselves to use the new facility.

(Continued on Page 16)

Despite the serious communal costs, there were good results from consolidation in Letcher County, one of which was the utilization of alternative education models in the construction of the school buildings.

In spite of his poor relationships with the most rural areas of the county, Letcher County Public Schools Superintendent Kendall Boggs was an educator at heart, and his hope was to 'perfect' the one-room school structure in his oversight of West Whitesburg Elementary School during the early seventies.

The elementary school was designed to be "a sharp departure from traditional school architecture", utilizing movable walls to create large educational areas that would hold four classes of students. Each class would have its own teacher, but the four teachers would work together to teach different subjects in the same room.

It was planned to last the school district for decades: equipped with a music room and sound-proofing ceilings, a library and a multi-purpose room that was purposefully "oversized to handle additional students should the school be expanded."

In an interview after his retirement, Boggs talked at length about this model and its execution, why it worked well and why the school stopped using it:

> "And it worked very well with the training, the hours, and the- and training that we gave them. We got them in there and we had a beautiful school, for a few years. But…I think what happened is that they didn't keep the training going for new teachers coming in there…
>
> And after a number of years, they began to isolate themselves and not use the team teaching and the- you know? The- the study carrel, and all the different, uh...uh...possibilities in there of accelerating the program…
>
> Pretty soon there- they were putting up temporary petitions and making everyone a little mess down there, and that's what they're doing right now…
>
> You'd have just those compounds of- of say, a hundred-and-twenty or a hundred, and...
>
> And then you have your corridor open, with all this in here- with all the offices and study b- areas and all that.
>
> Uh...was a beautiful design. I…thought it worked exceptionally well…
>
> But, uh...I don't what happened.
>
> They've gone back to the class's- uh...setting the classroom unit back. It has to be a better situation than a one teacher with twenty-five students, because you've got more expertise and more abilities…to draw from. But unless you have that cooperation, it's doomed from the beginning."

Boggs makes his position readily clear. From where he stood, the nature and the infrastructure of education in Appalachia needed to shift.

We end our journey through Appalachia's 'schoolhouse history' at Betsy Layne High School, in Floyd County, Kentucky.

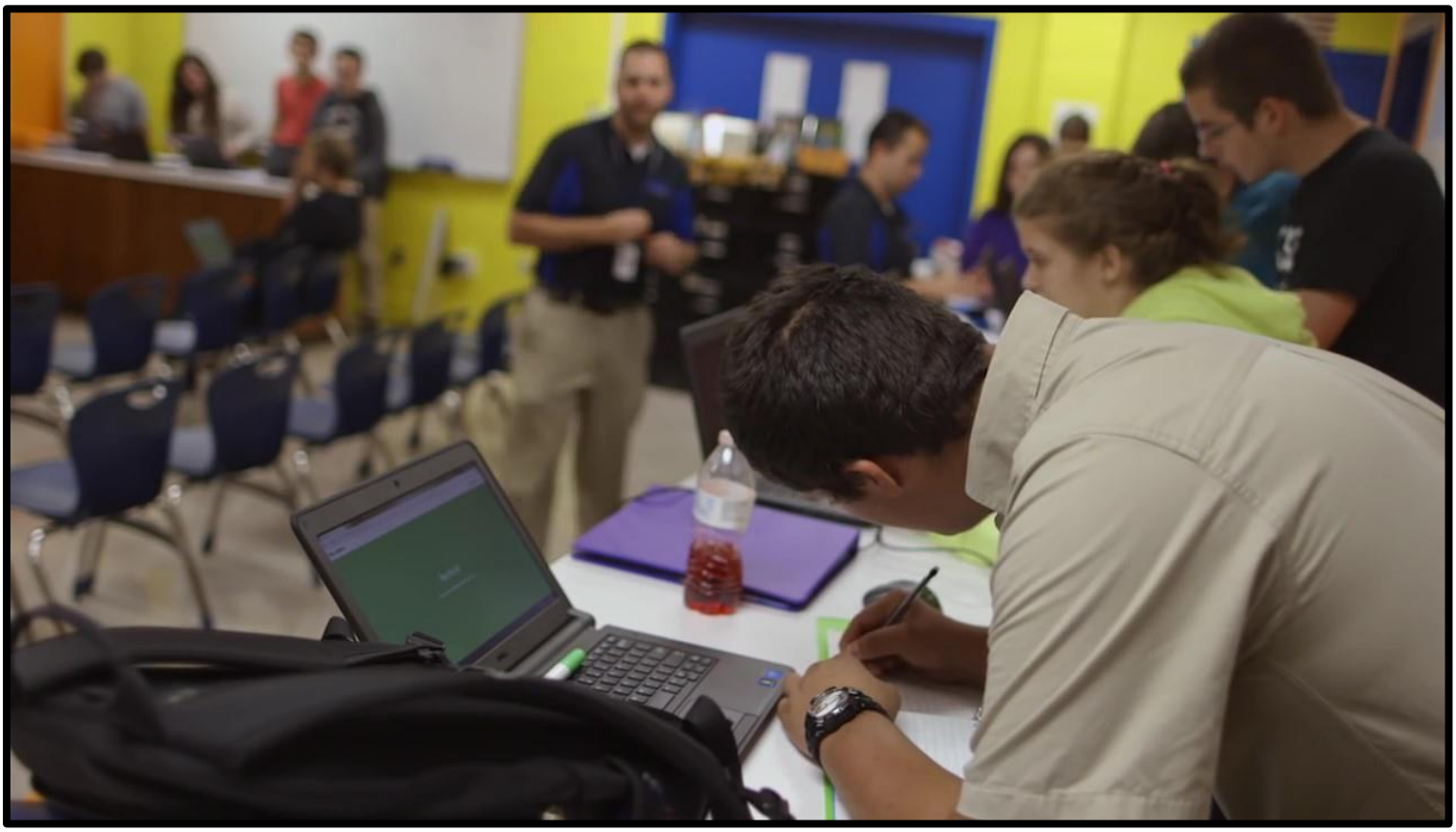
The county has lost over thirteen percent of its population since 2000. The school's population of less than 500 shrunk by over 100 people in a single school year. Over 75% of the school qualifies for free or reduced lunch. It's a Title I school.

And yet, Bill Gates himself lauded the school as a model for the nation.

To understand why, one simply has to look inside Mr. Ricky Thacker's Algebra I classroom and see how he utilizes his space. The majority of the classroom is set up as an open floor, with chairs stacked away and to be used only when necessary. The class is standing at attention, watching as Mr. Thacker positions two freshmen along a Cartesian graph taped onto the floor.

He uses the students themselves – their physical bodies – to educate the other students.

Along the back end of the classroom is a wall of standing tables, equipped with computers that the students can use to study and collaborate. Thacker walks rounds around the classroom, but his first priority is to allow for the students to help each other through their classwork- to inspire self- and group-education. It is often difficult to get students passionate about mathematics, but Mr. Thacker's classroom is physically and mentally engaged. He fully utilizes his material classroom – and the class itself - to educate the students.



This is the complicated journey that public education has taken in Appalachia.

This is the image to which we have arrived.

A young boy, studying mathematics alongside his peers, stooping into his work and leaning into the education.

Some might see – out of focus – his instructor begin to approach him.

Others might see the groups of students working at the back of the frame.

I see an educator cultivating problem-solvers in his community.

I see an educator cultivating problem-solvers for his community.

I see a classroom filled with realized potential.

I see a future for Appalachia.

And I see a future for Eastern Kentucky.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Javid Fathi is a freshman at the University of Kentucky majoring in Computer Science, whose professional and academic focus is to develop software solutions for twenty-first century education. He is a life-long storyteller, a trivia nerd, and a long-time animated filmmaker.

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