



Western Local School District

From the Desk of

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GRIT – The Appalachian Hope Project

What makes GRIT, as an organization, fundamentally different from every other single entity working in education? Most organizations, especially in education, focus on the process and the details. We try to make everything in a one-size-fits-all package with the goal of making our initiatives and programs work for millions of kids (and adults) when every single one is an individual and there is no silver bullet that will work for everyone.

The problem with so many initiatives is that they are valiant in intent but they start at the wrong place. This is why so many great ideas never materialize into tangible successes. This is where GRIT is different. GRIT started in a place that everyone else skips over. We, as an organization, started out with one simple premise - without HOPE in a better tomorrow there will be no focused intent on what we do today! Hope doesn't start with money. It doesn't start with a building. "If you build it they will come" only works when hope is already there. In the Field of Dreams" the players knew they wanted to play baseball they just didn't have a place to play. So, when the field was built they were just chomping to get on it and play. In Appalachia it's different. There are so many individuals who don't even know they want to play, let alone how to play or have an excitement about playing. GRIT provides the hope that they'll be able to get on the field. GRIT helps create the vision of a game and fosters a feeling of what it would be like to play on that field. GRIT gives everyone access and everyone can be part of the team, regardless of their background, whether filled with trauma or filled with opportunities.

GRIT functions as a support system rooted in giving hope to the hopeless. GRIT operates on the premise that everyone is valuable AND reachable. I grew up in western Pike County and have proudly lived my entire life here. I spent most of my childhood in Long's General Store, my grandparents' general store in Latham. As a young kid I had a hard time figuring out why the people least able to afford it were the ones who often bought lottery tickets, beer, and cigarettes. They bought expensive food that had no nutritional value and didn't go very far. It made no sense until I got older. They had no hope for a better tomorrow and there may not even be any money tomorrow. The instant gratification mindset so often controlled their lives. These were great people for the most part but they lived in a way that perpetuated their socioeconomic plight. Our poverty is generational. This broken system has been in place for generations and kids born into this cycle rarely pull themselves out. This system creates apprehension, mistrust, excuses, self-sabotage, and a self-fulfilling prophecy that opens the door to depression, drug use, and dependence on a system that holds them captive with public assistance and social programs. This system creates a perpetual cycle of chaos and unstructured survival. There are agencies offering short-term help in the form of money but short-term money never becomes long-term success.

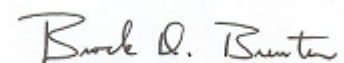
This is why GRIT is fundamentally different from every other "social program." GRIT works to socially elevate through a system rooted in hope. If you give me \$10 million dollars I'll find a way to spend it at Western Local Schools and it'll help kids. After a while it'll be gone. If you give any organization \$10 million they'll find a way to spend it wisely, I'm sure. For most organizations, \$10 million dollars is a fixed amount and when it's gone and its purpose has hopefully been realized. When the money is a fixed amount it really can't be used to create jobs long-term because there may be no money there to sustain those jobs. Here is where GRIT is different. When you give GRIT \$10 million dollars every one of those dollars is an investment in hope. Every penny invested in hope returns far more than the initial investment. Any organization would be thrilled to invest \$10 million dollars and get back \$20 million dollars. If that happens, that \$20 million dollars may be put in the bank to draw interest. When

GRIT invests those same dollars in hope, the return is exponential. Every student who receives training or a credential provided by a GRIT PARTNER has the hope of breaking the cycle of generational poverty. Every adult who gets trained by a GRIT PARTNER has that same hope. GRIT doesn't pay Amber Silcott to work but because of GRIT, Pike Community Action does. Because of the hope that GRIT gave Amber Silcott, in her own words "her kids have their mom back." GRIT didn't give Regina Ealey, a 52 year old grandmother who dropped out of high school in 10th grade, her GED but GRIT gave her hope that she could do it. GRIT didn't give Jasmine Cable her high school diploma, 10 years and 3 kids after she dropped out as a senior, her high school diploma but GRIT gave her the hope that she could do it and GRIT helped her believe that it's never too late to turn around. GRIT isn't an organization. It's a system. It's a multi-tiered system of supports. On every level there is someone whose job is to reach down and pick people up. GRIT and the hope that it provides has changed the course of history for Amber Silcott, Jasmine Cable, Regina Ealey and for their entire families. These families will never again feel like they are on an island. The curse of generational poverty can be broken in one generation and it has been for these three ladies and their families. These are Cinderella stories. These three, along with so many like them, are the underdogs. GRIT gives underdogs the hope that there are big benefits on the other side of the roadblock.

How has GRIT supported the greater Western community? How has GRIT brought hope to an area riddled by the opioid epidemic and generational poverty? How has GRIT made it possible for residents of one of the poorest rural districts in the state to have exciting educational and invaluable experiential opportunities? GRIT has provided a system of structure and support. GRIT has invested in individuals from this community and showed its belief in our area by hiring Western graduates. GRIT doesn't talk about a vast Appalachian talent pool and then bring in career coaches and supervisors and outreach specialists from Cleveland and Cincinnati and Columbus. They come from the communities that they love. That makes every day they come to work an investment in their personal future rather than just a paycheck. It's a brilliant business plan. GRIT has invested countless dollars in this community. GRIT built the Western Career Development Center for one selfless purpose - to provide a safe, functional space for residents of Western Pike County to be able to work remotely, further their education, receive job training opportunities, and have access to childcare on the campus of Western Local Schools. THEN, GRIT decided to deepen that investment by providing funding for the Western Career and Community Connections Center. That building will be open this spring and will serve as a community center for a community with no town "structure" and no informal gathering place or meeting space. The building is structurally designed to be a job training center and has space for community meetings, job fairs, large group trainings, etc. It also serves the greater community by providing a space for wedding receptions, graduation parties, birthday parties, social events, and unlimited other uses that serve a community that didn't have a space for any of these services that nearly every other community in the state already has. The funding and support provided by GRIT continues to level the playing field for the residents of western Pike County. These physical structures are tangible proof that people believe in us and they have invested in the future of our entire community. These buildings represent opportunities that weren't here a year ago and they represent hope in a tangible form. Webster defines hope as *to cherish a desire with anticipation*. Without anticipation there is no hope. Without tangible evidence of a pathway to success, the emotion of hope is nearly impossible to possess. GRIT has provided the tangible evidence needed for hope in this community by investing in desperately needed infrastructure and by investing in individuals who inspire hope in the students and adults they work with.

Why do I believe that investing in GRIT will result in exponential returns? No one with hope for a better tomorrow injects or inhales poison. No one with hope for a better tomorrow abuses their spouse or kids. No one with a hope for a better tomorrow takes their own life. No one with a hope for a better tomorrow gambles all of their family's money away. No one with a hope for a better tomorrow signs up for public assistance as a long-term plan. Hope can help so many mental illnesses. The list goes on. Investing in hope reduces the need to invest in social programs and organizations that help people simply survive. If you want to make an investment in the future of our region and our state that will provide generational returns consider investing in GRIT.

Sincerely



Brock D. Brewster