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THANKSGIVING ISSUE

West Virginia Teacher of the Year

# THE MAESTRO OF ROCK BRANCH



West Virginia Teacher of the Year Seth Skiles leads first-graders in a song in his music classroom at Rock Branch Elementary School on Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2024.

‘Creative’ music instructor Seth Skiles nails high note of Mountain State education

By SIERRA MARLING  
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WHEN STUDENTS walk into Seth Skiles’ classroom at Rock Branch Elementary in Nitro, they know they’re in for something special. On Tuesday, instead of sheet music or instruments, Skiles brought in pre-cut pastry dough and baked crescent rolls while teaching about Thanksgiving traditions. Students and staff said this kind of creative, hands-on lesson is just another day in Skiles’ general music

class, which spans pre-school through fifth grade. His engaging and multifaceted teaching style recently earned him the title of West Virginia’s 2025 Teacher of the Year. The Rock Branch staff said he’s Putnam County’s first state Teacher of the Year award winner and may also be the only music teacher statewide to receive the honor. **Teacher of the Year** A Putnam County native, Skiles studied at Marshall University before transfer-



Skiles dances the turkey trot song with kindergartners to the tune of The Hokey Pokey on Tuesday.

ring to Anderson University in South Carolina and later Belmont University in Tennessee. After teaching in Nashville, he returned to his home state during the COVID-19 pandemic, where he has since become known

as a positive figure in the Rock Branch community. “From 7 a.m. until 4 p.m., he has a smile on his face,” said Leah Leftwich, a first-grade teacher at the school. “He’s energetic. He is

SEE **TEACHER, 7A**

PEIA board gets earful of concern on rate hikes

By KATELYN ALUISE  
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LuAnn Wright remembers the last time teachers gathered against a change in the Public Employees Insurance Agency in Charleston in 2018. It was when the West Virginia Legislature passed an emergency measure to take \$29 million out of the state’s Rainy Day Fund to cover the expenses of the program. “I remember a lot of lip-service from legislators and governors and threats,” said Wright, a Title I Interventionist with Kanawha County Schools. “I remember having an opportunity to speak but not being heard by the majority of the legislators that were there.” Dozens of West Virginia educators, public workers and supporters showed up for the sixth and final public meeting of PEIA’s Finance Board about proposed increases in health care costs for the Public Employees Insurance Agency. Thursday’s hearing was held at the Culture Center in Charleston where many speakers said they knew

SEE **PEIA, 6A**

Summersville park a \$10M state taxpayer expense

By MIKE TONY  
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West Virginia’s newest state park came with a seven-figure price tag for the property. A bigger price tag hangs on the state’s decision to contract with a third party to build and operate the park. Taxpayer dollars covering both are flowing toward the same company. State officials approved a contract with Bright Enterprises Inc. for the financing, construction and operation of Summersville Lake State Park in June 2024 that committed \$10 million to the company for park oversight. That approval came less than a year after the state Division of Natural Resources agreed to pay \$4.3

SEE **PARK, 6A**

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