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Central to the missions of both the Lehigh Valley Workforce Investment Board, Inc. and the Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation is the goal to improve the business climate by creating growth opportunities for our region. And key to creating growth opportunities for current business and industry – or attracting new business, for that matter – is the quality of the existing workforce. Is the available labor force adequately educated, trained and capable of tackling whatever challenges exist in a high-tech world? Or will an employer be forced to look outside the region to fill skilled jobs?

More than 70 percent of Pennsylvania jobs today require workers with education beyond high school, yet only about *half* of our current workers have this education level. Jobs requiring only high school credentials are disappearing and those that do remain do not pay wages sufficient enough to raise and support a family. To address this issue, we must ensure our labor force has the education to compete; this means not only graduating from high school, but acquiring some type of postsecondary education as well, whether that be a two or four-year-college, technical school or work-placed training program.

In order for Pennsylvania to compete successfully in today's knowledge-based economy, we must engage every available worker, including those young people who have dropped out of high school. We need to ensure a continuous pipeline of qualified workers – in the Lehigh Valley and across PA. Re-engaging high school dropouts will increase the number of workers available to fill high-skill, high-demand occupations.

The fiscal implications of dropping out - both for the dropout and the community-at-large - are very real. Over the course of their lifetimes, dropouts make less money than their graduating peers; pay less in taxes; have fewer prospects to earn wages that support themselves and their families; and are more likely to rely on public assistance and get in trouble with the law.

Today in Pennsylvania there are almost 120,000 young people ages 16-24 who have dropped out of high school before earning their diploma. Each year, an additional 30,000 teen-agers do not make it to graduation with their class.

As businessmen in our region, we know the importance of not dismissing this population, but instead, of helping them to reconnect to their high school credentials and postsecondary education as a way to reach an untapped labor force needed for jobs of the future. The Lehigh Valley Workforce Investment Board, Inc. and Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation support a new statewide initiative dubbed *Operation Restart*, devoted to communicating to Pennsylvania policymakers – including

those here in the Lehigh Valley – about the need to reconnect high school dropouts to their education and a skilled workforce as a growth strategy for Pennsylvania.

Dropping out of high school costs money. It hampers a community's ability to thrive economically. Those who possess a high school diploma plus some postsecondary education or an associate's degree not only improve their own standard of living, but positively impact a community's economic well-being through contribution to the tax base. If the nearly 120,000 16-to-24-year-old current dropouts in Pennsylvania were to re-engage and earn their high school credential and attend some college, instead of *costing* more than \$80 million each year in publicly-funded programs, they would *contribute* more than \$1.1 billion a year in tax revenues.

We urge our leaders to do more to help young people who have dropped out of high school obtain the education and skills necessary to get a job that provides them the opportunity to support themselves and a family. Reconnecting high school dropouts to their education and the skilled workforce will turn dropouts into productive, taxpaying citizens and enhance our region's - and the state's - economy.

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Learn more about Operation Restart at www.operationrestart.org.*