

---

## Efforts under way to draw area dropouts back into workforce

By JOELLEN CHESNUT  
Era Reporter  
joellen@bradfordera.com

Almost 120,000 high school dropouts in Pennsylvania cost taxpayers \$683 more each year than they contribute. In Elk, McKean, Cameron and Potter counties, roughly 960 individuals age 16 to 24 are high school dropouts. Efforts are now under way to draw those individuals back into the workforce and into a self-supporting career.

“Pennsylvania is home to about 120,000 16 to 24-year-olds who have dropped out of high school,” said Joan Benzo, president and chief executive officer of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. “If you review the evidence on what that means, a high school dropout makes considerably less money, around 40 percent less, than a high school graduate. They are also twice as likely to be unemployed as a high school grad and more than four times more likely to live in poverty.

“That means in the long-term, high school dropouts in Pennsylvania cost the state about \$80 million in publicly-funded assistance programs on an annual basis. If those individuals were graduates that had some post-secondary education — an associates degree or having attended a technical school — they would contribute over \$1 billion in taxes.”

Operation Restart, which is a statewide initiative spearheaded by Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, focuses on making the re-engagement of high school dropouts a top priority for the state in 2010. With the re-engagement of these individuals and their successful attainment of a GED or even some post-secondary education, they could each be contributing \$9,500 annually, rather than costing the state, according to Benzo.

Benzo notes that the current workforce includes 25 percent of workers that have some post-secondary education. However, 70 percent of the jobs available require some post-secondary education or a bachelor’s degree.

“If you further couple that with Pennsylvania’s incredibly aging state, in the coming 10-20 years, many baby boomers in Pennsylvania will retire. We can’t stay economically competitive in this state unless we consider how to engage every available worker,” she said.

The initiative aims to address the issue through four main avenues — at the state and local levels as well as in educational facilities and local communities.

Strategies include creating a workgroup at the state level that works on strategies to bring programs to high school dropouts that will help them get high school and post-secondary credentials; develop and sustain youth workforce collaboratives in communities to analyze the population and improve education attainment of dropouts; initiate several incentives at the educational levels and establish local and regional centers to provide counseling and referral services to high school dropouts, as well as tax credits for employers who provide employment for former dropouts who are enrolled in further education.

“If we shed some visibility on those challenges and persuade policy makers of the changes we need to make sure we can re-engage those kids, we can get them on track to some post-secondary

education,” Benzo said.

Some local programs are already in existence to help engage high school dropouts. The Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry has contributed funding to a partnership between the North Central Workforce Investment Board in Ridgway and the Jefferson County DuBois Area Vocational Technical School, who are working on a pilot project for that purpose.

“The long and short of it is there are strategies to re-engage young people that work,” Benzo said. “Some are already in play in parts of Pennsylvania, and we are calling on gubernatorial candidates to make the commitment to re-engage young people so they can get back to work in our economy.”