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Opinion

LETTER TO THE EDITOR: United Way: Don't ignore the dropouts

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Times Guest Columnist

Since 1924, the United Way of Southeast Delaware County has provided leadership to promote the health and well-being of our community and its citizens. We are focused on the building blocks of a stronger community — lifelong learning and development, families and neighborhoods, and health.

In our 85th year of service, United Way of Southeast Delaware County is proud to provide opportunities for a brighter future for one in three neighbors in southeast Delaware County.

But unemployment and high poverty rates certainly do not contribute to brighter futures for our neighbors or the building blocks of a stronger community.

Every year, more than 30,000 high school students in Pennsylvania don't make it to graduation with their class. Right now there are more than 3,700 dropouts (aged 16-24) living in Delaware County. And almost 30 percent of adult dropouts are living below the federal poverty line (compared to 7 percent of people with some college or an associate degree).

That's unthinkable.

The fiscal implications of dropping out — both for the dropout and our communities in southeast Delaware County — 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.

But there is a way to help ensure this population no longer lives in poverty and also has the education and skills to be a vital part of our work force.

A new statewide initiative, Operation Restart, is urging policymakers to create programs and policies that reconnect high school dropouts here in Delaware County — as well as in other regions — to their education as a growth strategy for Pennsylvania.

Research conducted for the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry shows that high school graduates with some post-secondary education or an associate degree contribute roughly \$9,485 each year in tax revenue, while high school dropouts detract from a community's coffers.

That's why if Pennsylvania were to help high school dropouts re-engage and earn their high school credential and attend some college, instead of costing the commonwealth money each year in publicly funded programs, they would contribute to the state's financial well-being.

There's no doubt that dropping out of high school costs money for Delaware County and its residents. But reconnecting high school dropouts to their education and a skilled work force will turn dropouts into productive, taxpaying citizens.

If lifelong learning is one of the building blocks of a stronger community, then we cannot ignore the dropout population.

The United Way of Southeast Delaware County supports Operation Restart as a way to reconnect high school dropouts to their education and ultimately, skilled jobs that will help boost the financial well-being of our neighborhoods.

I urge our legislators in Delaware County to support dropout re-engagement efforts, too.

Doreen R. Storey, M.S., is the executive director of the United Way of Southeast Delaware County. Learn more about Operation Restart at www.operationrestart.org.

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