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Initiative hopes to re-engage high school dropouts

Report: Residents without diplomas are 'drain' on state

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LEWISTOWN - With many jobs now requiring a degree, high school dropouts often turn to government aid to keep themselves and their families fed and clothed.

But a new Pennsylvania education initiative is working to help these former students return to school and receive the education they need to find a job with a self-sustaining wage.

Operation Restart asks the state to make dropout re-engagement a public priority in 2010, according to a press release from the group. Pennsylvania should develop a system to provide educational options and support services so dropouts can learn the skills they need for a 21st century occupation, according to the release.

Not only would an education help these students live more profitable lives, but it also would benefit their communities through increased tax revenue and less dependency on government programs, according to the release.

Currently, Pennsylvania has about 120,000 high school dropouts aged 16 to 24 who each consume \$683 more annually in publicly funded programs than they contribute in taxes, the release states.

A recent report on high school dropouts shows that they are a "drain on Pennsylvania's economy," because they fail to gain the skills and knowledge necessary to earn a self-sustaining wage or compete in a 21st century marketplace, said Joan L. Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, which runs Operation Restart.

Report findings

Operation Restart estimates that 30,000 Pennsylvania teens leave high school every year without a diploma.

If young Pennsylvania dropouts were to reconnect to their education and earn a high school credential plus attend some post-secondary education, instead of costing governments some \$81 million each year in publicly-funded programs, they would contribute more than \$1.1 billion in taxes, according to the release.

The 2000 Census reported that there were more than 11,000 high school dropouts living in the Central Pennsylvania Workforce Development Corporation nine-county region, which includes Mifflin, Snyder and Centre counties, according to information from the CPWDC.

A study commissioned by the board found that if these individuals had graduated, their total earnings could have been \$16.4 million higher per year. That amount translates into about \$500,000 in personal tax revenue that has not been collected, according to the information.

Dropouts are more than twice as likely as high school graduates with a post-secondary education to be unemployed and four times more likely to live in poverty, according to the Operation Restart press release.

Nationally, drop-outs are three-and-a-half times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested, and more than eight times as likely to be incarcerated, the release states.

In-demand work force

Fact Box

DROPOUT RATES

A dropout is a student who, for any reason other than death, leaves school before graduation without transferring to another school. The following numbers represent the local students who dropped out of school during the 2007-2008 school year. The Pennsylvania average was 1.8 percent:

Mifflin County

School District

Indian Valley High School - 3.1 percent

Lewistown Area High School - 2.8 percent

Lewistown Middle School - .7 percent

Indian Valley and Strodes Mills middle schools - none reported

Juniata County

School District

East Juniata High School - .5 percent

Juniata High School - 1.6 percent

Tuscarora Junior High School - none reported

Mount Union Area

School District

Mount Union Area High School - .7 percent

Mount Union Area Junior High School - none reported

Midd-West School District

Midd-West High School - 2.5 percent

West Snyder Middle School - none reported

Information is from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

While jobs are scarce even for the educated, the CPWDC predicts that Pennsylvania - the second oldest state in the U.S. - will desperately need an educated work force when the wave of retiring baby boomers crests.

"As the economy improves, many areas in Central Pennsylvania will likely experience labor shortages as the number of entrants into the work force will be less than the number of exiters mainly due to retirement," said Katherine Lomax, senior coordinator for CPWDC.

Foreseeing this problem, CPWDC has participated in several state-level work groups and committees to lay the foundation for Operation Restart, Lomax said.

The collaboration between the public systems that serve youth is crucial but not always adequate, according to a CPWDC study. The CPWDC region lacks adequate opportunities for young adults to study for and successfully receive their GED based on the study, Lomax said.

"There are serious economic implications related to the region's ability to ensure that this population of youth are engaged, educated and possess the skills necessary to fully participate in the local economy," she said.

Part of CPWDC's hands-on work to re-engage dropouts is through PA CareerLinks like the one in Lewistown and the Tuscarora Intermediate Unit, Lomax said.

The centers frequently offer GED preparation classes and testing to the community and local inmates.

"Due to reduced public funding, these classes and testing services are often at capacity and carry waiting lists," she said. "These agencies are continually looking for ways to support serving more individuals into their classes and decreasing the number of dropouts in the local area."

The classes often teach using materials that integrate work and employment contexts and offer exposure to and information about post-secondary opportunities, Lomax said.

Educating for today's jobs

About half of the Central Pennsylvania region's high priority occupations - most in health care, education and advanced manufacturing - require some type of education beyond high school, Lomax said.

Dropouts "could be automatically disqualified from obtaining employment for almost half of the available jobs," because they do not have a high school diploma, she said.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 80 percent of the fastest growing occupations require some type of post-secondary training.

Another incentive for educating dropouts is "the more skilled laborers the region has to offer, the more likely employers will be to stay or relocate to the area," Lomax said.

"In a time of high unemployment, the issue is that youth ... are often left behind as older, more experienced and more educated workers are chosen to fill the fewer number of job openings," Lomax said. "We live in a world that requires lifelong learning to retain and advance in employment."

For more information about Operation Restart and local dropout re-engagement efforts, visit www.operationrestart.org or call the PA CareerLink Mifflin County at 248-4942.

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