

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Pittsburgh-Allegheny partnership aims to help school dropouts

By Daveen Rae Kurutz

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Thursday, January 28, 2010

La'Teja Kirk dropped out of Westinghouse High School just days into her senior year after getting into a fight. She then spent the next two years working at Wendy's.

But now, Kirk, 20, of Homewood, is working to get her diploma through Communities In Schools of Pittsburgh-Allegheny County.

"I feel like this was a positive program for me," said Kirk, who wants to pursue a psychology degree. "I knew I wanted to do something with my life and be a positive role model for my little sister. Dropping out wasn't the answer."

Pennsylvania needs more programs such as Communities In Schools to get its more than 117,000 dropouts back in class, according to a report released Wednesday by the Harrisburg-based nonprofit, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. Allegheny County has one of the lowest percentages of dropouts — ages 25 to 64 — in the state.

"No amount of dropouts is OK," said Nicole Molinaro, executive director of Communities In Schools of Pittsburgh-Allegheny County, a Springdale nonprofit that helps dropouts. "Without a high school diploma, your options are limited."

Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children's Operation Restart proposes the formation of youth work force collaboratives that would help reconnect dropouts with the means to get their diplomas. Molinaro's group helps young dropouts get a high school diploma and offers prevention programs to high-risk students.

"We need a strategy," said Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. "Let's focus on the needs of the community, get all the key players together and get dedicated funding."

The study reported that a dropout makes more than \$6,000 less annually than someone with a high school diploma or GED. Additionally, a Pennsylvania dropout uses \$683 more annually in publicly funded services than they contribute in taxes, Benso said.

Six percent of dropouts 24 and younger in the state are from Allegheny County, according to the study. Molinaro said that number could drop dramatically thanks to the Pittsburgh Promise, a scholarship program for qualifying Pittsburgh Public Schools graduates. The city also held a Graduate

Pittsburgh Summit in November to increase awareness about dropouts and seniors unprepared for college.

"We're putting attention to the dropout problem," Molinaro said. "People in Allegheny County are helping those who did drop out go back and get a diploma. It's a good start."

Daveen Rae Kurutz can be reached at dkurutz@tribweb.com or 412-380-5627.

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