

Schuylkill a leader in high school dropouts, near bottom in college graduates

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A recent report shows Schuylkill County near the top in an "ominous" category: High school dropouts.

"Thirty years ago, if you had a strong back and a good work ethic, you could make a decent living. You didn't need to go to college. Not anymore," Joan Benso, president of the youth advocacy group Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, said last week.

PPC's report shows 14.5 percent of county residents ages 25 to 64 lack a high school diploma. Only Philadelphia and Lancaster counties have higher dropout rates.

Clinton, Juniata, Mifflin, Snyder and Union counties were combined for the report and an average dropout rate in those five counties also tops Schuylkill.

Pennsylvania's dropout rate is 9.6 percent.

Schuylkill County is also tied for third-lowest number of college graduates, with only 10.1 percent having a bachelor's degree, according to the report.

The state average is 18 percent.

"I can tell you this ... we need to somehow light a fire under people. At some point, we need to make a decision: Do we want to be an entitlement community?" Mark Scarbinsky, county administrator and director of economic development, said last week. "The numbers are ominous. Its indicative of the fact that we have to ratchet up the value of education. We haven't done that."

In the end, it comes back to money, Scarbinsky said.

High school graduates with some college experience in Pennsylvania contribute, on average, \$9,485 more in taxes each year than they draw from government programs or assistance.

Dropouts, on the other hand, draw \$81 million each year in publicly-funded programs, such as welfare, according to PPC.

"They (dropouts) are a drain on taxpayers," Jacqueline Stash, program director of tech prep at Luzerne County Community College and a member of the Luzerne/Schuylkill Workforce Investment Board's youth council, said last week.

Stash said high school dropouts often don't realize the dire consequences of their decisions.

"If you are a high school dropout, you have a two-thirds greater chance of living your life in poverty," she said.

PPC recently launched its Operation Restart initiative, meant to get dropouts back into the classroom. The dropout issue, often overlooked, needs leadership at the highest levels, Benso said. Government partnerships with community colleges and other institutions could help draw dropouts back to school, but, just as important, help keep students in class until graduation day, Benso said.

"We think dealing with the dropout problem ... will assure that the next generation will be born to parents who can afford the expenses of a family," she said.

Many dropouts, Benso said, do not have problems learning. She recounted conversations with a teenage mom, who dropped out of school not because she struggled academically, but because she had no one to take care of her child.

While some frown on the idea of more taxpayer-funded child care programs, Benso pointed to the fact such programs can reap rewards for the state as a whole, if students complete school, get a job and pay taxes.

The answer locally, Scarbinsky said, may already be in place. He said community colleges, like Lehigh Carbon Community College and other institutions such as McCann School of Business & Technology can offer much-needed alternatives to expensive four-year colleges.

"They (community colleges) have the ability to react quickly to the job market," he said. "They're jewels in this community."

In fact, Benso said, most dropouts are looking for that kind of opportunity.

"Most young people regret their decision" to drop out of school, she said. "They realize that they're just not going to go any further." Highest high school

dropout rates in state:

- Philadelphia County: 16.4 percent
- Lancaster County: 16 percent
- Schuylkill County: 14.5 percent
- State: 9.6 percent

Residents with bachelor's degrees:

- Highest, Chester County: 30 percent

- Schuylkill County: 10.1 percent, tied for third-worst in state

- State: 18 percent