

## News

**County dropouts face uncertain future****HARRISBURG — High school dropouts are twice as likely to live in poverty than folks with degrees.**

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**BY JUSTIN STRAWSER  
STAFF WRITER  
justin\_s@newsitem.com**

Published: Monday, November 10, 2008 8:25 AM EST

HARRISBURG — High school dropouts are twice as likely to live in poverty than folks with degrees.

That statistic was provided by Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children (PPC). It's a staggering number, especially considering the relatively high dropout rates in some area school districts.

According to the Times-Shamrock Newspapers' annual analysis of academic performance, the dropout rate for Shamokin Area is 3.7 percent, more than twice the state average of 1.6 percent. North Schuylkill and Line Mountain were also above average, with 2 percent and 1.8 percent. Mount Carmel Area and Southern Columbia Area, though, were below average with 1.4 percent and .7 percent dropout rates, respectively.

Ten percent of high school dropouts in the state were unemployed in 2007. Last year, unemployment in Northumberland County was 5 percent. For high school dropouts, 8.6 percent were unemployed, as compared to the 3 percent of college graduates who are without work.

In 2007, 14.8 percent of Northumberland County residents who didn't graduate high school were living in poverty. Also living in poverty are the less than 7 percent of people who have an associate's degree or some college education. Two-and-a-half percent of those hold bachelor's degrees.

Benso said there's a "glaring difference" between dropouts and college graduates' yearly wages. On average, Northumberland County dropouts are making \$16,660, as compared to the \$28,741 yearly earnings of college graduates.

"It would be next to impossible to raise a family on that," said Benso. "If they had finished high school, they would be making more."

PPC is a statewide independent child advocacy program. Its goals are to ensure that all children enter school ready to learn; all children have health care; all children live in a safe, nurturing family free from abuse and neglect; all children have effective after school and youth development programs; and all children have high quality education from pre-school through post-secondary education to prepare them for life.

"We are the voice for children in Harrisburg and Washington," said Benso.



Benso said compiling accurate dropout numbers sometimes proves challenging. Pennsylvania law defines a dropout as someone 16 years or older that informs the school district that they are leaving.

Instead, PPC looked at the number of students who entered ninth grade in the 2003-04 school year versus how many of them graduated four years later in 2008. Statewide, 20.7 percent of students did not graduate. In Northumberland County, the number is less. Here, 10 to 15 percent of students did not graduate. However, Benso explained, the number doesn't account for students transferring.

"There has yet to be a system that effectively accounts for every student," said Benso.

Because of that, Benso said many officials aren't confident the numbers are correct.

"The number isn't as important as the reality of kids not finishing," said Benso. "If 10 percent aren't finishing, is that any less of a problem? It's not acceptable for any kid to drop out if they're twice as likely to live in poverty."

According to Benso, research says half of potential dropouts can be identified in the sixth grade by studying their math and reading performance, attendance record and behavior.

"It's highly unlikely that I could do high school level work if I can't do sixth grade level. By the time I'd hit ninth grade, I'd begin to disengage," said Benso.

The single biggest reason students opt to drop out, she said, is because they have been performing poorly academically not just in high school, but since middle and elementary school.

At one time in the central Pennsylvanian area, Benso said a person could still make a good living working in the coal and lumber industries without having to graduate high school. Unfortunately, though, "those jobs don't exist anymore," Benso pointed out.

The problem doesn't just affect dropouts. Society suffers as well.

"They need more financial support of the government to meet their needs," Benso said of dropouts. "They don't only cost us more; they contribute less."

Dropouts pay less taxes and spend less money, directly affecting the economy.

Benso and PPC work hard to provide support to those who have dropped out by reengaging students in a different way — including providing information about alternatives to four-year universities— like community colleges and technical schools.

"We can't lose a single kid," said Benso.

No. Unemployed

- 10 percent of state
- 5 percent of Northumberland County
- 8.6 percent of Northumberland County dropouts
- 3 percent of Northumberland County college dropouts

#### Living in Poverty

- 14.8 percent of Northumberland County dropouts
- Less than 7 percent with associate's degrees or some college education
- 2.5 percent with a bachelor's degree

#### Yearly Wages

- High school dropouts making \$16,600
- College graduates

making \$28,741

#### Dropout Rate

- State Average: 1.6 percent
- Shamokin Area: 3.7 percent
- North Schuylkill: 2 percent
- Line Mountain: 1.8 percent
- Mount Carmel Area: 1.4 percent
- Southern Columbia Area: .7 percent

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