

# Valley News Dispatch

## Economic turmoil increases interest in job training

By Debra Duncan

VALLEY NEWS DISPATCH

Sunday, November 30, 2008

The first people laid off in tough economic times often are those with limited skills -- such as high school dropouts or those working entry-level jobs.

But this is the best time for unemployed, low-skilled workers to get their diploma or brush up on job skills, take college courses or get vo-tech training, according to officials.

Mary Jendrey, director of the Alle-Kiski Learning Center in Arnold, encouraged those who are unemployed to enroll in classes.

"It's a great time for dropouts and others to go back to school," she said.

Then, when the economy recovers, these workers will be prepared for better jobs -- and higher pay.

Most laid-off workers can collect unemployment benefits for six months and President Bush this month signed a bill extending benefits by seven weeks.

The unemployment rate in the Alle-Kiski Valley's four counties was about 5 percent recently. But it's been creeping up, as it has in the rest of the country.

A recent state report showed that high school dropouts are twice as likely as graduates to be unemployed.

In Armstrong County, the unemployed rate among dropouts was nearly 40 percent in 2007 -- among the highest in the state -- according to a report by the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children. The statewide average was 10 percent in 2007.

Chuck Pepper, Armstrong School District coordinator of child accounting, said that although most of the dropouts he contacts report they are unemployed, he thought the state study's 40 percent figure seemed high.

Still, he attributed a high rate in Armstrong to the lack of jobs in the area.

The wage disparity for dropouts is startling.

In the Valley's four counties, the average wage for a high school dropout is about half the average county wage.

Actually, Jendrey says a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma is not enough any more.

"The emphasis now is on continuing education after high school -- technical school or college," she said. "The state has several new programs of intensive

service grants to help young people get more than a high school diploma.

"They come in here for 20 hours a week and we give them homework, help with test-taking or help them research papers," Jendrey said. "Then we work with them on transitioning to higher education, whether that's college or a training program."

And their classes are drawing older people -- in their late 20s and 30s -- because they want better jobs, jobs that pay more than fast food or entry level wages.

Despite the stereotype, dropouts often quit school not because of failing grades but because of family or personal reasons.

Pepper said he hears a variety of answers when making his calls to Armstrong School District dropouts -- some are young mothers, others don't want to return to school and some have jobs.

"I see more young people coming in now," Jendrey said. "Some kids say they dropped out because their parent lost a job and they need to work more to help the family.

"Many dropouts come into the center and their test levels are high," she continued. "One guy simply dropped out of school because he was bored and thought he would like work better. He went into construction, but he didn't like it. So he came here, got his GED and now is in a technical school."

Some people work and go to school at the same time.

"We're seeing more people wanting evening classes because they have part-time jobs during the day," Jendrey said.

Pepper encourages all of the school's dropouts to take the GED test and about 100 people do so each year.

GED classes are free, but the GED test costs \$50. It is given monthly in New Kensington.

Jendrey says about 350 to 400 area residents use the Alle-Kiski Learning Center's programs each year.

Of course, keeping students in school, and preventing them from dropping out in the first place is important, too.

One program Armstrong School District uses to help at-risk students stay in school is Your Educational Success, a collaboration with the Adelphoi Village youth program. Students in the program work independently on subjects to earn credits toward graduation, Pepper said.

"They're not locked into a time frame," he said.

Students who qualify for YES must be at least a grade behind and show a commitment to the program, he said. During the 2007-08 school year, 25

students participated in the program. Twenty-one of those students either graduated, returned to the program or returned to school. Four quit or were terminated.

"It's one of the better programs we have. I really like it," Pepper said.

Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, said educators must find alternative options to connect dropouts with education opportunities and work.

"It is imperative that we provide the necessary supports to not only keep kids in school and prevent them from dropping out in the first place, but to find a way to re-engage them in their education once they have dropped out," she said.

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## **A SUCCESS STORY**

Pam Smith, 38, of Brackenridge is one of the success stories at the Alle-Kiski Learning Center in Arnold.

Smith moved to the Alle-Kiski Valley about a year ago from South Carolina. She had a high school diploma and had some work experience but she had been out of the work force for four years while she stayed at home with her young children.

She wanted to get back into the work force, but knew her skills were rusty. She had job experience with computer programs such as Word Perfect and Excel, but she knew computer software programs change rapidly.

Free career-training classes at the learning center during six months helped her update her computer business skills, helped with a resume and in applying for jobs.

After completing the career classes in February, she landed an office job first as a temporary and now as an administrative assistant with Fire Pro Services in East Deer.

She would recommend the classes highly.

"I'm happy," she said, "I knew I wanted to work in an office, and they really helped me. And they helped me find a better-paying job."

*Renatta Signorini of the Kittanning Leader-Times contributed to this article.*

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