

Posted on Fri, Aug. 05, 2005

County has low number of 'idle' youths

Only 2.3 percent neither work nor go to school

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STATE COLLEGE -- First, the bad news.

In Pennsylvania, one in 11 youths ages 16 to 21 is neither working nor going to school, according to a study released Wednesday by the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

Summer employment for youth stands at 47 percent, the lowest percentage since such data collection began in 1948.

But in Centre County, the news is much more promising. Only 2.3 percent of youth in that age bracket, or 620 people, are defined as idle -- neither working nor in school.

That's the lowest percentage in all of the regions surveyed.

Information for the survey came from the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau statistics and current populations surveys from 1996 to 2004.

The report is the second in a series of three reports on Youth in Transition to Adulthood released by the organization, a Harrisburg-based advocacy group that focuses on giving families and children the tools to succeed and investigates how failure occurs.

"Work experience is an important passageway to becoming an adult," said Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

"There is a higher correlation between people working when they're young and having higher earnings later in life."

Benso said Centre County's figures are an anomaly, probably skewed due to the high percentage of young adults who attend Penn State.

Dr. John Sheridan, director of learning enrichment/gifted support program and student services in the State College Area School District, said the low totals for the county are due to a number of factors.

"Families in our area have strong and high expectations for their children, and that has a powerful impact on them while in school and after," Sheridan said. "Schools are pressed by family expectations to do all they can with the students, and they do."

"Much of this pattern is the result of the major local industry (Penn State) which exists to promote 'becoming.'

The expectation by so many in our area is that hard work will result in change. People buy it and do it."

However, Benso said, there are still young people in Centre County and across the state who have been left out of the job and educational market.

They are finding it increasingly difficult to find jobs, especially in the low-skilled, minimum-wage sector, as older workers looking to support retirement and young adults who have graduated college but have yet to find a job in their field slip into those slots, she said.

Those idle teens are not necessarily that way due to any fault of their own, Benso said. They may not have had the opportunity to work because of the increased competition, they may not have acquired the skills necessary for even low-skilled jobs, or there may be outside struggles, such as being a foster child or growing up in an economically depressed area that prevented that teen to acquire basic job skills.

Benso said she hopes this report, along with the others, paints a picture for legislators of what it is like to be a teen in Pennsylvania.

From this survey, Benso hopes to acquire additional support and funding for career- and technology-training programs that pair schools with businesses, technical companies and places of higher learning so students feel they have options.

There is also hope that employers will communicate their needs for new hires so schools can shape programs and that the state invest in second-chance systems that allow older teens to obtain degrees at community colleges.

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