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# Military service out of reach for many in Erie, U.S.

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Military service is out of reach for a large majority of young adults in Erie and nationwide due to low graduation rates, obesity and high juvenile crime, according to a new report to be released Monday.

Local leaders and child-care officials will discuss the issue on Monday at 9 a.m. during a classroom visit at Early Connections Learning Center, 420 W. Sixth St.

The center works in collaboration with the United Way of Erie County and operates Success by Six, a countywide program aimed at getting children ready to enter school.

Monday's report comes from Mission: Readiness, a national nonprofit composed of 300 retired generals and admirals, including Erie County Judge Michael E. Dunlavey.

Dunlavey, a retired two-star general in the U.S. Army and a veteran of the Vietnam War, joined the nonprofit in 2010.

He will be reading to preschool students in their Early Connections classroom during Monday's event.

"Without an education in our society, you can't function," Dunlavey said. "To be an infantryman today, where the rubber meets the road, you need to be computer literate, you need to know how to problem solve, you need to be in incredibly good physical condition."

The Mission: Readiness report, citing government data and information from other state and national sources, says 75 percent of young adults across the country are ineligible for military service.

One in five young people in Pennsylvania do not graduate high school on time, according to 2011 data from the U.S. Department of Education. Nearly one in four who do graduate and try to join the military can't because they score too low on the military's entrance exam.

According to Erie Vital Signs, the civic project tracking trends in the region's critical areas, 41 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds in Erie County have no more than a high school diploma, and only 10 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher.

More than 40 percent of young adults in Pennsylvania are overweight or obese, up from 33 percent a decade ago, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

One in every 28 Pennsylvania adults is in prison, on probation or on parole, and more have a criminal record that would keep them from serving in the military, according to data released this year by the Pew Research Center.

"I know the difficulties kids have, and a lot of the adults I see in my courtroom now were denied as kids the opportunity to

be a child," Dunlavey said. "Whatever we can do to increase the academic performance of our children will reduce crime and prepare people for the military."

Steve Doster, director of the state's Mission: Readiness bureau, based in Harrisburg, said Pennsylvania lawmakers "must expand the reach of early education programs to ensure that more of the state's children are prepared to succeed."

Quality early learning programs are crucial to higher achievement among at-risk children and should be preserved in the Pennsylvania state budget, Doster added.

The state House and Senate have until June 30 to approve the 2012-13 budget.

"The Erie community has made great strides in expanding the reach of early education through the newly established public-private partnership of Erie's Future Fund and state funding for programs like pre-K and Head Start," Doster said. "However, proposed state budget cuts to early education are threatening this partnership. It is our hope that the Pennsylvania House and Senate will restore funding for early education in the final budget."

In February, the United Way of Erie County and the Erie Community Foundation launched Erie's Future Fund, a project aimed to provide scholarships for nearly 300 low-income children to attend quality prekindergarten programs in the 2012-13 school year.

Coordinators of the fund are seeking to raise \$600,000 annually through donations from local businesses and residents.

Scholarships from Erie's Future Fund, valued at \$2,100 each, will be given in neighborhoods with the highest percentage of families with children under age 5 living in poverty.

More than 43 percent of the city of Erie's children live below the federal poverty line.

"Our visit to Erie is important because quality early childhood education is one of the most researched and proven methods of boosting graduation rates and improving the life trajectory of at-risk youth," Doster said. "Early education programs establish a student's foundation for learning, which leads to higher academic achievement and social skills that businesses need in their employees and the military requires of its soldiers."

Local military and business leaders warn of a skills gap and future workforce shortfall among young adults in Erie.

"We need to make people more aware of the education skills and the soft skills needed to succeed in our workforce and the military," said Betsy Bort, vice president of commercial lending at Erie Bank.

Bort will attend Monday's event in her role as a member of Pennsylvania's Early Learning Investment Commission. She was appointed to the commission by former Gov. Ed Rendell in 2010.

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