

Retired military leaders say local youth 'unfit' for service

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By Olivia Garber
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Rebecca Droke/Post-Gazette

Retired Maj. Gen. John Stevens speaks during a news conference at Soldiers & Sailors Memorial Hall in Oakland on Friday.

A combination of poor graduation rates, poor health and criminal records bars almost 90 percent of Pittsburgh's young adults from joining the military, according to a report by retired military leaders.

Retired Maj. Gen. John Stevens bluntly labeled the youth "unfit, uneducated, unscrupulous" during a news conference Friday.

Gen. Stevens is a member of Mission: Readiness, a nonprofit organization that calls for investments in early childhood education programs.

The organization, comprised of about 200 retired military leaders, recently released the report "Unable to Serve: Why Military Service is Out of Reach for Most Young People in Pittsburgh."

The report found that Pittsburgh students are 77 percent more likely than others in the nation to fail to graduate from high school in four years, and the violent crime rate for Pittsburgh adults is more than twice as high as the national average.

For the Pennsylvania students who do graduate high school and attempt to join the military, 20 percent fail the entrance exam. The number is worse for minorities, with 40 percent of African-Americans and Hispanic youth failing.

Although Pittsburgh is comparatively worse, the nation isn't doing much better. A 2009 Pentagon study found that 75 percent of Americans age 17 to 24 aren't qualified to serve in the military, a grim estimate that concerns those in Mission: Readiness.

"We have a national security problem," Gen. Stevens said.

But despite the condemning report, the four retired military leaders at the conference claim a solution is at hand: early childhood education programs.

"Early childhood education is a proven investment strategy," said Joan Benso, president and CEO of Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children.

She said that for every dollar spent on early childhood education, the public saves \$16. The largest reduction is in juvenile crime.

Retired Lt. Gen. Dennis Benchoff said putting money into early childhood education instead of disciplinary programs at the high school level is money well-spent, especially if there are limited resources.

Mission: Readiness commended Gov. Tom Corbett's budget proposal for preserving most of the funding to state childhood education programs. The National Institute for Early Education Research ranks Pennsylvania eighth in terms of state spending per child.

Mr. Corbett's budget proposal will reduce two of Pennsylvania's pre-kindergarten programs, Head Start and Pre-K Counts, by 1.9 percent each, for a total of \$38.6 million.

But he also proposed to eliminate funding for the Education Accountability Block Grant, which Pittsburgh Public Schools relies on for pre-kindergarten programs.

"If the grant is gone, it will impact the amount of students we can service," said Craig Kwiecinski, spokesman for the school district.

Steve Doster, the Pennsylvania director of Mission: Readiness, said that about 500 Pittsburgh children would not be able to attend pre-kindergarten if the grant is eliminated. He said the group hopes funding will be restored in the final budget.

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