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Michigan Association
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Adult Education

Families Speak: Legislators Pledge Support

February 15, 2017 - Their ages ranged from 20-something to 60-something, and they came from all parts of Michigan and some originally from places around the world, such as France and Mexico. But what drew them to the state Capitol on Feb. 15 was the desire to tell their stories of overcoming fears and life's obstacles to reach a common goal: education.

Twenty people told a panel of lawmakers, staff, advocates and other decision makers at a FamilySpeak event how their lives were changed by English as a Second Language, literary support, and community and adult education — programs supported through federal, state and local funding and championed by event sponsors Michigan's Children and the Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education.

Each speaker urged lawmakers to continue to invest — and to invest more — to help others improve their life potential.

They did so by sharing words of wisdom.

"Everybody needs a future to look forward to," said Angela Wilson, 61, a student at the Siena Literacy Center in Detroit.

"Never let your past define your future," said Patricia Bates, also a student at Siena Literacy.

Others spoke of opportunities: For themselves and their children.

"I wanted to go back to school not only to better myself and eventually be able to ... get a better job later on in life, but because I have two kids who I wanted to make proud of me for never giving up," said Robert Schultz, 32, from the Career Preparation High School in Novi.

"Education is very important to my family, especially my children," said Yasmeen Alderhally, who attends the Okemos Adult Education A+ English Language School. His daughter Salma attends the International Preschool at the school. When she began school at age 2 1/2, she could speak only a few words in Arabic. "Now she is able to spell her name, she knows many letters and colors ... and can count to 15."

"Learning English will help us and our children see success," said Wei Lu (aka David), originally from China but now an ESL student in the West Bloomfield School District. "ESL classes help us prepare to pass the citizenship test so that we can be ... a positive contribution to the community."

"I have the opportunity to follow my dream of getting my GED, going to college and becoming an early childhood education teacher. ... I want to make a difference in my community. I want to get books into the hands of young children and teach their families that reading is important," said Miriam Vilchis, originally from Mexico and now attending Battle Creek Public Schools Adult Education.

And, of course, there were examples of determination.

"I am the only person in my family that doesn't have a high school diploma, and I won't stop until I reach my goal," said Jacklyn Perkins, 58, a student at Detroit Public Schools Community District, Adult Education West Campus.

While she admits that she has had times when she felt like giving up, she praises her teachers for pushing her forward. "(Ms. Walters) drove me like a bus and often made me cry, but she never gave up on me. I am grateful to have this opportunity to further my education and create a better future for myself."

Giving people chances to have a better future is what drives people like Bob Steeh, MACAE president. "People ask me why we should give students a second chance when they've already been given a chance. I am going to give any student not only a second chance, but a third, and a fourth and a fifth chance to get an education. All of our students deserve multiple chances," Steeh said to a round of applause.

But he told of a need for more resources.

"I've seen years when MACAE had 300-plus programs in the state of Michigan. Today, we're under 100. What's that mean? Our students need access to programs. The only way you get access to programs is through resources. If we want a skilled labor force, we need to make sure that we have adults who are literate, who are able to work in that skilled labor force."

State Sen. Morris Hood III, D-Detroit, picked up on the theme of resources and parents helping their children learn. "When we talk about adult education, we talk about people reinventing themselves. If we don't have adult education programs, where adults can learn themselves and help their kids learn, we lose the basis of society. We have to provide those services."

State Rep. Donna Lasinski, D-Scio Township, also spoke of a parent's influence. She told of how when her father had been laid off he took the opportunity to improve his education. "We had the benefit of programs and assistance that helped us through those times."

She told how her father's example made an impression on her.

"And what I heard from so many here, it does matter to your children ... the example you are setting. The children see how hard it is, and they see how you are willing to do that."

Michigan's Children is the only statewide independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children from cradle to career and their families. Our emphasis is on influencing public policies that close equity gaps and ensure that the children and youth who face the most challenges have the supports they need to succeed in school and life. By working to reform public policy, we improve the odds for all children, and support the work of those who provide services that help individual children overcome the odds. For more information about Michigan's Children, email Matt Gillard, matt@michiganschildren.org or visit michiganschildren.org.

The Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education (MACAE) works to provide a cohesive framework for community education through collaboration and guidance at the local, state and federal level. MACAE's vision is to engage in partnerships, provide member support and advocate for lifelong learning, leading to employment and self-sufficient families. For more information about MACAE, email macaeoffice@gmail.com, visit macae.org, or call 517-492-1367.