

Family Takes Opportunity to Succeed

If Diana Bates, 55, wants to check up on her daughter during school hours, she just has to look around the classroom at Asher Alternative High School in Southgate. It's there that Diana and her 24-year-old daughter, Samantha Neubacher, are taking classes to earn their high school diplomas.

"I love having classes with my daughter," said Diana. "Yeah, we work together and we help each other," said Samantha.

It wasn't supposed to be this way, but life took an unexpected turn for both of them. Fortunately, when it comes to catching up on education, they had options.

Putting a face to those options was a key goal of the FamilySpeak held at the state Capitol on Feb. 15. Michigan's Children, a state policy advocacy organization, working with the Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education, hosted the event highlighting stories of families' experiences with a variety of programs, including English as a Second Language, literacy support, and community and adult education. The event gave policymakers a chance to hear directly from their constituents about how programs are working and what crucial services can really help families succeed, illustrating the long-term payoff in investing in family literacy and other basic skills.

Diana and Samantha illustrate the payoff. They now walk the same halls at Asher because health problems interrupted both their life plans. Diana was forced to leave high school at age 17 because of Crohn's disease. By the time she got well enough to attend school, she was 19 and decided to just enter the workforce.

"It was the '80s and you didn't need a diploma to get a good job."

Diana continued on that path until 2012, when she got sick again from the disease and had surgery. Recuperation and "other life events" took her to 2016, and she started looking at her bucket list. Getting her high school diploma was right at the top. "I felt I wasn't complete without my diploma," she said. "I feel like I'm a young person still. I want to get back out into the working world." The GED wasn't for her, though, she said. "Too much curriculum in too short of time."

In 2016 Diana enrolled in Asher and expects to graduate this June. She's looking to pursue something in law enforcement or the court system, she said.

Samantha's own health problem became apparent in high school. She suddenly started not understanding what was being taught and became disconnected, Diana said. Then came migraines that kept her from school. At age 20, she had a grand mal seizure, and doctors diagnosed her with Moyamoya disease, which constricts certain arteries to the brain, cutting off blood flow. She had surgery in August 2016, and 19 days later she enrolled in the same program as her mother.

They both are doing well now, earning A's and B's, Diana said. And both are grateful.

"I feel that it's a great opportunity, and I'm just so thankful that they have adult education so I can finish my schooling," Samantha said.

However, they both are concerned about future funding for the program. There have been recent teacher layoffs at Asher, Diana said, which resulted in both now taking some classes via computer.

“We feel it’s important for everyone to know the importance of funding this kind of program.” Diana said.

The Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education 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.

Michigan’s Children is the only statewide independent voice working to ensure that policymakers prioritize the needs of the most challenged children from cradle to career and their families – children of color, children from low-income families, and children shouldering other challenging circumstances.

FamilySpeak, modeled after Michigan’s Children’s signature KidSpeak® forums, mimics a traditional legislative committee hearing. These forums have been facilitated since 1996. Connecting the experiences of families directly with policymakers has provided firsthand knowledge of the challenges and opportunities and has proven to be an effective advocacy strategy. Their voices have changed the trajectory of policy conversation and have resulted in additional champions for parent-driven solutions in the Legislature, several Departments and other local policymaking bodies.

For more information about this FamilySpeak or other opportunities to hear directly from young people or their families, please contact Michele Corey, Vice President for Programs, michele@michiganschildren.org.