

FamilySpeak: Building Family Literacy Through Adult Education

Wednesday, February 15, 2017

Speaker's Library, State Capitol

Michigan's Children and the Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education were joined by over a dozen state and federal decision makers at our 2nd FamilySpeak focused on family literacy.

Sixteen students, almost all of them parents, spoke to the listeners about the life and school challenges that delayed their educational trajectory, and the motivators that brought them to the alternative and adult education system to continue that work toward a high school credential and beyond. They spoke eloquently, and often emotionally, about their interest in helping their own children succeed as a major driver to improve their own literacy and other basic skills, and about how their experience in adult education has helped them help their family. These skills not only allowed parents to be able to read to their children and help with their homework, but also better connect with teachers and health care providers.

There were a variety of reasons for not being able to finish high school the first time around, including a lack of English language skills, family economic circumstances, early parenting, physical and mental health concerns, bullying and a consistent lack of support from educators to continue. Students began adult education programming with very limited skills, one speaker with only a 2nd grade reading level. Many students spoke about learning more in the short time they had been in an adult education program than many years in traditional high school. When they turned to solutions, there were many more common themes, including:

- The importance of individualized learning opportunities and a variety of paths for students to succeed. This was tied to the point that people needed more than one chance at their high school diploma and programs providing those 2nd chances were getting fewer and farther between. It was also clear that the welcoming and supportive attitudes of staff at the programs serving them were key.
- The importance of English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, not only to help with employment skills, but with citizenship skills and to be able to communicate with their children's teachers and health care providers.
- The importance of GED as a path for some, significant workforce connectors for others, and really needing to see a variety of programs to fit the variety of needs of this population of students.
- The need to support diploma and GED for adults as valid paths to post-secondary education. Many speakers talked about using their success in adult education as a stepping stone to not only a job but also to further degrees supporting a career.

Legislators and other policy makers listened carefully to the testimony, several shared their own experiences. All offered thanks and encouragement to the speakers, as well as a commitment to work on these issues through the next legislative session.

This conversation was timely, since the Governor and key members of the House of Representatives and the Senate remain committed to improve 3rd grade reading in Michigan, with continued investments included again in the recently released Governor's budget recommendation. However, in that same recommendation, there was no recognition of the need to further invest in adult education and basic skill development. The lack of attention to assisting parents to engage in their children's learning will hamper the state's ability to improve literacy outcomes for all children all over the state. Research has consistently supported the testimony given at this FamilySpeak – the impact of parental education on children's success in school and in life.

This FamilySpeak has been made possible by the voices of the families supported through:

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.

Family Speakers:

Miriam Vilchis, Battle Creek Public Schools

Jacklyn Perkins, Detroit Public Schools

Odell Baldwin, Dominican Literacy Center, Detroit

Ruth Buruti, Kent ISD/Wyoming Public

Taylor O'Connor, Lapeer Adult Education

Deonte Long, Mt. Pleasant Adult Education

Robert Schultz, Novi Adult Education

Debra Malette, Novi Adult Education

Yasmeen Alderhally, OKEMOS Literacy

Colleen Debres, Plainwell Adult Education

Courtney Pomeroy, Plainwell Adult Education

Patricia Bates, Sienna Literacy Center, Detroit

Angela Wilson, Sienna Literacy Center, Detroit

Alix Destremau, Troy Adult Education

Rafeal Villela, Troy Adult Education

Marisol Worunek, Washtenaw Transitions/Adult Education

Families were joined by the following listeners:

Elected Officials and Staff:

Staff, U.S. Senator Gary Peters

Staff, U.S. Representative Mike Bishop

State Senator Morrice Hood, III

State Senator Tonya Schuitmaker

State Representative Diane Farrington and Staff

State Representative Tim Greimel

State Representative Jon Hoadley

State Representative Donna Lasinski

State Representative Mary Whiteford and Staff

State Department Representatives:

Michigan Department of Education

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services

Other Advocacy Partners:

Capitol Services, Inc.

Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health

Michigan Protection and Advocacy Services, Inc.

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. We have been creating opportunities for young people, parents and other community members to share their stories, concerns and suggestions directly with policymakers since 1996, and continue to find new ways to provide young people, families and the supporting professionals around them the tools that they need to advocate on their own behalf.

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, at 517-977-0322 or michele@michiganschildren.org.