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Michigan News

Candidates want more focus on early childhood education

Laura Weber (2010-10-29)

LANSING, MI (MPRN) - Education is poised for some big changes and, as Michigan Public Radio's Laura Weber reports, teachers and parents are wondering if Michigan will be ready for them.

"If you guys turn to page 194, we're going to jump in."

Matthew Landrum is teaching his students at Veritas Christi High School about Greek mythology. They're preparing to read Homer's Iliad.

"Jake, do you want to read that?"

"Sure, it starts with Rage?"

"Yeah."

"Rage, goddess, sing the rage of Peleus "

Veritas Christi is a new private school in Ann Arbor, and this classroom is small. There are only three kids sitting around the oval table.

"My name is Richard Nye, I'm head of school at Veritas Christi High School." "We actually said that we would set our class sizes at 12. Twelve is even too many. Maybe 5 or 8. Because to get that individualized attention it has to be a small class." Individualized attention is important at Veritas Christi because the school focuses on college prep for kids with Asperger Syndrome - a form of autism.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, about one percent of kids are diagnosed with some type of autism. That's a dramatic, somewhat unexplained increase from recent years.

Nye says public schools have to prepare for an influx of kids with all types of autism.

"It's a discussion that's way overdue. Way overdue."

Many autism experts say the best way to treat the disorder means reaching kids as young as two or three years old. They say early childhood education that is necessary for the kids to become communicative, independent adults.

Jack Kresnak is with the advocacy group Michigan's Children. He says it's become clear that early childhood education for all kids...

"Would go a long way to solving the drop-out problem, would go a long way solving a crime problem with our young people, and it gets them prepared for school, which will get them through school, and gets them ready for a career when they graduate from school. We need to start thinking of a cradle-to-career concept."



But Kresnak says Michigan has been moving in the other directions. He says budget cuts in recent years have closed preschools and hurt early childhood programs. He says nearly a third of kids in Michigan arrive to kindergarten underprepared.

"We're kind of nickel-and diming the system designed to help our youngest and most vulnerable children."

And Kresnak says whoever the next governor is needs to have a better plan for schools.

Democratic nominee for governor Virg Bernero and Republican candidate Rick Snyder both say early childhood programs are important.

That pleases Doug Pratt with the Michigan Education Association, the state's largest teachers union.

"You know, the one good thing is they're both talking about education as a key to economic development, but Virg has a real plan to do that."

Pratt says Bernero realizes that funding for schools has been cut too much, which has forced teacher layoffs and larger class sizes. Bernero is a union-friendly candidate who is married to an elementary school principal. But Bernero offers few details on how he would fix schools, except to say that school reforms have been too piecemeal.

Rick Snyder is also vague. He says his administration would evaluate education programs to determine which offer the best value to taxpayers.

Snyder's running mate, state Representative Brian Calley says there are more opportunities for schools to cut costs.

"I think we'll have the resources and the current pot of money to fund the higher priorities, such as early childhood education."

Calley's 4-year-old daughter was diagnosed with autism earlier this year. He says the experience has convinced him it's important to start working with children when they're very young.

But that requires money and planning. And neither campaign has provided details on how they would do that.