



Michigan Association  
of Community and  
Adult Education



Public policy  
in the best interest  
of children

## Parents Detail Benefits of Adult Ed in Their Lives, Their Children's Learning

**LANSING, Michigan** -- A ninth grade drop-out, Chris Feltman of Mt. Pleasant recalled a potential employer telling her, "I know you're smart, but you don't have a piece of paper saying you're smart," referring to a high school diploma.

Divorced and trying to provide for a young daughter, Feldman said she saw a lot of disappointment until eventually finding an adult education program that gave her the skills to successfully pass a GED test just after her 38<sup>th</sup> birthday. She's now attending college to become a nurse, and says she sees a brighter future awaiting her and her daughter.

Feltman's story was one of a dozen that touched the minds and hearts of state Legislators, their staffers, policymakers and advocates at an Oct. 28, 2015 FamilySpeak sponsored by Michigan's Children and the Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education (MACAE).

They came from across Michigan and represented a variety of programs – English as a Second Language, literacy support, Community and Adult Education. Their testimony focused on the importance of being able to better support their children's education while also urging lawmakers to invest more in programs that help adults earn a diploma and improve their career potential.

With 3<sup>rd</sup> grade literacy a new focus in education reform in Michigan, a common theme was the need for parents to improve their skills so that they could boost their children's education. This two-generation approach is also critical in order for Michigan to achieve the status of a top 10 education state, the goal of the state Board of Education, advocates say.

### ***Parents helping children learn***

Yojana De La Cruz Valdez, a native Spanish speaker from Mexico, immigrated a decade ago and is now an American citizen raising two sons, 6 and 9, in Mount Pleasant. Her husband primarily works outside the country. She decided to go back to school for a high school diploma (credits from her Mexican education didn't transfer over) and

improve her use of English. “My children are being educated in English and I found I could not help them,” she told the gathering.

“I want to inspire my children to love to learn at a young age. I believe 100 percent if you do receive a good education, we can make a difference,” she added.

Justine Geiger of Livingston County has traveled 52 miles a day to attend a high school diploma program for adults in Novi because one doesn’t exist in her area. She told the audience she left high school as a teen when the alternative high school she was attending closed due to budget cuts. Now a stay-at-home mom with a baby and a 5-year-old daughter, Geiger says she realized it was time to return to school to help guide her children’s educational journeys. “I needed to better myself for me, my children and my family,” Geiger said.



“I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. It’s given me a second chance,” Geiger added. “Alternative and adult education programs are so important for our future. People learn in different ways and we need these programs. I believe in alternative and adult education and I will fight for it.”

### ***Policymakers need to hear powerful stories***

Matt Gillard, President & CEO of Michigan’s Children, said the testimony is critical for policymakers and lawmakers to hear. Adult education has only recently received a minimal revenue boost in the state budget after two decades of declining support. Several attendees referenced those cuts and bemoaned the loss of programs because of disinvestment in their areas of the state.

“Your stories are very powerful,” Gillard told the gathering. “Lawmakers are most impacted when they hear directly from the people who are living those stories. We’re here to remind them to tie what they’re heard today to the decisions they will make.”

MACAE President Bob Steeh agreed. “Our agenda is you. When money dwindles access to programs dwindles. Our job is to advocate to open up access to more programs. That’s who they want to hear from – the students.”

“We’ve known the importance of educating our adult population in order to strengthen our children’s education,” Steeh added. “This event is a great start to bring that issue to the forefront of our legislature.”

Board Member Pamela Pugh of the State Board of Education attended as a member of the FamilySpeak listening panel.

“We really need to hear from you as parents trying to better the lives of your families. We understand this has to take the whole family into account. We’ve got to wrap our arms around the whole family in order to move the state forward,” Pugh said.

State Rep. Thomas Hooker, who chairs the House Families, Children and Seniors Committee, said he planned to make the issue a priority in his work. Because of the FamilySpeak on adult education and a previous one on foster care he attended, he said he is better able to inform committee members about the issues. In turn, these lawmakers become more “interested and passionate” about topics like these, he said.

“When people are willing to share their stories with us, we hear them and hopefully can do something about it,” Hooker said. “If we can change their (parents’) lives, we can change children’s lives. That’s the key.”

***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. For more information about MACAE, email [macaeoffice@gmail.com](mailto:macaeoffice@gmail.com), visit [macae.org](http://macae.org), or call 517-492-1367

***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, with a specific focus on the needs of children, youth and families with the most challenges in their lives – children of color, children from low-income families, and children served by the foster and juvenile justice systems. For more information about Michigan’s Children, email [michele@michiganschildren.org](mailto:michele@michiganschildren.org), or visit [michiganschildren.org](http://michiganschildren.org)

***FamilySpeak***, modeled after Michigan’s Children’s signature KidSpeak® forums, mimics a traditional legislative committee hearing. 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.