

Parenting Awareness Month

Spotlight on Parenting and Family Literacy



THE ISSUE: We can all agree that a child's first classroom is the home, and their first and best teachers are their own parents. And research shows that a parent's literacy and educational attainment directly impacts a child's academic success. But what happens when a parent's literacy skills are poor -- as with the more than 42,000 Michiganders in prime child-rearing years (18-34) who have less than a ninth grade education and no high school diploma or GED?

That is why Michigan's Children and many child and family advocates strongly endorse a two-generation approach that creates opportunities for adult learners to improve their basic reading and math skills. Community-based

adult education, family literacy and ESL programs are all important services that help parents improve their literacy leading to better school outcomes for their kids. Focusing state resources in these areas would give Michigan a better chance to improve 3rd grade reading skills and reach its goal for becoming a [top 10 education state](#). Serious investments in adult education are required in Michigan, where, unfortunately, state funding has been gravely rolled back over the past 20 years.

A Parent's Story: Heather Lipsey, 39, a mother of five who can't find a job, is working to complete her high school credentials. Enrolled in classes through Mount Pleasant Community Education, she represents the vast majority of parent-students who say they're back to [set a good example](#) for their own children, said program director Mary Murphy.

"We hear that a lot from adults who haven't come from a background of academic success," Murphy said. "By setting that example, they're opening the door for their kids and grandkids. And that's really their motivation, even more than employment."

As a young child, Lipsey had an undiagnosed learning disability, and never received the additional school support she needed when her mother refused to agree to testing. By high school, class work was such a struggle that she finally quit. "My mind just didn't connect with what was being taught," she said. Over the years, the Mount Pleasant woman had her children, and worked in child care and housekeeping until the jobs dried up.

Today, Lipsey is taking three classes and hoping to complete her credit requirements in two, or maybe three years. Balancing life with five children and a husband who's in prison has been thorny, yet she's carried on, mustering all her determination to push ahead. She hopes her example will prompt her two oldest children, who also quit high school before graduation, to return to school, as well.

“All through life I’ve told them, you have to finish school so you can get a good job and not struggle in life like we did,” Lipsey said.

Adults who return to school for a high school diploma often left school as teens because of complicated life events, Murphy said. Many teens that drop out have gotten behind in school credit because of teen pregnancy or other family struggles -- homelessness after becoming evicted, staying home to care for younger siblings, or taking day jobs to help their parents pay household bills.

Murphy knows her program is one of the few and lucky ones statewide. In Michigan, there are only 75 programs serving 31,000 people at a cost of \$20 million. That’s significantly less than in the early 2000’s when state funding for adult education programs ran \$80 million and covered 80,000 people across 160 programs, according to the Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education (MACAE).

“When funding and resources started to dwindle, programs started to close,” said MACAE Board President Bob Steeh. “Rather than it being the norm that school districts provide adult education, today those programs are very few and far between,” he said.

Murphy’s adult education program serves about 200 people out of two locations – the Mt. Pleasant Adult and Community Education Center where they share a building with an alternative high school program for youth, and the Isabella County Jail. They offer Adult Basic Education, High School Completion and GED Preparation at both sites.

While many adult education programs in Michigan have closed their doors because of funding cuts or lack of resources, Murphy said her program has stayed afloat through the combination of local support and other ways to leverage resources. For example, to ensure her role as the program’s director, she also works as the school district’s director of facilities. The program also benefits from generous grants from the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe, providing a unique opportunity to supplement operating dollars.

Lipsey said her younger children are pleased to see her working so hard to attain a high school diploma, and they’re a big part of her motivation. “My one daughter tells me all the time she’s proud of me for going back to school. My youngest son likes to ask me, “Did you go to school today, Mom? Make sure you go to school, Mom.”

With a diploma in hand, she plans to pursue plans to land a good job in the health care industry, perhaps as a phlebotomist, in nursing or working with the elderly. Having a nearby, accessible adult education program is the ticket to making that happen, she said.

It’s unfortunate more people looking for another chance at a better future can’t say the same thing.

Read more in these reports by Michigan’s Children:

[Supporting Family Literacy: Equipping Parents and Children with Literacy Skills for Lifelong Success \(3/8/2016\)](#)

[Making Michigan a Top 10 Education State by Shrinking the Learning Gap \(8/2015\)](#)