



## **Students from Alternative, Adult Ed Programs Shine While Raising Questions About Their Education with Candidates for Congress, State House**

### ***Michigan's Children, MACAE Sponsor Youth-Led Candidate Forum***

**October 18, 2016, BOYNE FALLS, MI.** This month's youth-led candidate forum during the annual gathering of the Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education (MACAE) created a prime setting to help educate office-seekers about the challenges and benefits of second- and third-chance programs. The forum was sponsored by MACAE and Michigan's Children, a leader in promoting youth voice for improving public policies that impact youth and families in the state. It was one of three forums the non-profit has hosted across Michigan this election season, said Michele Corey, Vice President for Programs for Michigan's Children.

Students from an alternative high school in Houghton Lake and an adult education program in Charlevoix and Emmet counties provided the questions and insight. First District Congressional Candidate Lon Johnson, a democrat, participated along with incumbent state Rep. Triston Cole, a republican, and his democratic challenger, Wyatt Knight. All candidates running for Michigan Congressional districts 1 and 4; and Michigan House districts 101, 103, 104, 105 and 107 were invited.

"The youth-led session was wonderful, giving students in Northern Michigan an opportunity to meet and ask candidates questions that concern them. It was also an eye-opener for the candidates to hear what issues concerned our youth," said MACAE President Bob Steeh. "Their questions certainly helped raise the awareness and importance of alternative/adult education programs."

**Agreed MACAE Board Member Linda Cianferra:** "The kids all provided testament to the importance of such programs. They raised the level of awareness among the candidates about what is happening in this field."

Carefully prepared in advance, questions included those that addressed inadequate funding for community-based alternative and adult education programming and illustrated the students' concerns about those who would need services down the road. "The students in their questioning wondered about the future of public education in 10 years," said Houghton Lake teacher Theresa McMunigal.

One student drew a connection between spending on the state's corrections system to what Michigan spends on public education -- \$30,000 annually for incarcerating an inmate to less than \$10,000 for educating a student in Michigan's K-12 system. Another asked why alternative education students aren't allowed to participate in school district extracurricular activities such as sports and choir. Another wanted to know what educational criteria are needed for individuals to serve on a school board and whether criminal background checks are provided.

Students also worried outwardly about the future. One student cited the Huffington Post which reported a 1,120 percent rise in college tuition since the 1970s and wanted to know what lawmakers

would do to halt continued rising costs of post-secondary education. Large class sizes, challenges in paying for new technologies and supplies for instruction were also bemoaned by the students asking the questions.

**“It was interesting** to hear the candidates address the questions and offer their different perspectives,” Cianferra said. “It was particularly exciting to hear Lon Johnson encourage students to run for school board positions and get active in the decision-making process as they expressed amazement about the lack of qualifications required for an individual to serve in this capacity.”

Notable was the realization that candidates and elected officials do need a greater understanding of what adult and alternative education programs offer and that funding levels, which have been on a downward spiral in most recent years, are inadequate to meet the needs of Michigan youth and adults.

“Many politicians only have a limited understanding of students’ educational needs,” McMunigal added. “Events like these are very important so that policymakers understand more about those affected by their decisions,” she said.

According to Michigan’s Children, roughly 42,000 Michiganders, ages 18-34 have less than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education, and far more have low skill levels that disqualify them from access to post-secondary education and job training. To be self-sustaining, it’s essential they are able to access community-based adult education, literacy and ESL programs. Over the past 20 years, Michigan has continued to cut funding for these programs while need has skyrocketed.

**McMunigal said her** students enjoyed the experience of preparing for the forum and then serving as questioners. “Interacting with politicians was a bit nerve-wracking for them at first, but overall, it was a positive experience for them,” she said.

Incumbent Rep. Triston Cole expressed that the young people were listened to and their opinions and questions matter. “I want them to know they can make a difference by doing what they did. The best thing we can do is let them know we're not giving up. And I expect them not to give up.”

*The Michigan Association for Community and Adult Education is a membership organization committed to engaging in partnership, providing member support and advocate for lifelong learning, leading to employment and self-sufficient families.*



*Michigan’s Children is the only statewide, multi-issue advocacy organization focused solely on public policy in the best interest of children from cradle to career and their families. Michigan’s Children is eager to work with partners around the state on public issues affecting children, youth and families.*

