



Voices Matter: Voices of People Impacted by Policy

Early On & Nicholas

At 15 months, Nicholas should have been able to say five, maybe 10 words, according to his mother. But he wasn't speaking at all. That's when his health care professional made a referral to early intervention services through *Early On*. New parents who find themselves caring for children with special needs, from developmental delays to significant disabilities, often need support and services to help their children develop to their fullest potential. With services geared to families of children up to age three, *Early On* has made a real difference in the development of young children at the point in life when services can have the greatest impact. One of its strongest advocates in Michigan has been Michigan's Children which continuously pushes for expanded resources and services. Nicholas' mom sees that support she's received has helped her help her child, "The therapist is coaching and encouraging me so that every day I'm with Nick, I know how to help."

Youth and Mental Health Support

"There's so much shame and stigma around mental health," said Krissy Dristy. A woman in her late 20s, Dristy has had first-hand experience with the life struggles that accompany a young person dealing with depression and anxiety since childhood. In her writings, she's called depression a "dark place. Dristy's own mental health challenges have strengthened her ability to help others, and today the Western Michigan University graduate is the coordinator of youth peer support for the Association of Children's Mental Health in Michigan, and a partner with Michigan's Children. Our work with advocates such as Dristy is essential for creating strong public policies that value youth voice and can connect the dots between the mental health needs of children across various sectors and particularly as it relates to education success.

[Youth and Alternative Education](#)

One of 40 alternative education students from Houghton Lake Community Education who traveled downstate in May, Justin Lee had the rare opportunity to talk directly to the man responsible for education for the entire state – State School Superintendent Brian Whiston – facilitated by Michigan’s Children. Justin wanted Whiston to know that not everyone learns the same way – that small class sizes with teachers who don’t give up on students are just what many youth need to achieve that all-important high school diploma. Justin had been retained for two grade levels when he started attending the Houghton Lake program. “The teachers egged me on, saying you can do this. And I felt like I could.”

Whiston encouraged comments from the students, and took notes throughout the meeting. “A lot of times alternative education students feel they don’t have a voice; having an opportunity like the visit with Superintendent Whiston really validates them,” said Houghton teacher Theresa McMunigal.

[Reunifying Families: Jacob and Celine](#)

As a result of a court-ordered program that helped them become the parents their toddler Koda needed, Jacob and Celine of Genesee County were able to reclaim their son last year. Koda had lived in a foster home for more than a year while his parents made scheduled court appearances, took parenting classes, and received mental health services that would help them provide a secure home for their boy. Not all families whose children are involved in the child welfare system have this kind of help after their children are deemed victims of abuse or neglect.

According to Genesee County’s baby court coordinator Erin Werth, the family was ready for intervention and amendable for the therapeutic process. And, without intervention, their child would likely remain in the foster care system.

[Family Literacy Brings Success for Children and Parents](#)

Patrick Brown has witnessed the transformations among families and adult learners countless times as an administrator for a Lansing-area English language school. At a FamilySpeak event last year, he brought parents to the state Capitol to share stories of empowerment as they achieved educational success and in the process became better prepared to help their children in their own literacy and learning. He stood proudly when one of the parents, immigrant Sagal Khalif, a Lansing mother of seven, described her journey toward earning a GED so that she could assist in her children’s education and model the importance of an education.

As Michigan works to build reading proficiency by 3rd grade, helping parents with their literacy is an important strategy. “Events like FamilySpeak give many voices to those who aren’t often heard,” Brown said. “(When) people engage with their children, children are going to follow in their footsteps. Michigan’s Children has been in the forefront of that message.”