



On the 2018 campaign trail for Michigan's Children

East and West, Urban and Rural, Michigan Families Make Kids Their Primary Priority

Michigan's Children kicked off our constituent-led candidate forums this year with two family-led forums. We've been conducting youth-led forums for the past two election cycles, and will continue those in the fall, and we held our first forum efforts led by families on July 25 in two very different areas of the state. In the dog days of summer, many 2018 Michigan campaign primary races are a dead heat, now in their final stage. With just three weeks remaining before they nominate candidates for the November general election, families from Ottawa County and Detroit gathered and led thoughtful and educational candidate forum conversations about the issues that matter to them.

Candidates for state and federal office from all major parties on the ballot attended forums at the Zeeland Early Childhood Center and the Children's Center in Detroit. While the questions ranged from early childhood to housing to career and workforce development and more, families and candidates alike focused on how we can work together to improve the odds for children and youth.



ZEELAND – In Zeeland, MI, the attending candidates for office in the 30th State Senate, including Mary Buzuma, Rett DeBoer, former State Rep. Joe Haveman, Jeanette Schipper, and State Rep. Roger Victory, and for the 90th State House seat, including Christopher Banks, Orlando Estrada, and Bradley Slagh, saw firsthand that while parents can lead incredibly busy lives, they're still committed to creating a better future for their children. One father showed up with his spouse and children about ten minutes after getting off his night shift. Other parents, dropping off their children on their way to work, took a few minutes to write questions that were

offered by our League of Women Voters moderator and formed the base of the candidate forum.

Not surprisingly, given the location and families involved, the candidates discussed primarily how Michigan can improve early childhood education and well-being. Families asked pointed questions about the affordability and availability of child care options that they trust. One parent wrote to the candidates, "I really want to work, but it is really hard to find child care where I feel comfortable leaving my children." Candidates offered various visions for early childhood policy, but agreed that families should be empowered to choose a child care option that works best for their family, and that community-based care providers are an essential piece of the early childhood puzzle. Several candidates mentioned the need for child care to serve a variety of purposes for families: not only where

they know that their children will be safe, learn and grow, but also where they might be able to find out early if their children have special needs that can be addressed. And several of the candidates talked about the essential need for child care options in order to maintain a successful workforce in their communities. When asked about the prohibitive costs of care, some candidates expressed concerns about regulations adding costs, but all acknowledged that cost was an issue for many families and that help should be provided, at least to the lowest income families in their communities.

Parents asked questions about how their children will move through the education system after early childhood, including how candidates would work to improve literacy rates. Candidates agreed that literacy begins at birth; that families play a critical role in teaching their children to read; and that children deserve literacy strategies that incorporate their own interests into their reading practice. Candidates all felt strongly that grade retention was not a good strategy, and talked about the need for earlier and consistent interventions to avoid retention whenever possible. They also agreed that some families struggle to assist their children due to their own academic and life challenges, and that schools and other community resources should be brought to bear to assist.

Responding to an audience question about postsecondary pathways, candidates across the panel agreed with continuing to establish strong pathways both during and after high school that allow youth to find their calling, build their skills, and achieve long-term positive economic mobility.

The forum conversation also included the importance of mental health care for the survival and success of young people. The denial of services to help children and youth overcome their mental health challenges, especially during times of critical need when there are no other options, can dramatically set back their future prospects. Because high-quality early childhood services for both young children and their families have been found to help prevent and mitigate adverse childhood experiences and their resulting trauma, the connection was important to make.

DETROIT - In Detroit, MI, families gathered for dinner with candidates for the 13th US Congressional District, including State Sen. Ian Conyers, former State Rep. Shanelle Jackson, Westland mayor Bill Wild, former State Rep. Rashida Tlaib, and State Sen. Coleman Young II, and with State Rep. Stephanie Chang, candidate for the 1st State Senate District. Parents in the crowd asked pointed questions about major local issues and how federal lawmakers can play a role in improving the lives of children, youth, and families in the city and districts.



Education was one major theme of the evening's forum – one parent of five children who need special education asked the

candidates how they would support individualized education for children in both special and general education populations. Candidates across the board supported funding for special education, and the conversation highlighted how reducing class sizes and providing other classroom supports can enable educators to better attend to the needs of their students.

Candidates also consistently stressed the value of both professional and lived experience in policymaking. Each member of the group has many years of experience and success in public office that they hope to build upon in Congress, touted successful efforts to pass laws in Lansing and in their communities, and gave substantive, educated answers about challenges and solutions. The candidates understand that the winner of the race is replacing the work of a Congressman who served for six decades and championed many pieces of legislation that have shaped our country, making their experience key.

The candidates were asked about and demonstrated a personal knowledge of policy issues on the minds of parents. In response to questions about Section 8 housing vouchers and basic resources, candidates recalled the process and pain of eviction, of having one's utilities cut off, of living above the poverty line yet being unable to afford basic needs. In response to questions about jobs and stabilizing communities, candidates recalled their own families' daily struggle to acquire resources to support oneself and one's family, whether as a small business owner or as an employee.

Candidates were also asked about their willingness and ability to compromise with colleagues with different viewpoints. All were able to point to many experiences where they had to come to consensus with members of different political parties and viewpoints. Several candidates expressed, however, that their willingness to compromise only went so far, and that they would first and foremost be champions for their constituents.

After breaking for a meal, families formed a circle with State Rep. Chang, the only candidate from the 1st State Senate District race who was able to attend, for an intimate conversation focused primarily around educational opportunity and concerns related to high auto insurance costs. Parents explained that they are faced with the decision to either direct precious funds, which could be used to further their children's education, to auto insurance, or find a way around the system as-is. Others asked questions about school funding and accountability, voicing that, whether its misinformation about school funding, random letters threatening school closures, or other barriers, they often feel excluded from having a real say in their children's education. The candidate did her best to answer questions thoroughly and promised attendees additional materials and conversations following the forums where she couldn't provide complete answers.

The forums in Zeeland and Detroit prove yet again that while families from different backgrounds and communities always have unique life experiences and interests, they share a common belief that Michigan's policymakers, regardless of where they sit or where they come from, have an obligation to work in the best interests of the children and youth of our state, from cradle to career, and especially when they face inequitable challenges. Michigan's Children was heartened by the expressed agreement on a variety of key issues, and looks forward to working with families, agencies and winning candidates on critical issues after the elections.

Thank you to all of our candidates who spent time learning from parents and families, and thank you to these organizations for sponsoring the families who led these primary candidate forums:

JULY 25, 2018 FAMILY-LED FORUM PARTNERS



Results of a community adopted early literacy screen in 2008 showed that fewer than half of our community's children were ready for school when they entered kindergarten at age five. In response to this critical need, Ready for School was launched. Parents and community stakeholders recognize Ready for School as a trusted partner in school readiness. Our relational, whole systems thinking approach will sustain our commitment to equity in creating communities of readiness and will strengthen an exemplary early childhood system that supports the thriving of all children, parents/families and the community. Our vision is To create communities of readiness where all children and reach their full unique potential.

<http://readyforschool.org/>



The Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health is a nonprofit professional organization that's all about promoting optimal infant and early childhood mental health by way of supporting the birth-to-six professionals who work with or on behalf of infants, young children, and their families.

<http://mi-aimh.org/>



The Children's Center leads the way in providing an integrated approach to community mental health that treats the whole child and the whole family. Together with our community partners, we offer meaningful solutions that address mental, physical and behavioral health, abuse and neglect, and poverty challenges currently faced by over 100,000 children in the Greater Detroit area.

<http://www.thechildrenscenter.com/>

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. We have been creating opportunities for young people and caregivers to share their stories, concerns and suggestions directly with policymakers since 1996. As a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, our forums are presented as a non-partisan activity. For more information, visit <http://www.michiganschildren.org/>