

Candidate forum focuses on hardships faced by adult students

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ADRIAN — A forum focused on the interests and questions of students participating in adult education programs Wednesday gave candidates running in the Nov. 6 midterm election an opportunity to share different perspectives on common political issues.

The forum at the Lenawee Intermediate School District Tech Center in Adrian was put together through a collaboration with Michigan's Children, a Lansing-based nonprofit child policy and advocacy organization; Michigan Works Southeast; and the Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education.

The event was moderated by Matt Gillard, president and CEO of Michigan's Children, and attended by Democrat Amber Pedersen of Seneca Township, who is running against state Rep. Bronna Kahle, R-Adrian, for the 57th District state House seat; Terri McKinnon, a Democrat running for the open 65th District state House seat; Bill LaVoy, a Democrat from Monroe running for the 17th District state Senate seat against state Sen. Dale Zorn, R-Ida; Jason Rees, a Libertarian also running for the 65th District state House seat; and Gretchen Driskell of Saline, the Democrat running for the 7th Congressional District seat against incumbent U.S. Rep. Tim Walberg, R-Tipton.

The questions were written by students affiliated with Michigan Works Southeast, which hosts in-house adult education programs in Jackson, Lenawee and Hillsdale counties.

Gillard read the first questions, asking how the candidates would help those who can't afford schooling and adult education.

Pedersen recalled her background, putting herself through college as a single mother with toddlers.

“Adult education is something that we need to simply make happen at the state level and make accessible, because we have evidence that a high school diploma can triple your lifetime income. So we need to make that accessible,” Pedersen said. “By making that accessible that means that we need to make sure the jobs that our adult students are working to support themselves pay the bills, so that they have time to pursue those education outcomes.”

McKinnon said education should be funded. She said she had to get a GED when she was 18 and later went to community colleges to get the education to work in information technology support.

“Education is the key to prosperity, for individuals and for our state. We have a lack of skilled trades worker in our state. We have a teacher shortage. We need people to fill those jobs,” McKinnon said.

LaVoy said that as a son of two teachers, adult education is very important to him, especially since his mother worked extensively with adult students.

“I think you have to make it more accessible, because of transportation costs. We have some innovative programs in the city of Monroe, where I live. There’s something called the Learning Bank and it’s in an area of town where there isn’t a lot of transportation and where more low-income people actually tend to live,” LaVoy said. “It’s an old bank branch that they repurposed for GED and high school completion.”

Rees said he has been a teacher for the last decade and, despite being a libertarian, he still supports spending on adult education.

“I do see the importance of education. If there’s anything that the government is going to spend our stolen money on, I suppose it’s on educating us towards the future,” Rees said. “So I’m willing to spend or direct some of our government money towards those efforts, I suppose, if we must.”

Driskell agreed with the panel, even if she was not an educator.

“Of late, we made choices — the (Republican) majority ... has made choices in the state Legislature to not support funding adult education and affordability,” Driskell said.

Driskell said that as a state representative, she introduced a bill that was an apprenticeship tax credit, to get businesses to partner and help fund education.

The high costs of child care — which Gillard said was a common topic at other forums the organization has posted throughout the state — was also discussed.

McKinnon said Michigan's Child Development Care Program, which is funded federally, has too many restrictions.

"In our state ... it's actually the least accessible of any other state in this country," McKinnon said.

That program allowed her to go back to school when she had three kids five and younger, she said.

McKinnon said Michigan's barriers are higher than the federal requirements and that she would propose lowering them to make child care more accessible.

LaVoy said he believes educational institutions should offer child care, with possible state funding, as an option.

For Rees, the solution to reducing child care costs is simple: "Get government out of it."

"Why do we need occupational licensing. Why do you have to beg the government for permission to fish or to hunt or to cut hair or to take care of children for that matter. That's raising the cost of child care for our parents," Rees said.

Driskell said that one way to reduce costs would be to incentivize employer resource networks, where businesses can work together to provide child care onsite.

"At one point in time, in our country, we had universal day care, during World War II. And I think that's something that our country should be thinking about," she said. "Because at the time that we did that, everybody was working because of World War II and everybody is working right now."

Among the students' questions was concern over the cost of health care for people with life-threatening conditions and for families.

While the health care debate is a federal issue, Pedersen said that states can reduce all the barriers possible to receive funding and enroll as many citizens into insurance plans as possible so that people can go to their primary-care doctors and leave “emergency rooms for emergencies.”

“How this impacts life-threatening conditions is it frees up our system so that the specialists and the providers that we have can focus on those people who need their attention the most,” she said.

McKinnon said that not only should the state protect the Affordable Care Act (ACA), Medicaid and Medicare, it needs to get rid of the newly passed work requirements and pass into law the so-called health care bill of rights.

“These are the things we start with. But I’m going to tell you that if we want to be serious about lowering costs, that we at some point are going to have to accept that we are going to have to move to some sort of single-payer health care system,” McKinnon said.

LaVoy said he supported prevention and catching problems early through making it easier for families to see primary-care doctors before the problem gets more expensive.

Rees said that he did not think elected officials had the power to reduce health care costs, saying that the only thing that can lower health care costs is to take away the intermediaries, such as government and insurance companies and have the financial transaction be between the patient and the health care provider.

Driskell said she supported the ACA and supported fixing it. She blamed the Republican majority in the U.S. House and Senate for working to undermine and weaken the ACA and Medicaid.

“We have millions of people that didn’t have health insurance before and they are accessing it,” she said, adding that there is a role for government to make sure prescription drug pricing isn’t outrageous.

No Republican candidates were in attendance at the forum, despite being invited. Dillard said that at one point many were actually scheduled to come but had to cancel because of conflicts.

"All of the candidates for these offices were invited to this forum and given the same notice and efforts were made to get them all to commit," Gillard said.

Zorn was absent from the event because he had to present a tribute at the Monroe Rotary in honor of World Polio Day. Walberg was in Washington for the signing of his opioid legislation by President Donald Trump, and Kahle had a scheduling conflict. She said that her organizers tried to reach the organization several times to reschedule but received no response.