

Adult Ed Students in Kent County Raise Tough Questions before Legislative Hopefuls on Education Costs, Teacher Ranks, Childcare, Public Transportation

Wyoming, MI – In a discussion that often sounded like a job interview, a panel of Kent County adult education students – most immigrants – put seven area candidates for state Senate and House seats to the test on issues directly impacting the success of anyone trying to improve their language skills, get a GED, diploma or credential, and improve their workforce prospects.

The 90-minute question-and-answer session inside Kent County ISD’s Wyoming Community Education Center featured adult learners posing queries specifically focused on issues that enable adult learners to accomplish their educational goals and offering real insights into barriers adult learners face: How would you increase public bus transportation funding to offer service later and longer in the day for those balancing work, family life and evening classes? How would you make childcare and healthcare affordable and accessible for adult students? How should Michigan attract more and better teachers? With college tuition unaffordable for many Americans, what would you do?



Others asked about fixing roads and city sidewalks, neighborhood safety, ensuring clean drinking water, and bridging the gap between wages and the cost of living. Several focused on the candidates’ stances on one of the hottest topics of the General Election at the federal level – immigration.

Candidates for the 28th and 29th State Senate Districts, and the 75th, 76th and 77th State House Districts were invited. Attending were 28th State Senate candidates Craig Beach (Democrat) and Nathan Hewer (Libertarian); 75th State House candidates David LaGrand (Democrat) and David Allen Schutte (Libertarian); 76th State House candidate Rachel Hood (Democrat), and 77th State House candidates Tommy Brann (Republican) and Patty Malowney (Libertarian).

None of the candidates disparaged immigrants who make up a large part of the regional workforce. Two questions at the top of the forum dove right into the national debate. ESL student Reina Perea Munoz asked the candidates for their plan on helping immigrants who have been long-time U.S. resident of 20 years, and working and paying taxes here. Her question was followed by one from classmate Nerida Aviles, who asked them about their feelings about immigration, and why they think “Our government is trying to stop this?”

Brann, who favors DACA reforms, said immigrants are strong people who had value to communities by often starting businesses after their arrival. “We need more immigrants,” he said. He also said he voted against a Republican-backed measure in the state Legislature to make English the state’s official language. “I went against my party. That was a cruel vote. I couldn’t do that to my district.”

“We drastically need more immigrants in this country” Hewer agreed. “Immigration is the foundation of this country.” By increasing legal methods of immigrants, he said it reduces incentives for working “in the black market.” He added that immigrants could be helped by reducing licensing requirements for certain jobs – like siding installers and those braid hair – that don’t pose a public safety threat.”

LaGrand said he favored opening borders and creating a path for citizenship for undocumented immigrants already here. It creates “strange incentives” with too many people living in fear, hiding from authorities and working in less than ideal arrangements, he said. “The central irony



is that no one was here 20,000 years ago. Everyone here came from somewhere. And a lot of people were brought here involuntarily as slaves. The idea that this country can be hostile to immigrants is something I’m deeply opposed to,” he said. LeGrand added he favors expanding H-2 visa programs with more Americans allowed to sponsor immigrants.

Hood said immigrants are a “critical part of our economy, a wonderful part of our community, and need to be welcomed here.” She said she would find ways as a state representative to work on creating easier pathways for immigrant to work and learn here. She added that many who come to work in Michigan’s agricultural industry live in poor quality homes and that should be addressed along with improving access to public services, especially as they’re paying taxes. “I support all policy efforts to make it easier to come to United States,” Hood said.

Maloney, whose children attend a “mostly bilingual school,” said everyone regardless of immigration status should be offered a good education to make sure everyone can make a living. She agreed there needs to be a pathway to citizenship for immigrants already here. “I’m somewhere in the middle, she added. “You can’t have the black market but completely open borders isn’t the answer, either.”

Beach said immigrants contribute \$3.2 billion in GDP to Kent County and should be honored. “My faith teaches me to be compassionate and helpful to all people,” he said. He added that undocumented immigrants should be able to secure a driver’s license. To and to deny one to a person who is “struggling for a better life for their family is wrong. To help them is right.”

A retired high school teacher whose family fostered immigrants from Bangladesh, Sudan, and Congo, Beach favors DACA reform and expanding legal limits. “I taught my children that people are important and have value,” he said. “If I want my child to value people who don’t look exactly like I do then we need to model that behavior; society needs to model that behavior.”

Shutte, a Grand Rapids minister who’s worked with immigrants for decades, said if changes are needed to increase legal immigration, “I’m all for that. If they’re here legally, we should do all we can to help them. You’re doing that here by teaching them English, helping them to become contributing Americans. I love immigration.”

Deborah Pitsch, an adult education instructor at Kent ISD, said she appreciated the opportunity for her Level 3 ESL to pose questions to the candidates and later evaluate their responses. Her 50 students from 17 countries speak 20 different languages. Of those, 27 have high school diplomas and nine graduated from a university in their home countries; and two were studying when they left. They hold university degrees in accounting, business, management, graphic design, pre-med, criminal justice, social work, industrial engineering, and elementary teaching. Despite being here legally, though, many face difficult challenges due to discrimination, stereotyping, language, transportation, child care, and emotional trauma, she said.

“I find they are more enthusiastic and informed about issues and voting than many native born Americans!” Pitsch said. “They have said they love America and they believe in the values and ideals of America. Today gave my students a chance to voice their opinions even though they cannot vote. This was an amazing experience for them to be exposed to the democratic process. I hope my students continue to be a significant reminder of the faces of the people they will be serving,” she said.

Matt Gillard, Michigan’s Children’s President and CEO, said the first step in seeking solutions to community issues is making policymakers and those who want to represent constituents aware of the issues. Patrick Brown, a MACAE spokesman, said the students worked hard to formulate their questions, discussing ideas in advance with their teachers and classmates. “As ESL students many also practiced pronunciation and voice inflection to ensure that there would be no barriers in connecting with their legislative candidates -- what drive.”

This event on October 22nd was the fifth in a series of forums before the November General Election sponsored by Michigan’s Children, a statewide public policy and advocacy group working on behalf of kids and families from cradle to career. Other sponsors were the Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education and Kent Intermediate School District Adult Education Program.

Michigan’s Children is the only statewide, independent voice working to ensure that public policies are made in the best interest of children, from cradle to career, and their families.