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### **'Students Speak' Forum in Jackson Spotlights the Need to Expand Adult Ed, Literacy Support and Closing the Skills Gap**

JACKSON, MI – “Closing the skill gap” has been a bipartisan goal for boosting Michigan’s workforce and talent potential in the Snyder Administration in recent years and most recently in Gov. Gretchen Whitmer’s first State of the State address.

Now the renewed fight to improve the state’s [education crisis](#) with a focus on improved literacy, workforce and talent development is being championed anew with a series of forums titled *Students Speak* and hosted by the [Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education \(MACAE\)](#) and [Michigan’s Children](#). The next **Student Speak** event is **Monday, March 25 from 9:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.** at the [Michigan Works! Southeast office, 209 E. Washington Avenue, Suite 100, Jackson, MI 49201](#).

Elected government officials, business and community leaders have been invited to attend the informal forum led by MACAE “ambassadors” from adult education programs. Students will guide visitors around the Jackson center and discuss how they’re able to access adult education programs and prepare for a job-training course in one place. It’s a rare model and partnership that’s worked particularly well for their region, said Heather Robidoux, the center’s Adult Education Program Supervisor. A more common model is to see adult education courses operated by school districts or nonprofit groups apart from career training.

“One of the biggest things that Michigan Works! offers qualified candidates is the ability to access short-term training for careers in high demand,” Robidoux said. “But unless they have the basic skills in reading, English, or math, they won’t be successful in their career journey. That’s why it’s so important to have immediate access to a remedial class, work toward high school completion (GED) or enroll in an ESL (English as a Second Language) class under the same roof.”

**People are often** surprised to learn that the largest group of students seeking adult education services are those 17-22, who for a variety of reasons weren’t successful in traditional schools, Robidoux said. Another group are people who already have a high school diploma but have tested below proficiency in basic skills needed for employment. A third group are parents seeking to help their children in their schooling and serve as a role model.

With an unprecedented number of first-time state lawmakers and members of Congress from Michigan, the stakes are also high for getting the message for adult education across Michigan, said MACAE President Bob Steeh.

“Michigan will have over 811,000 career openings through 2024. Who’s going to fill those job openings when 1 in 10 Michiganders over 18 do not have a high school diploma? Steeh said. “Michigan is at a critical stage. Adult education can play an important role in workforce development and in closing that basic skills gap.”

While adult and career training may seem an obvious and critical element in the state’s prosperity for education advocates, Steeh said, the number of accessible programs for the people who need them has declined. Access is compounded by barriers like finding transportation or child care, or proficiency in basic skills like reading. This creates sometimes insurmountable hardships for many low-wage, working parents who yearn to create family stability and move ahead.

Besides personal success, family stability is an important byproduct of adult education programs, said Michele Corey, Vice President for Programs for Michigan’s Children. There is consistent and strong evidence that ties children’s success to their parents’ educational attainment.

“**There’s nothing that** impacts a kid’s educational success more than that” Corey said. “With more than 42,000 adults of child-bearing age in our state who don’t have more than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education, if we want to improve school-age literacy, then helping parents is critical. Investing in those parents provides a two-generation investment that benefits school-age children, the family’s self-sufficiency and Michigan’s prosperity.”

The recent Snyder Administration added additional funds – the first in years – for basic education and ESL support that would help adults enter workforce development programs but the dedicated funding remained inadequate for the need. For the past 20 years, access to adult education programs has declined overall, even while the need for a highly skilled workforce has skyrocketed in the face of fewer low-skill, high-paying manufacturing jobs in the state, Steeh said.

Today, there are 97 adult education programs across Michigan, compared to nearly 200 programs 15 years ago. Fewer Michiganders are accessing adult education services. Last year, 17,000 people were enrolled in programs (with 12 or more hours of instruction), but five years ago there were 30,000 served, Steeh said.

The Jackson forum follows others in Grand Rapids, Troy and Kalamazoo. Other gatherings have been planned for Huron Valley, Romulus, Royal Oak, West Bloomfield and Rochester.

***The Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education*** works to provide a cohesive framework for community education through collaboration and guidance at the local, state and federal level. MACAE’s vision is to engage in partnerships, provide member support and advocate for lifelong learning, leading to employment and self-sufficient families. For more information about MACAE, email [macaeoffice@gmail.com](mailto:macaeoffice@gmail.com), visit [macae.org](http://macae.org), or call 517-492-1367.

***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, with a specific focus on the needs of children, youth and families with the most challenges in their lives – children of color, children from low-income families, and children served by the foster and juvenile justice systems. For more information about Michigan’s Children, email [michele@michiganschildren.org](mailto:michele@michiganschildren.org), or visit [michiganschildren.org](http://michiganschildren.org)