



Michigan Association
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Adult Education



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Young Mother Enrolls in Adult Ed Program, Builds Better Life for Her Daughter – Stories from the Kalamazoo Students Speak Forum

KALAMAZOO, MI – What started as a casual conversation between shift workers at a fast-food restaurant led to a major life change for a young mother from Kalamazoo.

Ruby Dixon was barely getting by when she acted on a co-worker's suggestion and enrolled in the Kalamazoo Adult Education (AE) program. Often struggling to find accessible and affordable childcare before coming to class, the 22-year-old did achieve a milestone in her quest for a better life for the two of them. In November she earned a GED and today she is enrolled in a certified nursing assistant program in partnership with Kalamazoo AE, Comstock AE and Michigan Works!



“I knew that this wasn't just a priority for myself; my priority was to work hard for my daughter, too,” Dixon said.

Hers was one of a handful of presentations made by adult learners at a Student Speak forum, sponsored by Michigan's Children and the Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education (MACAE), on March 11 in the Kalamazoo Community Education Center.

Adult education students came from Battle Creek and Kalamazoo to urge policy makers and elected officials to champion programs like theirs. Other students included Ashley Brown, who left high school after suffering trauma from an assault at an early age and later a car accident. She's now found new hope in the GED program in Kalamazoo. “There's no excuse not to exceed now,” she said.

Myanmar native San Chung arrived here two years ago and is learning English at Battle Creek AE in order to study computers at a community college and later a university. His high school diploma from back home isn't recognized in the United States. “I'm so grateful for this program. It changed my life,” he said.

Business and community leaders, top educators and federal and state elected representatives were invited to the Students Speak event. Among those attending were: state Sen. Sean McCann; Annie Brown, a staff member for U.S. Sen. Gary Peters; Mary Judnich, a staff member for U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow; and Mariah Phelps, a staff member for state Rep. Jim Haadsma.

Kim Bell, director of the Kalamazoo Adult Education program, said stories like Ruby's and others illustrate the importance of helping community residents on a path to academic and career improvement.

“You think about the impact that someone motivated like Ruby can have on her family and community. Maybe she'll become a registered nurse, maybe a nurse practitioner. She'd be able to provide well for her family,” Bell said. “We know that data shows the mother who goes far in her education usually has a child who mirrors that academic level. She's a role model not only for the academics, but for behavior. When a child witnesses hard work, resilience and tenacity on the part of the parent, they will learn they can achieve too.”

Bell in Kalamazoo said the forum focused on students' stories for a reason. “We want the policy-makers to see the faces of people who live in their own communities. It's harder to ignore their need if you can experience how they've been effected by the learning.”

Their intent was also to point out the immeasurable benefits communities gain when more under-educated residents achieve the educational skills they need for better-paying jobs, or when parents are able to better participate in their children's education. “These circumstances benefit our local economies and have the potential to break cycles of poverty,” she said.

In the past decade, nearly every school district in Region 8 (Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph and Van Buren counties) operated an adult education program, but today most have closed because of funding issues. Today there are just two in Kalamazoo County, in Kalamazoo and Comstock, despite an increase in demand for such programs. It's a similar story statewide with advocates like Michigan's Children and MACAE renewing their call for new state investments to help more under-employed and under-educated Michiganders gain the basic skills they need to enter job training programs or college.

For years, adult education programs have been underfunded and inaccessible for many in Michigan. MACAE estimates that more than 42,000 Michiganders of child-bearing age do not have more than a 9th grade education, limiting their employment opportunities and economic self-sufficiency.

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

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, visit 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, or visit michiganschildren.org.