



Michigan Association
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Adult Education



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Adult Learners Call for Expanding Valuable Basic Skills Programs to Restore Hope, Improve Job Opportunities

TROY, MI – Labeled “a slow learner” by a teacher, Terri Mitchell let those words define her and her future prospects. When she found she was pregnant with a medical condition, she dropped out in her senior year feeling hopeless and discouraged. That led to years of embarrassment, parental disappointment and conflict. “I felt I couldn’t do anything right,” she said.

However, things changed for the better when she connected with the [Romulus Adult Education Program](#). The staff’s support, her own progress toward a GED, and a rediscovered passion for sewing, rekindled her dreams and created a new vision for her future. “We need programs like this to put people like myself back in the workforce, to be productive and to boost the employment rate” she said.

Terri’s story of despair and hope was one of 14 shared by adult learners at a *Students Speak* forum sponsored by the [Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education \(MACAE\)](#) and [Michigan’s Children](#) on Feb. 25 at Troy Athens High School. Speaking before 40 public policy makers, legislators, educators, and students were adult learners from Novi, Troy, Romulus, Huron Valley and Royal Oak and Rochester. Other *Students Speak* forums are taking place in Kent, Kalamazoo, Calhoun, Jackson and Hillsdale counties, Detroit and out-Wayne County and other areas around the state.

U.S. Senator Gary Peters, D-Michigan, sent a representative as did state **Sen. Jim Runestad**, R-White Lake. They were joined by State Reps. **Lori Stone**, D-Warren, and **Padma Kuppa**, D-Troy.

Others in the audience included attendees from Oakland County Michigan Works!, Troy School Superintendent Richard Macheski, and educators and students from surrounding Oakland and Macomb county communities.

Addressing the policy-makers and elected officials, students spoke of the need to prioritize advance basic skills training and programs preparing students for job training and certification programs. Their testimonies were personal and riveting. Among them were English-language learners, including highly educated immigrants unable to work in their professions here; and those fleeing oppression and violence from their native countries. Other heart-breaking accounts came from American natives, including individuals fleeing domestic violence; those who left high school because of pregnancy; and those who failed traditional school programs because of learning disabilities.

Student Bhavisha Modi, a civil engineer from India, shared her gratitude for the Troy Adult English program. Despite struggles learning a new language, she preserved and gained self-respect and the fulfillment of a dream, she said. “My lack of English skills held me back,” she said. Not only was an employment search made more difficult, but she was unable to effectively communicate with the teachers and friends’ families of her two children. Proudly, she described that she had just started her new job on the day of the forum.

Jill Cameron, a student in the Huron Valley Schools Adult Education program, described life-long education struggles linked to fetal alcohol syndrome, a condition she was born with. Dropping out of high school, she resumed her pursuit of a diploma not once but three times, enrolling in programs only to have her education interrupted again when one program closed and she left a second program when her family moved and she was unable to afford transportation. Despite those obstacles, the mother of five persevered, earning her diploma in December after her family moved to a White Lake neighborhood where the Huron Valley Schools' program was within walking distance.

Lawmakers thanked them for sharing their personal struggles and successes. Rep. Kuppa, who came to America from India at age 4, said her own story shaped her vision of education and the importance of programs like those described that evening. Rep. Stone, an educator by profession, offered to meet again with representatives from MACAE and Michigan's Children in her state Capitol office. She also offered to bring a student to an education committee she is a member of.

Oakland Michigans Works! CEO Jillian Geyman told the audience that the working relationship between MichiganWorks! and adult education programs is improving the economy.

MACAE President Bob Steeh, who serves as Director of Community Education for Novi Schools, said programs like these are critical to help Michigan "close the skills gap" and prepare people for training that leads to good-paying jobs. Yet, the number of accessible programs for Michiganders who need them has declined with access compounded by barriers in reading/literacy, transportation and child care.

Analysts estimate Michigan will have over 811,000 career openings through 2024. "Who's going to fill those jobs 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."

Michele Corey, Vice President for Programs for Michigan's Children, said there's another important benefit to improving education opportunities for adult learners - strong and consistent evidence that links how well children succeed in school and their parents' educational attainment. "There's nothing that impacts a kid's educational success more than their parents' educational attainment," Corey said. "With more than 42,000 adults of child-bearing age in our state who don't have more than a 9th grade education, and if we want to improve school-age literacy, then helping parents is a great way to do that. Investing in those parents becomes a two-generation investment that benefits school-age children and family self-sufficiency."

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