

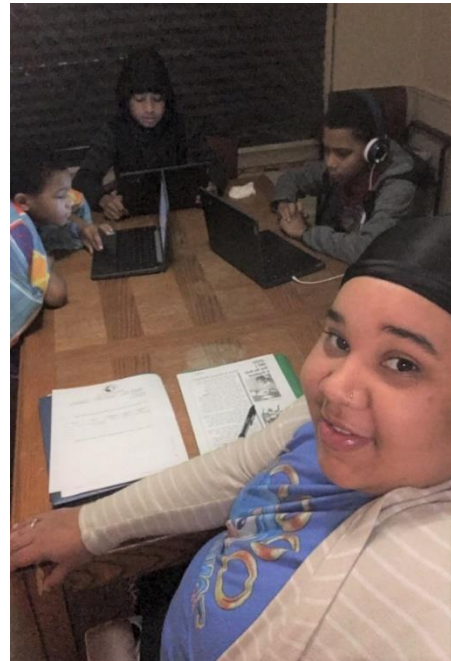
Mom of Eight Makes Her Education a Priority after Setbacks and in a System Poorly Designed for Adult Learners with Kids

This story spotlights one of Michigan's Children's public policy priority areas - the challenges around unmet child care needs of adult learners raising families while seeking to advance their education and careers.

On certain school days, Miranda Parker of Muskegon County sets up the dining room table for eight virtual learners – plus herself. On the walls hang white boards covered with school assignments and meal plans. At 28, Parker has gone back to school again after repeated attempts that would have broken the plans of a less ambitious person.

This time, Parker says, “It’s important for me to have my high school diploma for my children.”

Parker is not the same person she was when she dropped out of high school in the ninth grade, running the streets and trying to grow up too fast. Afterward leaving school she had a baby born so sick that he was hospitalized for over six months. Her responsibilities mounted; life changed. “It was just a lot to deal with at 14,” she said.



Miranda Parker at home and at her studies with three of her children.

The story of Parker’s up-and-down educational journey, carrying for eight children (five are stepchildren) while struggling to find child care, is both remarkable and too common. It’s remarkable because of the number of times she’s started a diploma or GED program, and had to stop to the detriment of herself and her family. It’s common because of the familiar barriers shared by adult learners across Michigan. Locating affordable quality child care, including hard-to-find evening care, tops the list. Also challenging are long travel distances that make attendance a struggle while holding down a job and family, especially as adult education programs have dwindled over the years, program providers say. These difficulties persist despite the fact that parents with low incomes who are pursuing an education or employment are one of the groups that Michigan targets for child-care subsidy eligibility.

In November, Michigan’s Children joined with the Michigan Association of Community Adult Education to host a panel discussion with state policymakers and adult education program managers about the child care gaps adult learners face, and how adult education programs could help. Participants came away with agreed-upon strategies for creating solutions. Among those: Boosting public funding and child care subsidies to help families access child care; creating a statewide voucher system for adult education family access to early child care; training program providers on directing parents to resources; and working with community agencies to create

child care where it doesn't exist. Michigan's Children's President & CEO Matt Gillard said prioritizing the child care needs of adult learners and investing in them is an essential step..

With over 26,000 adults across 95 programs participating in education and career training opportunities in Michigan, their unmet child care needs have been gaining new attention thanks to efforts by advocates such as MACAE and Michigan's Children. The Whitmer Administration's goal to see 60 percent of Michigan residents secure a college degree or career credential by 2030 also offers an important backdrop.

Over 40,000 Michiganders age 18-34 have less than a 9th grade education, and over 13,000 babies are born each year to moms without a high school credential, according to a recent Michigan's Children Budget Basics report. Without a high school credential, post-secondary goals that lead to family economic stability are out of reach. Despite recent improvements, Michigan has had one of the lowest college attainment rates in the country, at 45 percent. But reaching a 60-percent attainment rate will require overcoming the barriers working families with children face in order to climb out of unemployment or low-pay jobs, and secure promotions and better-earning jobs.

"There is no question that addressing the child care struggles of low-skilled working parents and adult learners is central to building family stability, and keeping families strong in Michigan," said Michele Corey, Vice President for Programs at Michigan's Children. "Preserving and expanding state support for adult education programs that provide opportunities for young adults and parents to build literacy skills, earn a GED and prepare for a career all lead to greater workforce participation and family literacy rates. Our state's economic future depends on it."

In addition to the fact that only half of all families access the child care subsidy who are eligible for that support, the high cost of care and critical shortages of quality care really hold families back, she added.

Miranda Parker's struggles to earn a high school credential have spanned nearly 14 years, illustrating the difficulties of finding child care and paying for it, even when she was eligible for the federally funded child care subsidy offered to low-income earners who work and go to school.

Two and a half years after she had her first child, Parker, then a mother of two toddlers, enrolled in a GED program at Orchard View Schools near Muskegon that she described as an ideal arrangement - for a while. "A bus would pick us up, and the kids would go to the daycare center, and I went into class," she reminisced. Parker said she never learned why the program ended, but after she attended for a year, it closed. Another year passed and she tried registering for GED classes again, but when she couldn't find care in the evenings (she was working days), she gave up. Later, when she found a reliable child care provider, she discovered that the credits she accumulated were no longer valid. "Every four years you have to start over," she said. "I worked so hard for two years to get this far. That was when I said, I'm done with it."

But today Parker is back. Her husband's hard work and dedication to build a landscaping business and their large blended family have inspired her to resurrect her own goal to attend culinary school. She recently enrolled in the Fruitport Adult Education Program to earn her high school diploma. Earning a diploma involves a longer time commitment than working toward a GED, she said, but Parker wants to set an example for her children. "We have eight kids that look up to me. The last thing I want is for my boys to drop out and turn to the streets," she said.

“The biggest part of my not completing my schooling was that I couldn’t afford child care even when I was approved because my co-pay was so high,” Parker said. “I had a 75 percent co-pay and I was paying my daycare provider \$427 a week.” Today, she said her family’s \$60,000 annual income disqualifies her from being eligible for the subsidy.

As with most households, the coronavirus crisis has had an impact on the Parker homelife. With the focus on virtual learning, everyone’s at home and studying together. Two days a week, it’s a full house when her five stepchildren come to stay. After the kids go to bed at 8:30 at night, Parker continues her studies at the table. “I go to school once a week, get my work, get it done at home, turn it in,” she said.

Adult educators who attended the virtual MACAE forum with policymakers last month said they want their students to achieve their goals but too often see students lose steam and drop out because of the child care dilemma. The state’s system has long been beset by low pay for providers and an inability to attract and keep providers. That’s led some adult education programs to explore creating child care spaces in their own buildings, and prodding local community colleges to develop a credentialed CDA (child development associate) curriculum to grow the field in so-called “child care deserts.” There are big questions including how to pay for it. Whitney Dettmer, an associate director of adult education for the rural Iosco RESA in northern Michigan where they span eight counties, has explored the development of CDA programs locally but has heard colleges would rather invest in programs that earn their students better wages. Her response, “Well, that stinks. It’s not the greatest pay, but how are your welding people going to go to work if they don’t have anywhere to take their kids.”

Exploration by adult education programs continues. Dearborn Schools Adult and Community Education is running an in-house, tuition-based CDA program for students who pay out of pocket for care, said MACAE’s Director Patrick Brown, who is exploring the program and its curriculum as a possible statewide model. It’s a fast-track program designed to prepare students for the CDA exam in 12 weeks. “We’re looking at best practices and models like this to see where there are breakthroughs,” Brown said. “We want to identify stable and innovative programming to support marginalized families.”

Employers have recognized that child care problems are a barrier to workforce development as well. Four areas are serving as pilot sites for a model launched by a bi-partisan coalition led by the Grand Rapids Chamber and funded in the current state budget. The \$1 million investment in the Michigan Enhancement Grant “tri-share model” that includes equal contributions by employers, the state and individual parents to pay for their child care could be one small part of the solution. “It is time to try different approaches that will help people enter the workforce and in many cases break the cycle of poverty,” said state Rep. Greg VanWoerkom, R-North Shores in the conversation with MACAE educators and others last month. “Employers see a skilled workforce, lack of transportation and child care as barriers to prosperity,” he said. “I’ve seen it and lived it.” VanWoerkom and his wife who have young children also faced the issue at home.

For Parker’s part, her family’s prosperity is uppermost in her mind. She delayed going back to school this year to help her husband get his business launched. Now, it’s her turn.



Miranda Parker