



How will Michigan candidates support students with special needs?

SARAH WILLIAMS | SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2022



For decades, parents, educators, and advocates have debated how state legislators should allocate public dollars to education. At a recent virtual forum hosted by Detroit Champions for Hope and Michigan's Children, Detroit parents had the opportunity to ask local candidates running for Michigan's State Senate how best they can support students with special needs.



Other hard-hitting questions addressed mental health for infants and toddlers, air quality in communities, access to life-saving medical treatments in schools, funding for universal preschool, affordable child care that offers living wages for staff, and how to tackle early education teacher shortages. The parent-led forum was held on Oct. 24 and streamed to live audiences on Facebook.

Candidates in the six Senate districts touching at least a portion of Detroit—1, 2, 3, 6, 8, and 10—were invited to participate. Four candidates showed up to hear and respond to parents. We've listed them according to the district they hope to represent in Michigan's newly drawn map released earlier this year by the Michigan Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission (MICRC).

Sen. Erika Geiss, D- (District 1), Harry Sawicki, R- (District 2), Sen. Stephanie Chang, D- (District 3), and Sen. Mallory McMorrow, D-(District 8) were in attendance.

A question came from Detroit parent Sparkle Berry whose son is currently enrolled in a charter school system and has special needs. She said she's had difficulty setting up his Individualized Education Program (IEP) and has heard it's because special needs programs are better in public schools. In every other aspect of his education, she believes the charter school is the better fit for her son and is frustrated that she has to "cut down" on his education to meet his needs.

Question: Why are special needs resources for students not equal in all schools, and what will you do to ensure students have access to quality education and special needs support?

Harry Sawicki said he'd like to see tax dollars follow families to their school of choice.

"That would give these schools more money to operate and be able to establish these types of programs for you better," he said. "It's something that has to come through the state legislature, and it's the thing that I deeply support."

Erika Geiss said funding isn't the same because public schools are required to meet the needs of students with special needs, whether it's through an IEP or a 504 plan, or other programs. She said only some charter schools are required, able, or choose to provide the type of special needs education that students might need.



"The term special needs is very, very, very broad when talking about our education

system," she said. "The range of special needs goes from cognitive all the way to physical, so that might be part of the discrepancy you're seeing. But, our public schools are required to, regardless of what level of special needs it is, constitutionally provide for the education of all of our students.

Stephanie Chang took a moment to direct Berry to Michigan Alliance for Families and said it's a "great resource" to support families with kids with special needs in school. The federally funded parent training and information center is led by caregivers of someone with a disability who have first-hand experience with the aspects of the special education system. Regarding the discrepancy between traditional public and charter schools, Chang said Michigan's lack of accountability among its charter schools means they can essentially turn someone away by dissuading parents from applying, which is wrong, she said.

"We also know part of the whole problem is that it costs a lot of money to support children with special needs. We need to allocate more; we're underfunding our schools," she said. "We've been doing much better in recent years, but we've got to do better because it's not enough to make sure that every child has the resources they need, regardless of what kind of school they go to."

Mallory McMorrow pointed to Massachusetts, regarded nationally for its public and charter school systems. All charter schools in Massachusetts are accountable to the statewide Board of Education and must meet the same standards and regulations as public schools, she said. In Michigan, numerous independent entities across the state authorize charter schools. This creates a discrepancy between the standards of public and charter schools and between each charter school. Requiring all schools to meet the same measures is essential, she said, to ensure a place for every student.

"This is personal to me," she said. "My brother-in-law has Down syndrome, came up through Michigan public schools, and had a great program. But the funding has been cut and cut and cut and cut. When I talk with special needs families, they feel that pressure. We have to bring up the level of education across the board and continue investing in our public schools, so you don't have to make that tough choice. So that if you're going to a public school for your child to get the special needs care they deserve, they're going to have a quality education as well."

Question: Will you prioritize expanding Michigan's Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Program (IECMHC), and what will you do to invest in the well-



being of our children?

Abigail Smathers, a graduate student of Wayne State University's School of Social Work, asked candidates a question about children's emotional and mental well-being. She said in working in early childhood family services and infant mental health, she and her colleagues have seen an alarming increase in behavioral and emotional issues in infants, toddlers, and children across the state. She said research shows that mental health consultations offer an effective solution for children in daycare by reducing suspension, expulsion, and teacher burnout. Still, in our state, this is only available in 18 counties (there are 83 counties in Michigan).

Stephanie Chang said she wants to learn more about what 18 counties have this program and that she favors its expansion. "We've got to start our youngest kids out with the strongest possible support," she said.

Mallory McMorrow agreed. She's said she's concerned about what kids are experiencing amid COVID-19, and how we can empower families with the support they need. News headlines focus on children's low test scores but don't capture everything kids have been through, she said, specifically in the last few years.

"We have to invest more in that funding and make it more accessible," she said. "One thing I hear overwhelmingly from kids is not knowing who to talk to; if their parent isn't equipped to talk about issues or doesn't have access to a therapist, you don't even know where to start. I think that has to be available for all kids and families at a very young age."

Harry Sawicki said he thinks mental health is a big issue in this country, not only for children but also for adults. "It's something I think that needs to be looked at seriously," he said, "and see if we can provide more funding for it."

Erika Geiss said our country and the world have collectively experienced significant trauma regarding COVID-19. There are many issues where access to trauma-informed care is necessary and we must ensure it's happening in our communities and schools. It's also critical to destigmatize access to mental health so people can receive the care they need, she said. She supports increasing access to the IECMHC program in all Michigan counties.

"You can't do schoolwork when you're traumatized by something else, and you can't



succeed academically. If you think about us as adults, if something is going on horribly in one's life or environment, you don't succeed very well at work. It's human nature." she said. "And so we need to acknowledge that and put in place the necessary types of care so people can thrive physically, emotionally, as well as physically."

Check out the rest of this series to learn how these candidates responded to more questions from parents around family issues, as well as how Michigan House candidates responded to parents in a September forum. This community conversation has been edited for clarity and brevity.

This entry is part of our Early Education Matters series, exploring the state of early education and childhood care in our region. Through the generous support of the Southeast Michigan Early Childhood Funders Collaborative (SEMI ECFC), we'll be reporting on what parents and providers are experiencing right now, what's working and what's not, and who is uncovering solutions.



Read more articles by Sarah Williams.

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