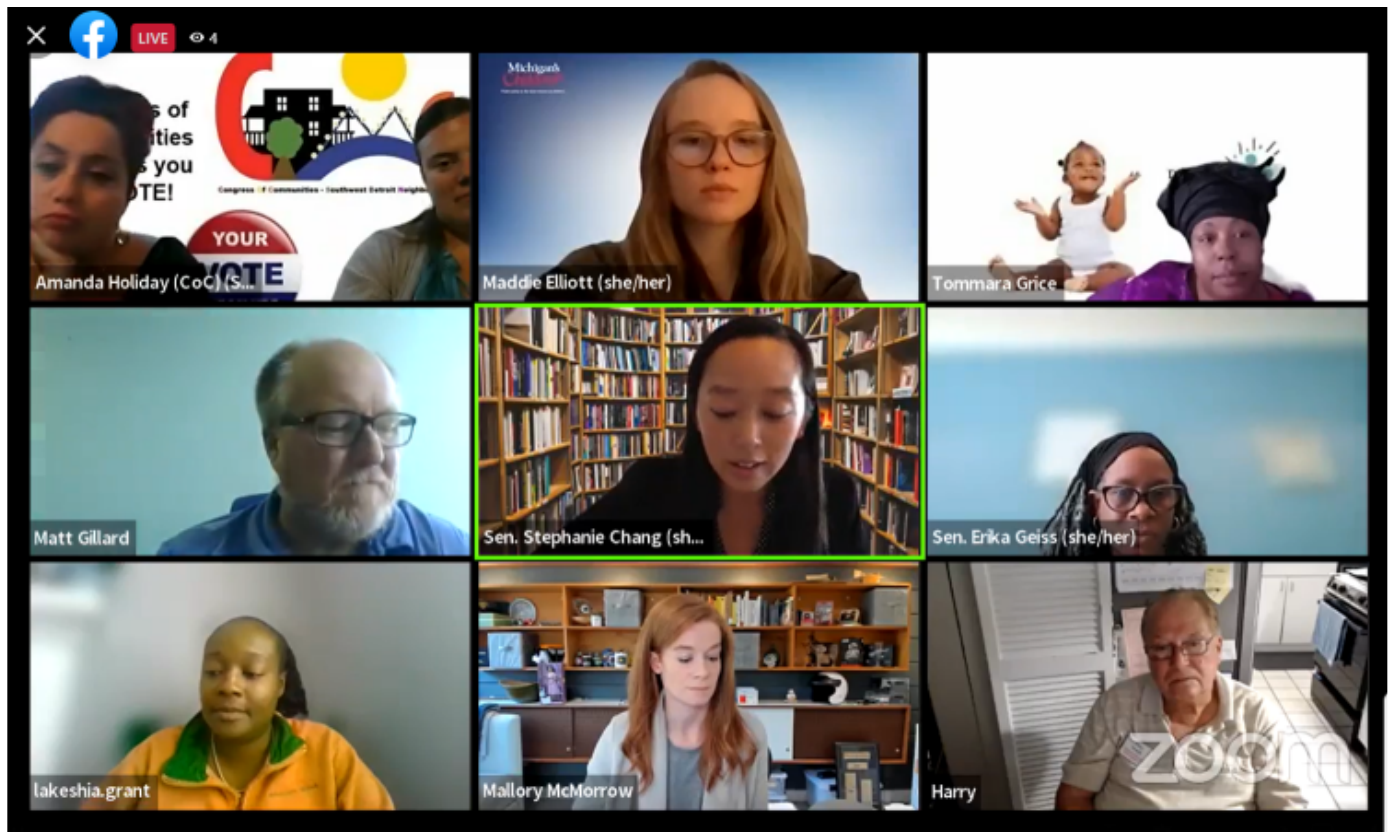




# Universal pre-K, affordable child care, and teacher shortages: Michigan Senate candidates weigh in

SARAH WILLIAMS | SATURDAY, OCTOBER 29, 2022



In metro Detroit, as in many other places in Michigan and the U.S., parents struggle to find affordable, quality care for their young children. Thousands of early education employees, among the lowest wage earners in the state, have left the industry for higher compensation and benefits offered elsewhere. This has led to staffing shortages,



child care facilities closing classrooms and reducing operating hours, and long waitlists for parents.

It's becoming more apparent that the lack of affordability in child care is a threat to our local and state economies. In Michigan, child care for one infant expends 19% of a family's income at the state's median income, and 55% of the income for a parent working at minimum wage, according to research from the Michigan League of Public Policy. For many, child care often exceeds the cost of a mortgage or rental payments and rivals college tuition payments.

To create care that meets the needs of working parents and their children, advocates say the state needs to implement a funding plan for child care that supports living wages for child care professionals and expands high-quality care for infants and toddlers. Detroit parents recently attended a virtual forum to question local candidates running for Michigan's Senate about where they stand on these issues. Poor air quality, access to asthma treatments in schools, and funding for childhood mental health and students with special needs were also on the agenda.

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.

**Parent question: Do you support universal preschool, and how can you ensure that affordable child care in Michigan while maintaining a quality of living wage for child care workers?**

**Harry Sawicki** said he believes a universal preschool program is good but questions how to fund it alongside everything else. "I will try to support as much as I can within the limits of what our budgets are," he said.

**Erika Geiss** supports universal pre-K starting at age four, so kids have a strong foundation moving into kindergarten. Countries that already do this show student higher retention as they move through school and tend to go on to other things post-



secondarily, she said. As for affordable child care, the legislation infused funds toward expanding and supporting child care in this past budget season, she said, including Great Start Readiness Programs, and ensuring childcare organizations and institutions could access additional grants and funding.

"From the time kids are ready to have those social and educational interactions, we need to make sure they have high-quality access to those educators, people, and nurturers who are for them," she said. "And in such a way that all of our parents have access to that care."

**Stephanie Chang** said preschool teachers are heroes. She's "hugely supportive" of universal pre-K, which will require a solid pipeline of high-qualified people who can obtain the salaries they need and deserve.

"We are grateful for what we've been able to do with the money available," she said, pointing to the \$250 million Michigan's child care centers have received in support through COVID-19 stabilization grants. "But, we've got to make sure we're building things out in a sustainable way because these problems are not going away anytime soon, and if anything, are likely to get worse unless we take bold action now."

**Mallory McMorrow** also favors universal pre-K and said she was frustrated to see this cut from the Build Back Better federal negotiations. She advocates for approaching this and childcare as an economic issue. As Democratic Vice Chair of the Senate Economic Development and Small Business Committee in Michigan, McMorrow's concerned about the state's potential fiscal cliff due to its many retirees and lack of a young workforce. She said we have to start considering subsidizing child care as a government, which strongly happens in business.

"We've got to keep pushing, she said. "If we believe, as a state, and as a country, in supporting working families, then we have to invest in the same way we do manufacturing and engineering jobs, which is going to attract people to the state, and keep people in the state."

### **Question: How will we build the workforce needed for early childhood and education?**

Early childhood educator and doula Lakeshia Grant also had a question for the candidates. She said when talking about universal preschool, we must address the need to recruit more people to go into classrooms and field that.



**Erika Geiss** said we could tackle the teacher shortage in many ways, but ensuring respect and fair compensation for the profession is paramount. She pointed to a bill she introduced this year with Sen. Dayna Polehanki, both former educators. The bill would help increase the pipeline to education by giving paraprofessionals a path to becoming certified teachers. Also, in this past cycle, she said, she and her colleagues on the Education and Career Readiness Committee put language into the budget that would provide stipends for students studying to become teachers. She said both measures could help create a pathway for people to enter the field, become certified, and see it as a well-paid career.

"A lot of careers that tend to be more dominated by women are the ones where women are not receiving the type of pay that matches their expertise and professionalism," she said. "So we need to make sure those are some of the issues we're also addressing."

**Senator Chang** echoed the ideas in the bill package by Sen. Polehanki, focused on teacher recruitment and retention in Michigan. These include providing a student-teacher stipend, reimbursing student-teachers for the cost of childcare during their service, helping to pay for teacher professional development, and providing coaching and a system of support for new teachers. All these ideas center on the need to respect and reward people for their work, which is critical, she said, for the future of our state.

"Right now, clearly, we are not doing enough, and teachers are being disrespected at every turn. We've got to do better because they are some of the most important people in our communities," she said, "who are building out what we're going to be."

**Mallory McMorrow** said she was passionate to co-sponsor all of the bills in this package. There's a massive weight on teachers and child care providers to solve everything, she said, and the fact that states are considering arming teachers is horrifying. Teachers want to teach in a safe environment and provide a space for kids where they can learn and grow and feel creative, she said, but we're asking them to do so many things beyond their pay.

She said we must increase the teacher pipeline with pay and eliminate hurdles. She also noted teachers who spend hundreds of dollars out of their pockets to decorate classrooms and purchase supplies. "We don't pay for that in our budgets right now. It is a necessary thing that we need to include in budgets," she said, "so teachers do have to pay for that themselves to be able to provide a good experience for kids."



**Harry Sawicki** agrees there is a teacher shortage problem in Michigan.

"We also have a problem in the shortage of nurses; we have a problem in a shortage of tradespeople. We need to do something at a state level to improve the quality of life so we can retain these people in our state and bring these people back into our state."

*Check out the rest of this series to learn how these candidates responded to more questions from parents about family issues and how Michigan House candidates answered 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.**

*Sarah Williams is a freelance writer and photojournalist based in metro Detroit. Her work focuses on individuals and nonprofit organizations investing in their communities through arts and culture, holistic healthcare, education and neighborhood revitalization.*

*Follow her on Instagram @sarahwilliamstoryteller*

#### SPONSORED BY

##### FOCUS AREAS

ARCHITECTURE  
ARTS  
BUILDING COMMUNITIES  
ENTREPRENEURS  
FILM  
GREEN  
GREEN TECH  
HIGHER ED  
JOB CREATION  
MICHIGAN NIGHTLIGHT  
MOBILITY  
MOVE TO DETROIT

##### NEIGHBORHOOD INNOVATION

REDEVELOPMENT  
REUSE / REBUILD  
SHOP LOCAL  
SMALL BUSINESS  
SOCIAL INNOVATION  
TALENT DIVIDEND  
TRANSIT  
URBAN FARMING  
URBAN LEADERSHIP  
WOODWARD AVENUE  
WORKFORCE/TALENT DEVELOPMENT



[ABOUT MODEL D](#)  
[CONTACT US](#)  
[DETROIT LINKS](#)  
[HAVE A TIP?](#)  
[PRIVACY POLICY](#)  
[TERMS OF USE](#)

COPYRIGHT © ISSUE MEDIA GROUP. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

