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'Sandbox Party' sets sights on early education funding

Legislature approves another \$2.6 million for youngest children

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Five-year-old Joey Smith molded the foundation for a sand castle Thursday on the playground of a child care center.

The Mason child was oblivious as a group of adults nearby launched a new "Sandbox Party" designed to sustain early childhood education funding.

Joey also was unaware of larger political forces taking shape a mile away at the Capitol in Lansing. Later Thursday, lawmakers in the House and Senate provided a more solid foundation for early childhood education by boosting its funding by \$2.6 million.

Lawmakers approved \$98.6 million for the Great Start School Readiness Program, an effort to help low-income, at-risk children become prepared for school. The budget for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1 now goes to Gov. Jennifer Granholm for her signature.

"(Funding) is moving in the right direction," said state Rep. Kathy Angerer, a Dundee Democrat and House majority floor leader. "Both Democrats and Republicans agree that early childhood education is important."

Launching the "Sandbox Party" event the same day of a funding increase was a happy accident for some.

The "party" includes a statewide coalition of government leaders, child service professionals and parents who want to stress the importance of education for children, ages up to 5, at a critical stage of their intellectual and emotional development.

The nonpartisan effort was launched at the Educational Child Care Center, 1715 W. Main St., which Joey has attended nearly his entire life. The nonprofit center receives roughly 15 percent of its funding from the state.

Group organizers insist the effort just isn't a flash in the pan, but will be a sustained movement.

On Aug. 26, the "Sandbox Party" will hold a convention at the Breslin Student Events Center at Michigan State University.

Organizers say they will not endorse candidates in the Nov. 2 general election, but will educate voters where candidates stand on funding for early childhood education.

"Science has shown that early ages, 0-5, is a critical window of opportunity (in education)," said state Rep. Richard Ball, R-Laingsburg. "Kids soak up knowledge like sponges."

Advocates say government funding of early childhood education is important because many families cannot afford preschool.

They say 45 percent of all births in Michigan are to single women with incomes below the poverty line, and according to Kids County, one in five Michigan children now live with a family earning an income below the poverty line.

Additional Facts

What's next

- The "Sandbox Party" will hold a convention from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Aug. 26 at the Breslin Student Events Center at Michigan State University. The free event will feature family entertainment, exhibitors and an appearance by the rock band, The Verve Pipe, which will perform family friendly songs.
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