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Children just as important as tea partyers

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The tea party movement may not be the most important force affecting the races for governor and the Legislature in Michigan this year.

Children's advocates across the state have joined forces to create the Sandbox Party, a nonpartisan, nonpolitical organization that wants to force candidates to focus on a child's first 1,000 days of life, the time period most vital to development and future success.

"Mounting evidence has convinced us that Michigan's economic future will be determined by the resources the state puts into its young children today," Judy Y. Samelson, CEO of the Early Childhood Investment Corp. (ECIC), said in a news release.

Empowering experience

Sandbox Party volunteers have been interviewing every candidate running for state office. That's how Teresa Gormley, a 49-year-old mother of seven, found herself asking questions of U.S. Rep. Pete Hoekstra, one of the five Republicans running for governor, at his July 6 appearance at the American Legion Hall in Lapeer.

"I felt a little like a reporter," she said, "and I took my 13-year-old daughter. She wants to be a journalist, and she took notes for me. That is totally out of my comfort zone, but at the same time, I felt that I had power!" Gormley said.

"I was not only there in this role as the parent liaison for Lapeer County, but also a parent," she said. "I was speaking with a local candidate this morning, a current state representative, and he said, 'We hear you in Lansing.'"

Samelson, who runs ECIC, the nonprofit that administers the state's Great Start program, said in a subsequent interview that children's advocates were moved to action by how little election discussion has been focused on children.

She said the Sandbox Party will not endorse candidates, but instead, after the primary, will conduct a candidate survey "so ultimately, we will know and we will share and make sure that parents across Michigan are as educated as they can be on where gubernatorial candidates and state legislative candidates stand" on early childhood issues.

An issue here to stay

If the Sandbox Party could harness the fire of parents statewide, it could create a lobby that could greatly impact public policy. That's a big if, but the party plans to test the waters with a Sandbox

convention 1-4 p.m. Aug. 26 at Michigan State University, the week before the state Republican and Democratic conventions.

The free event is open to kids and families, and the men running for governor have been asked to bring their wives and children and to speak about their intent.

"I hope that what we demonstrate this fall in this election is that this issue is not going to go away," Samelson said. "People who care about children and making Michigan the best place in America to raise a family know it won't go away."

For more information about the Sandbox Party and its parent coalitions, visit www.greatstartforkids.org/content/great-start-your-community.
