



NEWS RELEASE

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Sandbox Party focuses on the key to Michigan's economic future – young children *Supporters say election season heightens importance of maintaining state's investment in early childhood*

LANSING – Concerned that a key component of Michigan's economic turnaround may be lost amid election-year politics, children's advocates today launched the Sandbox Party for Michigan's Youngest Learners.

The nonpartisan, nonpolitical party represents the interests of Michigan's youngest residents, from birth to age 5. A growing body of research identifies this age group as vital to developing competent citizens and workers.

"Mounting evidence has convinced us that Michigan's economic future will be determined by the resources the state puts into its young children today," said Judy Y. Samelson, CEO of the Early Childhood Investment Corp. (ECIC), a nonprofit public corporation that is implementing a comprehensive early childhood system in Michigan. "This strategic approach to rebuilding our economy must be a prominent part of the discussion throughout this year's elections."

The party was launched during a news conference at Lansing's Educational Child Care Center, near a sandbox where several young children were playing.

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Sandbox Party supporters include parents, representatives from leading early childhood organizations including Michigan's Children, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Michigan, Children's Trust Fund, Michigan League for Human Services, Michigan Association for the Education of Young Children, Michigan Council for Maternal and Child Health, Michigan Association of United Ways and other state leaders.

"We can't let this election sidestep our most important special interest group – our children," said state Superintendent of Public Instruction Mike Flanagan in a written statement. "The creation of the Sandbox Party means voters now will have a focal point for directing their concerns about early childhood issues."

The Sandbox Party will hold a convention at Michigan State University's Breslin Student Events Center from 1-4 p.m. on Aug. 26, just days before the Michigan Republican and Democratic parties hold their conventions.

The convention is free and open to all – kids are especially encouraged to attend with their families -- and thousands of supporters from across the state are expected. There will be family entertainment, exhibitors and special appearances by popular Michigan sports, music and news personalities. Featured entertainment includes the Michigan rock band The Verve Pipe. The band's October 2009 release, "A Family Album," features family-friendly songs.

The gubernatorial candidates have been invited to speak and to bring their families.

"We plan to fire up the troops to send home the message that all aspects of early childhood – from physical and emotional health to quality child care and prekindergarten – are crucial to Michigan's next generation," Samelson said. "We want to make sure candidates understand that Michigan voters want to know where candidates stand on early childhood – and candidates should be prepared to tell them."

Eighty-three percent of Michigan voters in a poll last year said early childhood development and education programs are an "absolute necessity" for their community; 75 percent want them spared from state budget cuts.

The 55 Great Start Collaboratives (<http://www.greatstartforkids.org/content/great-start-your-community>) and Parent Coalitions (<http://www.greatstartforkids.org/content/parent-coalition-contacts>) statewide will coordinate local Sandbox Party information and activities.

Great Start was created in 2004 to restructure the state's investment in children from birth to age 5. ECIC was formed to build, grow and administer Great Start, starting with the creation of local community efforts. ECIC also focuses on building a stronger, higher quality child care system for Michigan.

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