



OPINION

Young children key to economic turnaround

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From the St. Joseph County Great Start Collaborative

The St. Joseph County Great Start Collaborative and Great Start Parent Coalition are gearing up to make sure local voters know about the Sandbox Party for Michigan's Youngest Learners, which was recently launched in Lansing.

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, and crucial to Michigan's economic turnaround.

"Working with other parents in the community, we know there is a groundswell of support for programs that help grow healthy, capable children," said Brenda McGowan, who leads the St. Joseph County Great Start Parent Coalition. "The Sandbox Party gives us a rallying point for our efforts to ensure that local children start kindergarten ready to learn."

The 55 Great Start Collaboratives and Great Start Parent Coalitions statewide are coordinating local Sandbox Party outreach, including information for candidates running for office. Locally, contact www.sjcgsc.org.

"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 administers the coalitions and is implementing a comprehensive early childhood system across Michigan.

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 wanted them spared from state budget cuts.

Great Start was created in 2004 to restructure the state's investment in children from birth to 5. The 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 and higher quality child care system for Michigan.

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