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## Great start: Members of the Lenawee Great Start Parent Coalition advocate for the needs of families and children

**By Arlene Bachanov**

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ADRIAN, Mich. —

In a classroom on the ground floor of Adrian's St. Joseph Academy, a dozen or so parents — mostly moms, but a couple of dads as well — and their young children sit at tables with a colorful array of vegetables, cheese and tortillas on plates in front of them. "How many of us love to eat?" asks Awilda Dominguez, from the MSU Extension's Family Nutrition Program. Almost everyone raises their hands.

"How many of you love to eat veggies?"

Fewer, but still a good number, of hands go up.

"Say yummy."

"Yummy," comes a chorus of little voices.

Dominguez is leading this past Monday night's parent-child activity to kick off the monthly meeting of the Lenawee Great Start Parent Coalition. Each meeting begins with a similar activity, whether it's exercise and movement, making masks for Halloween — next month's featured event — or in this case teaching parents and children how to make a fun and healthy snack.

The Lenawee Great Start Collaborative is made up of parents, community agencies, business leaders, health care providers, educators, and others in the community who have an interest in early childhood education. The Parent Coalition is a partnership of parents who advocate for the needs of families and children in the county.

"It's a grass-roots effort to get parents involved in the community," says Heather Perez, a parent liaison with the Great Start Collaborative. The coalition meets on the first Monday of each month to discuss issues of interest, identify needs in the community when it comes to young children, and share ideas with each other.

“They are the engine that really helps to drive the work of the collaborative,” says Lenawee Great Start Collaborative Director Margaret Gross.

For example, says Gross, the coalition recently spearheaded the creation of a list of skills that will help children be successful in kindergarten, with a brochure for parents created as a result. “The (coalition) drove the project and got it done and it was endorsed by county school principals,” she says. “It was a nice collaboration between parents and educators.”

The coalition also sponsors events around the county including Parent Cafés to which parents can come to discuss specific topics. One recent topic of interest, for example, was the difficulty some parents have had getting their children immunized conveniently.

Each of Michigan’s 55 Great Start Collaboratives has a parent coalition — something that according to Gross is unique to the state. “Michigan is the only state in the nation that has taken this on,” she says. “No one else has parent coalitions.”

In general, she adds, parents who get involved in these coalitions get much more involved in the larger community, with their children not only benefiting from the work itself but also from seeing “the bigger picture that they’re part of the larger community,” Gross says.

And the bottom line, she adds, is that parents in the coalition “know they’re not alone.”

Back in the academy classroom, the children and their parents have sampled the rollups they created under Dominguez’ tutelage and the children have gone off to play under supervision in another room while the meeting continues, led by Perez and her fellow parent liaison, Lisa Eack.

The evening’s main topic of discussion is the upcoming candidates’ forum on Sept. 28 at the LISD. The parents are coming up with questions they’d want the candidates to answer, on topics ranging from mandatory insurance coverage for autism to the importance of funding early childhood education. Along the way, some parents are able to share information with other parents who are seeking help with one issue or another concerning their own children.

Being able to bring parents together to not only help each other out but to have a say in issues affecting the county’s children is key to the Parent Coalition, says Perez. “It’s all about facilitating the parent voice,” she says, calling the coalition “a PTO for early childhood.”

One parent who’s been involved with the coalition for about two years now, since the time it formed, is April Berendt of Adrian. Berendt’s 5-year-old son Samuel has Down syndrome, and for her the coalition is a valuable way to get information that will help her son.

“I needed to find out about resources for kids with special needs ... I’ve found a lot out just by parents

talking to each other,” she says.

Another parent present Monday evening, Davin Heckman of Adrian, is fairly new to the coalition. It’s just his second meeting.

The father of 6-year-old Jonah, 4-year-old Oscar and 1 ½-year-old Sergio, Heckman said the coalition is a way for him to get connected with what’s going on in the community when it comes to early childhood. Jonah’s in first grade now, but “when your kids are at home you feel like you’re in this little bubble,” Heckman says.

Both parents, who moved to Adrian from other parts of the country, think that the community — whether the city, the county, or the state — needs to put a focus on its littlest residents. “Our community needs to do everything for its youngest,” says Heckman, to which Berendt adds “because they’re our future.”

For Berendt, being part of the coalition “makes me feel like I have a voice.

“My voice along with everyone else’s voice is a bigger voice,” she says.

Heckman says that for him, being able to hear about other parents’ concerns, and possibly be able to offer his own support and input, is important.

“It’s parents feeling like they can talk to each other,” he says. “Everyone feels like they’re doing it alone, (so) this is such a help.”