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Sandbox crowd provides a convention warm-up

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EAST LANSING -- It was a noisy warm-up to this weekend's state party conventions, as gubernatorial candidates Rick Snyder and Virg Bernero spoke briefly to a few thousand children and parents gathered Thursday to promote state support for early childhood development programs.

It was the candidates' first appearance at one event, speaking a half hour apart at the Breslin Center on Michigan State University's campus.

The Sandbox Convention featured mostly loud music and children's entertainers, pizza and the banging of plastic thunder sticks, while dozens of children flitted about the arena floor.

Neither candidate held the antsy crowd rapt. A few knock-knock jokes would have been better.

Republican candidate Snyder gave an abbreviated stump speech of his vision for Michigan to improve the economy and education system and keep more young people in the state with more jobs.

"Early childhood is near and dear to my heart," he said, noting his three children and his involvement with an early childhood initiative when he lived in South Dakota.

He called for the end of divisive politics. He spoke of an era of innovation.

Democrat Bernero said that early education would be a top priority, as he touted his wife, an elementary school principal, and his commitment to school funding.

"You are Michigan's future," Bernero exhorted to the cheering crowd.

Afterward, Bernero told reporters, "We have to invest more in our young people so we have to invest less in (the) corrections system on the back end."

Snyder said it was important to speak at the event.

"They're our future, these kids are," he said. "To the degree we can support their parents and gain them the best education to be successful, that's what this is all about."

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