

## Sandbox Party convention draws thousands to MSU

Event focuses on need for early education efforts

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EAST LANSING - Several thousand parents, children and advocates for early childhood programs swarmed into the Breslin Center on Thursday for the Sandbox Party Convention.

The three-hour event, which was free and open to the public, included speeches by children's advocates and gubernatorial candidates Rick Snyder and Virg Bernero.

"I want them to walk away with a better sense of their choice for a future leader for this state," said Judy Samelson, CEO of the Early Childhood Investment Corporation, a sponsor for the event.

The nonpartisan Sandbox Party, formed in July, is a coalition of government and independent groups who want to raise awareness about early education and childhood programs, focusing on children less than 5 years old.

Snyder and Bernero's speeches focused on the importance of education as an investment in Michigan's economic future.

"It's critically important that we build a future for all of the wonderful kids sitting here - we want you to stay in Michigan," Snyder said.

Bernero said he would make early childhood programs a priority.

"Education is economic development," he said.

Organizers for the event say they will not endorse candidates for the Nov. 2 general election, but want to educate voters about candidates' stances on early childhood programs.

"Our job is not to engage in politics but to engage in education," Samelson said.

The need to reform and restructure education in Michigan was proven by the thousands of people who attended the convention, she added.

Many parents were there as part of the Great Start program and other organizations focused on early education.

"I'm a stay-at-home dad and I've seen the value of the Great Start system," said MC Rothhorn, a 38-year-old from Lansing who was at the convention with his 5- and 8-year-old children.

When it comes to the election, the new governor and legislators will need to focus on adequately funding all levels of education, he said.

"I want people to make some hard choices," he said.

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