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Gov hopefuls discuss early learning at Sandbox Party

Candidates speak to parents who support childhood programs

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East Lansing -- Thousands of pint-sized Michiganians boogied, bounced in their strollers and provided one heck of an audience Thursday for Michigan's gubernatorial candidates.

About 3,500 people -- many toting diaper bags and fruit snacks -- converged on the Jack Breslin Student Events Center at Michigan State University for the Sandbox Party Convention, meant to encourage lawmakers to support preschool programs, K-12 education and other priorities for children.

It was the first time Republican Rick Snyder and Democrat Virg Bernero appeared at the same event since before the Aug. 2 primary election, but their paths didn't cross. Snyder left before the dancing to the "Hippo Hop," which preceded Bernero's entrance.

East Lansing mom Emily Barkham came with her three boys -- Edward, 3; Benjamin, almost 2; and Frederick, 3 months -- holding tight to Edward's hand while pushing a double stroller. She came because she doesn't want lawmakers to cut funding for Michigan's Great Start Readiness Program, which funds preschools across the state.

"Edward and Benjamin both go to Great Start," Barkham said, noting Benjamin is enrolled in a special program for children with delayed speech. "The speech (program) has definitely helped him with talking, and they both get to have interaction with other children."

Tots tossed giant plastic balls into the air as Snyder promised parents he would create more jobs to keep their kids from moving out of state when they move out of the house.

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

He noted he has three kids, including one who just graduated from Albion College and faces a challenging job hunt in the state.

After spirited cheering and hopping, Bernero appeared on stage with his daughter, Kelly, a recent University of Michigan graduate, and wife, Terri -- principal of East Lansing's Lewton Elementary School.

"(Terri Bernero) knows first hand what state budget cuts have meant for the children of Michigan, especially for early childhood programs," Bernero said. "Education is economic development, and that is what we need to convince the leaders of Michigan of."

Advocates and parents formed The Sandbox Party in July to ensure Michigan maintains its investment in children from birth to age 5, when research shows it does the most good, they say. The party is nonpartisan

and nonpolitical. Its main sponsor is the Early Childhood Investment Corporation.

Supporters note experts have linked prospects for an economic rebound to ensuring Michigan children are ready to learn when they start kindergarten.

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