

# RALLY FOR KIDS



FOR THE CITIZEN PATRIOT • HANNAH ENGELSON

Jackson resident Dan Gretzner cheers with his daughter Hannah, 4, during the opening ceremony of the Star Power gathering Wednesday morning at the State Capitol in Lansing.

## Event at Capitol urges lawmakers to fund programs

By Bob Wheaton

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Mayerick Stergakos, 3, of Jackson played in the dirt on the State Capitol front lawn Wednesday as adults spoke about early childhood education and health programs.

About 3,000 people, including 140 from Jackson County, attended a rally to urge state lawmakers to support funding of programs that help children from birth to age 5.

Legislators would be wise

to invest in children who are Maverick's age because preparing them for school will save the government money in the long run, early childhood advocates said.

Mayerick had another issue on his mind. "I want a dinosaur toy," he said.

He attended the fourth annual Star Power rally with his parents, Rick, 28, and Erika, 24, and his brother, Sedrick, 1½, who has special needs.

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Zach Perfitt, a dean for Paragon Charter Academy in Jackson, talks with eighth-grader Jeremiah Haskell about his question for state Rep. Martin Griffin during the Star Power rally.

# Rally seeks funds for early education

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"This is what needs to be done to get lawmakers to see what needs to be done," said Rick Stergakos, who owns a construction company and attends classes at Baker College.

Like others at the event, the Stergakos family wore yellow T-shirts that read "Great Start Star Power 2010."

After the rally, members of the Jackson County group met with their representatives in Lansing — Republican state Sens. Mike Nofs of Battle Creek and Randy Richardville of Monroe, and state Rep. Martin Griffin, D-Jackson.

Kelly Robles, a preschool teacher at ABC Academy, 800 Laurence Ave. in Blackman Township, asked Griffin what she could do to make her voice heard.

"I'm not a big political person," Robles said. "I mean, I teach 4-year-olds. We're really concerned. We've heard about programs being cut for next year, and we have kids on the waiting list."

The news from Griffin wasn't good.

"Unfortunately, the revenue is not there," he said. "We can't deficit-spend. Everybody has to share (in balancing the budget)."

Star Power is sponsored by the Early Childhood Investment Corp. and the state's Great Start Collaborative and Great Parent Coalitions,

which all attempt to prepare children for school.

"The main message is that we care about our kids and we vote," said Sheri Butters, director of Jackson County's Great Start. "So legislators need to pay attention. Because when parents vote, they're going to be thinking about their kids."

If the state doesn't spend money to prepare children to enter school, it's going to have to spend money later on prisons to house adults who didn't do well in school, she said.

Judy Samelson, CEO of the Early Childhood Investment Corp., said the state cut \$151 million from early childhood programs in the current budget year. That meant less money for prekindergarten, child care and Medicaid, she said.

Richardville, who spoke from the Capitol steps at the rally, said afterward that public education — and specifically early childhood education — are top spending priorities.

He said he met with Jackson County Great Start officials last year and then helped push through a reinstatement of some of the earlier-approved early childhood education cuts in the budget.

"Virtually everything is being cut," Richardville said. "These programs are being cut in a much smaller way than many others."