

GREAT START COLLABORATIVE

Annual meeting focuses on early childhood needs

By Chris Gautz

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A broken model for school funding, problems with Medicaid and teen pregnancy were among the concerns raised with a panel of local legislators Friday morning.

About 50 attended the Great Start Collaborative's third annual legislative breakfast, which took place at CMS Energy's headquarters in downtown Jackson.

"I think we're very fortunate that we have legislators that understand our community's needs regarding early childhood," said Carolyn Bloodworth, secretary and treasurer of the Consumers Energy Foundation. "They get it."

U.S. Rep. Mark Schauer, D-Battle Creek, state Sen.

Randy Richardville, R-Monroe, state Rep. Martin Griffin, D-Jackson, and Greg Moore from the office of State Sen. Mike Nofs, R-Battle Creek, participated in the discussion regarding early childhood development.

The goal of the collaborative is to coordinate resources in the community so families in the county can provide a great start for their children from birth to age 5.

Earlier this year, the utility announced it had increased its financial support for early childhood by about 70 percent, and it has donated \$30,000 to programs across the state. David Mengelber, senior vice president of governmental and public affairs for CMS

See **COLLABORATIVE**, on A5



U.S. Rep. Mark Schauer, D-Battle Creek, said early childhood should be part of the area's economic development strategy. **CITIZEN PATRIOT FILE PHOTO**

Continued from A3

Energy, said utility leaders see it as one of the best investments they can make in the state's future.

Schauer said early childhood should be part of the area's economic development strategy.

The dwindling economy has meant both less money to spend on programs that address those concerns, but it also has led to an increased demand for such services. Richardville said he was

one of several senators recently who fought to restore \$6 million for early childhood programs that Gov. Jennifer Granholm had recommended be cut from the budget.

One of the biggest areas of agreement among community leaders and politicians was that their efforts won't work unless parents start getting involved.

For many children, the learning stops when they get home, Griffin said. "We cannot legislate common sense," Griffin said. "So

many of these children have a far different home life than any of us can ever imagine and that's really where the problem is."

Jackson NAACP President Arlene Robinson agreed and said her organization wants to help.

"Our young people are having children, and they are not prepared to raise these children they are having," Robinson said. "I will be glad to work with any one of you and I hope that we can get this ball rolling."