Missouri mother ignites movement, remains Parents as Teachers advocate

While seven months pregnant with her daughter, Michelle Gieselman decided she had to stand up to the Missouri state budget cuts to the Parents as Teachers program funding in the only way she felt she could: she updated her Facebook status, sounding the alarm to a close circle of small-town mothers.

“It really spread the news,” Michelle said. “I think people didn’t think education would be cut, but Parents as Teachers was affected.”

Within days, a Facebook group had sprung up in her name, eventually attracting almost 16,000 followers. They posted comments of support and stories chronicling the organization’s impact on their lives.

Michelle herself has a similar story. Her first son Michael seemed to be developing normally. But as a teen mother, she was inexperienced. In a high school parenting class, a Parents as Teachers educator came in to speak, prompting Michelle to schedule home visits.

“At six months, I didn’t realize he should have been pushing his arms up and holding his upper torso up,” she said. But once her parent educator began checking for development benchmarks, Michelle was able to have a more meaningful dialogue with her pediatrician.

The parent educator assigned to her second child, Hayden, re-affirmed her faith in Parents as Teachers. “We had just moved to a small town; I didn’t have any way to socialize my sons,” Michelle said. So parent educator Martha Martin introduced the family to other stay-at-home moms, who organized weekly play dates for their children. “I probably would’ve moved if it wasn’t for Martha,” Michelle said.

Years later, concern for Martin’s job security motivated her to fight debilitating budget cuts.

“I said, ‘If you participate in this program, you need to speak out! We don’t want this to go away.’”

A day of activism in Jefferson city was organized in the midst of the crisis using the Facebook page and the Parents as Teachers national office. Those at the rally and meetings with legislators wore buttons that read, "We'll give you 154,000 reasons to fund MO Parents as Teachers programs," referring to the number of Missouri children that received Parents as Teachers services in the preceeding year.