



Best Practices Case Study

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Editor's note: The Confidence in Kansas Public Education Task Force sponsors the Friends of Education Awards. To recognize exemplary partner development, Kansas Partners in Education sponsors the Partner Activity award category. Each nominee is a business, company, or agency that has provided an on-going partner activity over an extended period of time (minimum of three years), by means of volunteer time, services, finances or other types of support, in amount that exceeds typical collaboration from a private or public institution. This case study provides information about a 2008 Partner Activity nominee and is an educational service to KSPE members, their organizations, and prospective partners.

The Opportunity Project (TOPS)

*District contact person: Aaron Pannone, Public Information Secretary,
apannone@usd260.com*

The Opportunity Project (TOP) was founded by Barry Downing in 2000. The charitable organization is devoted to serving children living in poverty or at risk situations. TOP strives to help children learn regardless of their economic status, and with the help of public and private partners, they are able to provide the highest educational opportunities to poor children from birth to five years of age.

TOP began its efforts in 2000 developing early centers devoted to creating school readiness for children living in poverty. During its first three years of development, TOP researchers studied the efforts by educators in low income areas of major U.S. cities to improve the educational performance of minority and economically disadvantaged children. Based upon these findings, TOP researched longitudinal studies proving that high quality, early education undoubtedly produced improved life outcomes for poor children.

The Opportunity Project opened its first early childhood learning center in Oaklawn, one of Wichita's lowest income areas in July 2003. The \$4 million dollar, 30,000 square foot, 12-classroom center serves as a "learning community" for area educators, facility staff, families, and children in poverty. Enrollment has steadily increased from 90 in 2003 to nearly 200 today. Educational outcomes have been so successful that TOP's second early learning center opened in Northeast Wichita during the fall of 2006. Governor Kathleen Sibelius recognized its success

when she met with Mr. Downing to discuss how TOP could be a “national model for how to turn at-risk kids into confident and prepared kindergartners.”¹

The Opportunity Project has impacted more than just the students and families that take advantage of their program. TOP partners with Derby USD 260 and Wichita USD 259, as they help tackle the problem of students beginning Kindergarten without basic skills. The impact of Oaklawn’s TOP Learning Center has already been felt in nearby Derby and Wichita schools. Kindergarten students who participated in the TOP program are better adjusted to the school environment, and as Mr. Downing reports, “Not only are they doing better intellectually, but this has a dramatic impact on these kids’ self-esteem.”²

Derby USD 260 recognized Barry Downing and The Opportunity Project program from not only their preparation of students for entering Kindergarten, but also for their overall organization’s mission “to ensure all children have an opportunity to succeed in school and improve their chances for success and happiness in their adult lives.”³ With Mr. Downing’s plans of opening even more learning centers in the Wichita poorest areas by 2010, Derby and other nearby school districts will undoubtedly rely heavily on TOP’s influence with economically at-risk students before they enter our school systems. As those TOP students move through our schools over the next several years and approach graduation, it will be exciting to see students succeed that may have otherwise taken a different path. Thank you, TOP, for joining with Derby schools in helping students reach their full potential.

References:

1. **A Model Preschool: State Could Copy Oaklawn Center** by Roy Wenzl. The Wichita Eagle. April 30, 2006.
2. **A \$10.5 Million Plan for Impovershied Wichitans: Project to Help Kids Escape into Hope** by Roy Wenzl. The Wichita Eagle. June 29, 2005.
3. <http://www.theopportunityproject.com/about/mission.html>

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Kansas Partners in Education
c/o KSU College of Education
1100 Mid-Campus Drive
Manhattan KS 66506-5307
785-532-5886

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This publication is edited by Elizabeth Cox,
Credit Union of America, elizabethc@cuofamerica.com.