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Smart start for kids

BY LORI YOUNT
The Wichita Eagle

A unique early-childhood program is helping low-income students enter Wichita-area schools prepared to learn, according to data released by the Opportunity Project, or TOP.

TOP administrators on Thursday gave Gov. Mark Parkinson and community leaders a tour of one of the program's two Early Learning Centers, where students 1 to 5 years old receive eight to 10 hours of instruction a day.

Administrators announced evaluation scores that they said show children in the program, which was established nine years ago, are significantly more capable in behavioral and academic areas than their peers.

They said research-based results will help TOP lay the groundwork to open a third center in the northwest part of Wichita and to pre-empt a raid on tobacco settlement money that funds part of the program.

"We're now saying we have hard numbers... to build the case for early childhood (education)," said Janice Smith, TOP executive director, adding the results for 2009 were verified by an independent evaluator.

More than 80 percent of TOP students scored proficient in five categories — social development, literacy, math, social studies and science — compared with 56 percent among other low-income students.

She said the program will continue to track TOP students as they enter elementary school and until age 30.

Funding

The early indicators of success will help in raising private money for a new Early Learning Center on the northwest side of the city, Smith said.

The program receives about three-fourths of its nearly \$3 million yearly budget from federal and state sources, TOP founder Barry Downing said.

But he said the program didn't suffer from state budget cuts this year because most of the state money TOP receives is through tobacco settlement dollars that weren't touched.

Parkinson said he plans to keep it that way.

He said it's a sound investment, saying studies have shown that for every \$1 spent on early childhood, \$7 is saved in social services and imprisonment costs.

"We have to fight for the funding to keep this going," he said. "Next year is going to be particularly difficult with efforts to raid tobacco funds."

Family education

About 400 students attend the existing centers, and there are waiting lists to enter the year-round program.

TOP leaders said parents' lack of both money and education puts children at a disadvantage before they even start kindergarten because they are often exposed to less conversation and reading, stunting the literacy skills needed to succeed in all subjects.

Nathan Darden, a father of a TOP student, said he didn't need the hard numbers to know that his daughter, 4-year-old Natalee, benefits from the program.

He said he enrolled her three years ago because he thought it was the best child care option while he was at a full-time job. After all, his cousin recommended it, and his cousin's daughter could write her name at age 4.

With Natalee, Darden said he has seen improvement in her social skills.

"She walks around to say hi at all her old classrooms," he said.

He said she has progressed so much that he hopes to enroll Natalee in a private school kindergarten one year early because "she's ready." Then he plans for her to attend a public school.

Parents of TOP students are encouraged to make plans to improve their own education, such as earning a GED, Smith said.

Darden, a single father, said TOP does require parental commitment.

"I've got to be in her life — I have homework to do with her," he said. "You have to be involved, too."

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