

Wichita Eagle, The (KS)

September 22, 2005

Section: LOCAL & STATE

Edition: main

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CHILDREN BREAK GROUND ON NEW LEARNING CENTER

BECCY TANNER, The Wichita Eagle

Barry Downing took a gold shovel Wednesday morning and stuck it in a sand pile.

Taking their cue, a couple dozen children with plastic shovels attacked the pile, cheering and climbing to the top to throw sand.

Downing stood, grinning.

The moment was validation, he said, for all the hard work and planning to create Wichita's second Opportunity Project Learning Center.

"It's gratifying to see almost 200 people here who all support our youngest citizens and how much potential they have," Downing said as the children, brought in from the Oaklawn Learning Center, played.

The occasion was the groundbreaking for the TOP-North Learning Center at 2200 N. Jardine, near 21st and Grove.

The new center will offer preschool classes for the neighborhood's low-income children, and is expected to open next August. It will have eight classrooms for infants through school-age children.

The first Learning Center opened two years ago in Oaklawn, funded largely by the Barry L. and Paula M. Downing Foundation. It worked in partnership with public service organizations and schools.

Partnerships for the new center include the city of Wichita, Boys and Girls Clubs of South Central Kansas, the Wichita school district, Kansas Health Foundation, Wichita Community Foundation, Kansas Department of Commerce and Wichita State University.

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Ron Holt, president of the Boys and Girls Clubs, said planning for the **center** began a year ago as city leaders sought to revitalize 21 st Street.

"We talked about the needs of **children**. After several meetings it was clear the group had a shared dream and common vision," Holt said. "In this neighbor hood, test scores are low, crime rate is high. We need to develop **children** who grow into healthy and thoughtful adults."

The city is providing land for the **center** as part of its overall plan to revitalize 21 st Street.

In concert with those plans, the Boys and Girls Club will build a **new center** in the complex with the **learning center**, Holt said.

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