

The Wichita Eagle

Starting school on TOP: New Opportunity Project school opens in northeast

By CHRIS SHULL | Aug 19, 2006 | 565 words, 0 images

At The Opportunity Project's new preschool in northeast Wichita, Friday morning's classes passed with delightful normalcy. Children stored backpacks in neat cubbyholes, explored their bright, clean classroom stocked with an aquarium, educational toys and kid-sized tables and chairs, and, later, climbed on a brightly colored jungle gym under the watchful eye of two young teachers.

But this buzzing activity took place against a cool, cavernous silence. Only six students enrolled to begin the school year. The new school has a capacity of 160.

"We wanted to start out slowly so we can do what we do well," said Gwen Duggins, 41, director of the new school.

"But we're ready to take more children."

The Opportunity Project was founded four years ago to provide free or reduced-rate preschool and child care for families in need. The program was nationally accredited last spring.

At TOP's south campus near 47th Street South and K-15, nearly 130 preschoolers were enrolled when it started its fourth year of classes on Thursday.

The new school sits on Opportunity Drive just north of 21st Street. It was completed and outfitted in May for \$3 million.

The sprawling yellow manor house has eight classrooms with porches and porch swings; a sunny, spacious indoor play area; a large industrial kitchen; two laundry rooms; offices and meeting rooms; a parent's lounge and reception area -- all connected by wide, carpeted hallways.

In back is a lawn with gravel play areas studded with red, blue and yellow art tables, stepping stools, climbing walls and other playground equipment.

"This for me is a dream," Duggins said. "I grew up five blocks from here. I would have been a child who would have received these services. So for me to be able to give back to the community, it's like I've come full circle."

At half-day preschool classes, children ages 3 to 5 will work on reading and language skills, math and motor skills. They'll explore science, recite rhymes, sing songs and don costumes for "dramatic play."

"We don't just watch children and let them play," Duggins said. "They are engaged in learning. We're definitely in line with what they'll be getting in the future (at Wichita public schools) in terms of curriculum."

TOP's annual operating budget for the two schools is \$2 million, raised by tuition fees, funds allocated through the Wichita and Derby public schools, state agencies, and from private contributions. The Kansas Health Foundation contributed \$2 million to TOP. Wichita businessman Barry Downing gave more than \$1 million to build the first school and more to endow TOP programs.

By the start of school next year, Duggins hopes North TOP is filled to its capacity of 160 students.

Parents can enroll in the TOP program by calling the North or South school. Some full-day and child care programs require tuition of between \$24.50 and \$39 a day, depending on the program, the age of the student and the family's need.

Many of its programs are provided free through the Kansas Social and Rehabilitation Services, Head Start and other agencies.

"As soon as we saw the building and the facilities, it was a no-brainer," said Kari Filippi, 31, who enrolled her son Joseph in the TOP preschool through USD 259.

"Everything is provided. You just need to bring him."

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