

Posted on Wed, Sep. 13, 2006

Opportunity knocks, but too few have opened door

Dramatic effects can have distant and subtle causes, the scientific theory goes.

Take the butterfly effect, a meteorologist's supposition in 1972 that the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil might set off a tornado in Texas. I don't think the meteorologist believed that literally, but rather, that what we do now affects the future in ways we may not fully understand.

It's sort of like firing a rifle at a distant target. Raise the barrel a hair, alter the trajectory a skosh, and you miss your target, wide.

Think of The Opportunity Project that way, although it is aggressive instead of subtle in its attempt to influence. The project, philanthropist Barry Downing's contribution to helping kids break out of the cycle of poverty, aims for a better life for children by adjusting the trajectory of their lives early.

But the project can't change the arc of children's lives without the children, and the north site, which opened last month near 21st and Grove, is nearly empty.

Enrolling your children can mean the difference between the fate they are likely to meet and the destiny you plan for them.

The school is aiming for 150 students, but fewer than 10 children enrolled the first day of school.

To buy the kind of education offered free to those who qualify would cost somewhere between \$6,000 to \$7,000 a year.

"It's not too good to be true," says Polly Basore, a Downing Foundation project manager. "Imagine that there's a \$7,000 gift sitting on the coffee table waiting for someone to take it."

Why parents haven't packed the building for the opportunity there remains a mystery, but that's secondary to getting the word out.

Program founders designed the TOP buildings to resemble big, yellow houses so that the learning environment feels more like a home than an institution. Each classroom has its own back porch and porch swing, its own swath of grass.

Inside, oil paintings, decorative masks and stunning photography line the walls. Sensory overload is the intent, says Janice Smith, TOP's executive director. With classrooms crammed with branches and bark for science and jar after jar of paint for art, the school creates an atmosphere designed to spark curiosity, creativity and critical thinking.

During my visit to the south site last week, I saw an impossibly cute 2-year-old named Makayla sing "You Are My Sunshine." Children ate family-style at tables they set themselves. Afterward, teachers prepared trays of teeny toothbrushes.

"There's a sense of community and belonging they may not have," said Gwen Duggins, director of TOP's north campus.

The operation reminded me of the second tenet in talk show host Tavis Smiley's *Covenant With Black America*, "Establishing a System of Public Education in Which All Children Achieve at High Levels and Reach Their Full Potential."

All of this early care and attention comes not only from the heart, but from mountains of studies that demonstrate this formula works.

Children in TOP will be less likely to drop out of school. Less likely to abuse drugs. They will have greater career opportunities, better health, even better marriages.

And not by chance, not by dumb luck and, certainly, not by the random beating of Brazilian butterfly wings.

But simply because their parents aimed high.

Check it out

AN OPPORTUNITY

For more information on the project, call 973-5341 or 440-2788. TOP offers services for toddlers as well as pre-kindergarteners.

Reach Mark McCormick at 316-268-6549 or mmccormick@wichitaeagle.com.