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Study shows TOP Early Learning Center students more prepared for school than peers

Low-income children attending two particular Wichita early learning centers are getting a leg up on their peers, according to an independent performance study conducted at the centers in July. According to the data, 86 percent of low-income children who participate in the TOP Early Learning Center program demonstrate a readiness for kindergarten compared to a 56 percent readiness rate among low-income children who do not participate in a high-quality early learning program.

“Initially, I didn’t believe our test scores – they looked too good,” said Barry Downing, founder of TOP (The Opportunity Project). “In fact, we hired an independent consultant to assess each student individually and her assessments confirmed that children participating in the TOP program are significantly more prepared to succeed in school than children who do not have access to a high-quality early learning program.”

During the 2008-2009 school year, TOP students demonstrated significant proficiency in the following areas:

Category	2009 Proficiency	8 to 9-Month Gain
Social Development	90%	39%
Language and Literacy	82%	46%
Mathematical Thinking	85%	59%
Social Studies	88%	51%
Scientific Thinking	89%	49%

“Nine years ago, we began planning for these high-quality early learning centers that would focus on making sure more Wichita children living in poverty would be ready for school,” Downing said. “During our first three years of development, we studied what educators were doing in other major U.S. cities to improve the education performance of minority and economically-disadvantaged children. Based upon these findings, we created an early educational, best practice model for children in poverty. We also researched studies that proved high-quality, early education undoubtedly produced improved life outcomes for poor children.”

According to these national studies, children who participate in a high-quality, early learning programs, like TOP Early Learning Centers, are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college and find secure employment as adults. The national studies also determined cost-savings for taxpayers - including reduced special education needs in the public school system, reduced criminal justice system costs, and reduced public assistance program costs - that result when low-income children have access to high-quality early learning programs.

Currently, nearly 400 Wichita area children are enrolled in the TOP program. The majority of TOP students live in families that earn below the federal poverty level. TOP Centers have earned a four-star rating from the Kansas Quality Rating System and are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

TOP is a 501c(3) charity based in Wichita. TOP Early Learning Centers provide educational day care and preschool in some of Wichita’s poorest areas: Oaklawn and north central Wichita. Dedicated to creating school readiness for at-risk children, TOP’s mission is to improve life outcomes for Kansas children living in poverty and to collaborate with educators elsewhere to improve early education for all children living in poverty.

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