

Early learning director to speak in Winfield

Press Release Feb 23, 2018

Cornelia Stevens, executive director of TOP Early Learning Centers in Wichita, will speak at 7 p.m. Tuesday in the Winfield High School Cafeteria.

Stevens is the mother of a daughter who graduated from TOP, the intensive early learning program for children ages 12 months to 5 years. Stevens went to work for TOP in 2013 and has been executive director since.

Save our Schools and Women for Kansas, both of Cowley County, are the sponsors.

TOP operates three early learning centers in Wichita, where 600 primarily poor children have full-day classes for a full year.

“We believe if children have a full day (of early learning) it can make a difference,” Stevens said.

TOP provides low student-teacher ratios.

TOP stands for The Opportunity Project. It was started in 2003 by entrepreneur Barry Downing with the knowledge that supporting children’s early brain development leads to dramatic improvement in their life outcomes.

A longitudinal study of 876 TOP graduates from 2008 to 2014 shows they were in the upper 20 percent of their classes in social behavior with 17 percent less absenteeism. By seventh grade they had an average GPA of 3.07, compared with a control group’s 2.80.

A principle of TOP’s program is parent involvement.

The program’s all-day, all-year curriculum allows working couples and single parents to reduce outlays for day care. At the same time TOP asks parents to engage in their children’s learning and provides vision, hearing, general health assessments and help in creating family improvement plans.

Two meals and snacks are provided each day.

Downing’s vision is large.

“TOP is designed not only to make a difference in the lives of Wichita children in poverty, but also to change the way people think about early at-risk education and to improve early learning environments in Kansas and across the nation,” according to material from the program.

TOP provides mentoring in its methods to other communities including Coffeyville, Kansas City, Kan., and several in western Kansas.

Downing is a partner in cardiac specialty hospitals in Kansas and Texas. He supports the arts in Wichita and is the principal donor of the Downing Gorilla Forest at the Sedgwick County Zoo.



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