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# TOP EARLY LEARNING CENTERS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM HELPS OTHERS



**Published:** Tuesday, August 14th, 2018

### **Students get help from scholarships.**

In the winter of 2015, not long after she began working at TOP (The Opportunity Project) Early Learning CenterSouth in Wichita as an assistant teacher, Sierra Pieschl learned of a scholarship program that would help pay qualified employees' tuition at Butler Community College. Pieschl was already in a Butler early education course taught at the Center and had been thinking about earning her degree. She decided to apply for the scholarship and was accepted.

In Spring 2018, Pieschl graduated from Butler with an Associate of Applied Science degree in Early Childhood Education and is now working at the Center as a preschool teacher.

"It definitely made a difference in receiving my education," said Pieschl, who also received the Pell Grant and academic scholarships. "Without those scholarships I would have earned my degree, but it would have been a lot harder."

Pieschl is just one of several Butler students to benefit from the (TOP) Scholarship Program, a partnership between Butler, the Bank of America Foundation and TOP Early Learning Centers that helps TOP's teachers and parents earn their degrees.

The Opportunity Project, a non-profit organization, was created in 2003 and now operates three preschool and child care centers that serve more than 600 children ages one to five from low-income households. TOP's mission is to deliver a high-quality early learning experience to children living in poverty, providing them tools needed for emotional, academic and lifelong success.

TOP's Executive Director Cornelia Stevens said the scholarship program was born of necessity.

"We have a shortage of qualified early childhood education teachers – it's a local and a national problem," Stevens said. "Some of our employees are interested in becoming teachers but don't have the resources. So, we decided to grow our own."

To qualify for a scholarship, TOP employees must be early childhood education majors. Parents of TOP students are not restricted to a major and can attend other schools, although most choose Butler. Currently, about 46 TOP employees and parents are receiving scholarships.

TOP parent and scholarship recipient, Tisha Kirk, earned her associate degree in elementary education at Butler this spring and will pursue a bachelor's degree in education at Emporia State University this fall.

"The scholarship helped me buy a computer and pay for Wi-Fi for the classes that were online," said Kirk, who has 5- and 9-year-old daughters. "I started going to Butler years ago but didn't finish, but I always wanted to be a teacher. When I learned about the scholarship I said, "I want to do this.'"

Butler Foundation Scholarship Coordinator, Averie Nelson, said the college recognized the need to help students like Kirk and Pieschl.

"Students already face uphill battles in many areas, including transportation, having healthy food and making ends meet," Nelson said. "The TOP Scholarship the Foundation gives them, which is made possible by the Bank of America Foundation, supports these students."

Pieschl is excited about her experience and recommends both Butler and TOP to others.

"Butler makes it real easy for students to achieve their academic goals, and TOP is very caring about their employees and wants them to succeed academically," Pieschl said. "They helped make it possible for me to get me where I wanted to be."

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