The Opportunity Project (TOP) provides young children from disadvantaged homes the early help they need to become successes in school and life.
THE CHALLENGE
Preparing kids to reach for the top is the goal of The Opportunity Project (TOP) in Wichita, Kansas. The charitable organization is dedicated to helping children living in poverty get the education they need and deserve. Through its TOP Early Learning Centers, it provides students with tools and learning strategies that can lead to emotional, academic and lifelong success. Approximately 90% of the children attending the Learning Centers are from disadvantaged households. Most of the students do not have the foundational skills needed for learning. They lack the oral language development and conceptual experiences required for success in school and life.

“INITIATIVES LIKE THE OPPORTUNITY PROJECT IN WICHITA HAVE SHOWN US WHAT’S POSSIBLE WHEN CHILDREN RECEIVE THE HELP THEY NEED AT AN EARLY AGE.”

KATHLEEN SEBELIUS, Former Kansas Governor

The importance of helping kids early is underlined in the book From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development, edited by Jack P. Shonkoff and Deobrah A. Phillips:

“Advances in brain research show that children are born learning and that their first years of life impact the success they experience later in school. Early experiences that are nurturing and active... create a brain with more extensive and sophisticated neuron structures that later determine intelligence and behaviour.”

THE SOLUTION
The educators and staff at TOP are driven by the belief that all students can learn effectively, no matter what their economic background. By addressing the emotional, physical, social and academic needs of young children, the TOP Early Learning Centers deliver high-quality learning experiences.

“Children light up our world, make us smile and give us hope,” says executive director Cornelia Stevens. “That’s why we make them our TOP priority at all three TOP Early Learning Centers. Each day we are honored to educate and care for more than 600 of Wichita’s best and brightest one-to-five year olds. Our promise is to provide each child a superior early education and loving care each and every day they are with us.”

TOP students attend full-day, year-round classes led by teachers and teaching assistants with appropriate degrees and certifications. From the founding of the first TOP Early Learning Center, in 2003, the organization has chosen a curriculum that aligns with what is taught in each local school district and specifically targets the needs of at-risk children with research-based best practices.

For the latter, TOP turned to the Success for All’s Curiosity Corner. This comprehensive program for preschoolers is designed to provide a strong foundation in language and literacy, mathematics, science, listening and social skills, creative expression and positive self-esteem through a holistic, thematic approach to instruction. Curiosity Corner provides teachers with well-structured thematic units aligned with state and national early learning guidelines.

TOP also makes parents a strong part of their kids’ learning process. Parenting classes, referrals to social services and health resources and other aid works to promote positive home lives that benefits the kids and their whole families.

TOP Early Learning Centers currently serve about 600 students each year, allowing the children to be enrolled in the district but served at a TOP center. The charity also partners with Head Start and receives from state agencies to fund scholarships for children.
The Results

Studies reveal time and again that high-quality early childhood programs like TOP’s produce dramatic improvements in the school readiness as well as life outcomes of at-risk students. The children are less likely to need special education, repeat a grade, or to get in trouble, and are more likely to graduate and have successful life experiences.

TOP annually assesses their students’ readiness for kindergarten, as well as the performance of the more than 3,000 of their graduates currently in K-12 classrooms, helping them to fine-tune their program. The results speak for themselves: 78% of the 2017 TOP graduating class achieved kindergarten readiness compared to only 16% their demographically matched peers.

Kindergarten teachers also ranked TOP graduates high in the area of appropriate behaviors. TOP graduates in grades three through eight were 41% more likely than their peers to be progressing toward college readiness in literacy and 23% more likely in math. They were also 38% less likely to require special education remediation in K-12.

As a result of TOP’s success, other school districts and communities have reached out to it for assistance in establishing their own similar projects. TOP professionals are currently working to share their model and to encourage others to join in this important work, at the local and national levels.

TOP’s work is, as well, getting top marks from political circles. For example, former Kansas Governor and United States Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathy Sibellius has said: “Initiatives like the Opportunity Project in Wichita have shown us what’s possible when children receive the help they need at an early age. This wonderful early learning program for low-income children is a great example of a public-private partnership at work.”