

## **Barry Downing, President, Northrock, Inc., Kansas**

Barry Downing, President of Northrock, Inc, an entrepreneurial real estate and healthcare business located in Wichita, Kansas, became an advocate for pre-kindergarten education because of his commitment to under-resourced children.

About ten years ago, drawing from his own experiences of growing up in poverty, he and his family began looking for a way to use their financial success to help others. After exploring numerous options, they concluded that early childhood education offered the most dramatic way to make a difference in their community, both in the near and long term. This led to the creation of The Opportunity Project (TOP), an organization focused on improving school readiness among children living in poverty. Initially, TOP studied program models that proved effective for educators in low-income areas of major U.S. cities.

By 2003, TOP established the first Early Learning Center. Now, with two centers, TOP Early Learning Centers provide a high-quality early learning experience to 400 of the city's most needy children. More than \$11 million has been contributed to the program by private donors, and about 700 children have graduated from a TOP preschool. The centers have been recognized as a model for statewide replication.

TOP schools are dedicated to careful measurement of short- and long-term outcomes. Current governor Mark Parkinson visited one of the TOP centers earlier this year to announce the schools' latest test scores in areas such as social development, language and literacy, and mathematical thinking. These results showed that children entering the TOP program scored, on average, in the bottom third of their peer group, but by the time they were ready to enter kindergarten, they had moved to the top 10 to 20 percent.

"Once we saw the power of early childhood education for at-risk children, we decided we should reach a larger audience," said Downing. So he began promoting statewide early childhood education advocacy by creating opportunities for Wichita business leaders to learn about the power of early education. Through well-attended luncheons he "buil[t] brain power for the issue. It is important," Downing asserts, "to find a way to enable business leaders to make their voices heard without asking them to take big chunks of time out of their day." From the participants at these luncheons, a coalition of 48 Wichita business leaders agreed to make their voices heard on the issue.

Now, Downing and others from the coalition advocate on behalf of early childhood education before state and national legislatures, committees and governmental bodies. In 2007, local coalition engagement moved to the state level with the creation of the Kansas Coalition for School Readiness, an informal, "virtual" group that is housed at Kansas Action for Children. Downing serves as one of three coalition co-chairs, along with Bill Nelson, Chairman of George K. Baum Asset Management in Kansas City, Missouri and Mike Chesser, Chairman and CEO of Great Plains Energy in Missouri and Kansas. In this capacity, Downing routinely makes the case for early education with Kansas legislators via personal communication, testimony to the House Ways and Means, Budget Committees and letters to the editor.

The Opportunity Project Early Learning Centers have been toured by 120 legislators, allowing them to see for themselves what high-quality, early education looks like and the children they will be helping. Downing believes, making it personal is monumental for helping legislators understand whom they are supporting and why.

In 2007, Governor Kathleen Sebelius praised The Opportunity Project Early Learning Centers in her State of the State Address saying, "...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."

The result of all this support has been increased funding for the state's Four-Year-Old At-Risk Program in FY 2009, by an estimated \$2.1 million to \$20 million and inaugural funding of \$11.1 million for the Early Childhood Block Grant (up to \$7.8 million of which can be used to support pre-k).

According to Downing, "Early childhood education is a smart financial investment and a moral responsibility. We owe it to these children to have a chance to arrive at school prepared to succeed. It's both a head and a heart issue." In this difficult economy, he knows that he will need both arguments to get legislators to dedicate more public dollars to ensure children come to school ready to succeed.