



## *Best Practices Case Study*

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Editor's note: The Confidence in Kansas Public Education Task Force sponsors the Friends of Education Awards. To recognize exemplary partner development, Kansas Partners in Education sponsors the Partner Activity award category. Each nominee is a business, company, or agency that has provided an on-going partner activity over an extended period of time (minimum of three years), by means of volunteer time, services, finances or other types of support, in amount that exceeds typical collaboration from a private or public institution. This case study features the 2009 Award of Excellence recipient and is an educational service to KSPE members, their organizations, and prospective partners.

## Exploration Place: 2009 Award of Excellence

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Exploration Place is a private 501(c)(3) not-for-profit institution located on the banks of the Arkansas River in downtown Wichita. The center has two major goals: 1) To offer a variety of stimulating educational resources which motivate visitors, many of whom are children and families, to learn more about how the world works and to develop the creative skills that contribute to living more satisfying, productive, and healthy lives; and 2) To create an attraction including a landmark building and park, that will draw several hundred thousand people annually to the center of the city, serving as a community gathering place for ongoing activities and events and encouraging development near the site and additional activity along the river cultural corridor. Exploration Place and its staff generously collaborate with USD 259-Wichita's Parents as Teachers (PAT) program by supporting numerous projects focused on strengthening early childhood development.

The PAT partnership with Exploration Place began in 2003, when the Wichita PAT hosted a state-wide conference in Wichita. Over 500 Parent Educators from across the state attended. PAT collaborated with Exploration Place to host an evening dinner meeting that provided an important opportunity for PAT Programs from across Kansas to network. A mutually-satisfying working relationship between Exploration Place and PAT has since grown. The Exploration Place staff has continued this partnership through ongoing support of PAT parent/child activities. Examples of these activities are Messy Art, Art from the Heart, and Summer Fun with Science. The most recent projects hosted by Exploration Place include Project Dad, First Things First classes, and Science Times Playgroup.

**Project Dad:** Exploration Place lends its services and building to the PAT monthly playgroup Project Dad. Project Dad was first proposed in summer 2006 as a way to attract this hard-to-reach audience. This playgroup allows fathers to socialize with their children apart from mothers in a setting that contributes to children positively bonding with male influences. Studies demonstrate that children who have a positive male influence in their lives tend to have better verbalization skills, are more creative, and at an older age can better defend

themselves against negative peer pressure. PAT supports this research by providing an attractive location to bring fathers and their children together. This playgroup has been very successful in reaching out to fathers and their children ages 5 and under. About sixty dads, grandfathers, or other male role models attend each month. PAT enjoys providing additional hands-on learning centers and written materials to support fathers in their efforts to succeed at the job of a lifetime, being a Dad!

**First Things First Classes:** First Things First was started by the Wichita Parents as Teachers program in 2004 to help bridge the gap in PAT services for children (ages 0-3) to the age when a child enters the USD 259 pre-K programs. This free program is designed to prepare parents and their 3-year-old children to enter the school environment. The move to Exploration Place in September 2008 has provided a truly unique learning opportunity. The curriculum emphasizes early literacy, science, and math in a structured classroom setting with an ever-changing environment allowing for numerous real-world experiences for both the parent and the child.

These young students have enjoyed topics such as chimpanzees, whales, transportation, their home State of Kansas, and pretend-play in a manner that would be virtually impossible to provide in the typical school environment. Parents become more knowledgeable about parenting topics when, at the end of each class, they can ask questions or discuss concerns with the teacher. Exploration Place provides children with hands-on opportunities with multiple tools for learning, including investigation, exploration and imagination. In 2009-10, the First Things First program serves a diverse population of 85 families by offering seven sessions each week.

**Science Times Playgroup:** The PAT Science Playgroup is offered by Wichita Parents as Teachers each month at Exploration Place. This playgroup was created to showcase and enhance the monthly themes at Exploration Place. The natural environment at Exploration Place serves to enrich and enhance learning opportunities with hands-on experimentation and a variety of fun science-related activities. About 90 families attend each month.

**Summary:** Wichita Public Schools through Parents as Teachers and other early childhood education programs recognize the impact of early intervention in academic achievement and student success. With limited funds available to support early childhood programs, the partnership with Exploration Place enhances efforts to reach, teach, and actively engage young children and their families. The opportunities for parents and other adults to participate in this engagement only promotes their willingness to continue this level of involvement as their children enter Wichita Public Schools' K-12 program.

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