

## Description of the School

Positive Tomorrows stands alone as the only school of its kind in the central section of the United States. A private school, Positive Tomorrows serves only children whose families are homeless or ascertained to be at risk for homelessness under a variety of circumstances. Limited by space to an enrollment of 74 children, pre-K to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the school has four multiple-grade classrooms and one pre-K classroom with no more than 16 students in each, staffed by a certified teacher and a teacher's aide. The pre-K classroom was a new addition during the 2016-17 school year.

Positive Tomorrows is accredited by AdvancED and is a member of the Oklahoma Private School Accreditation Consortium. The school curriculum meets Oklahoma State Dept. of Education guidelines and is designed to help students eventually transition back into the public school system. Positive Tomorrows is also a recognized Oklahoma A+ School, identifying its curriculum as arts-integrated and presented to students through hands-on, creative means.

The students at the school live in a variety of housing situations. During the 2014-2015 school year, 50% of the students served lived in an emergency homeless shelter, 15% lived in supportive or transitional housing, 8% lived in motels, and 22% were classified as couch homeless. The remaining 5% resided in permanent housing, sober living facilities, or vehicles. The term "couch homeless" is used to identify families who are forced to find shelter wherever they can, staying a few days with friends or relatives, renting a motel room when they have money, etc. Often couch homeless families stay in facilities not meant for human habitation, such as garages, abandoned buildings, unheated basements, etc. The reality in Oklahoma City is that there are not enough emergency family shelters nor enough affordable housing; hence, homeless families often find themselves in unsafe and insecure housing situations.

Positive Tomorrows students come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. During the 2014-2015 school year, parents identified their children as African-American (32%), White (32%), Mixed Ethnicity (24%), Hispanic (6%), Pacific Islander (3%) and American Indian (3%).

Students who enter Positive Tomorrows often exhibit academic and social delays due to chronic trauma and/or neglect. Many of them have family backgrounds of generational poverty. Most families are headed by single mothers with low educational success. Students typically show low levels of life experience due to the limitations of poverty. They may be unfamiliar with the concept of a birthday party, have never been to the movie theater or swimming, or don't know conventional table manners. Behaviors relating to team cooperation and group play have never been developed.

According to Eric Jensen in Teaching with Poverty in Mind, children who grow up in poverty live in a state of constant stress and trauma. As a result of stress hormones constantly flowing through their bodies and the impacts of health and environmental issues, the brains of children in poverty do not develop normally. Research shows them to have deficits in language, working memory, cognitive control, and other neurocognitive areas. These are the children Positive Tomorrows endeavors to serve in its programs.

In addition to the typical school environment, Positive Tomorrows out-of-school activities are designed to make up for the deficits children in poverty face. An afterschool program partners with outside organizations to provide Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Camp Fire, music and drama lessons, rock climbing, and other experiences. During holiday breaks from school and for six weeks in the summer, students are

offered day camp experiences, which include visits to museums, swimming lessons, volunteer opportunities and other activities not accessible to children in poverty. All of these enrichment activities are particularly designed to overcome the deficits outlined by Jensen and bolster academic success in the classroom.

Bringing stability to the family unit as a whole is the primary emphasis of the Family Support side of the Positive Tomorrows program. Case managers work one-on-one with families, meeting with them regularly and helping parents progress toward meeting self-identified goals. Education and referrals to other agencies are provided to parents as well as meeting basic needs such as housing, food, and clothing. Counseling is made available to individual students and to families. Special emphases in improving housing, employment opportunities and income are significant to the Family Support program.

Students at Positive Tomorrows do not stay enrolled at the school for their entire elementary school experience. Rather, the intention is to enroll them and work to bring them up to speed academically and socially, while at the same time working with families so they become stable. Once families are stable and children are successful in school, the students are transitioned into public school where they can re-integrate with their peers.

### **School's Purpose**

The purpose of Positive Tomorrows is to educate homeless children and their families to break the cycle of poverty.

The children we serve are those who come from deepest poverty. They move frequently, have no sense of structure, and live with chronic trauma. Their parents' energy is focused on finding safe places to sleep and enough food to feed the family. There is no money or strength left to read books at night, teach the names of colors, help with homework or have a gentle conversation with their children.

Due to the constant stress in which our students live, their brains lack the physical structures necessary for organized thought, linear deductions, and other processes necessary for learning. On top of those deficits, our students also have few resources expected by schools and little assistance and support by adults.

Research tells us that the physical issues can be overcome through kinesthetic learning techniques and by emphasizing art, music and physical activity. The resource and support issues can also be overcome through school programs designed to meet the needs to children in poverty.

As a school, it is our goal to overcome all of these issues and bring children to a place of success. The students we see have had difficult school experiences and feel left out and alone. They are often 1 to 2 years behind their classmates and believe they have little chance of success.

As a school, we recognize the situations from which they come. We understand that a child may come to school with dirty clothing, not because the family is dirty, but because mom doesn't have access to laundry facilities. We understand that a child may daydream in class not because they don't want to pay attention, but because they're sorting out feelings from violence or drug use they've seen at home.

Because of our orientation towards working only with children from poverty, we have built our teaching methods around the specific attributes and needs these students exhibit. Our school is a calm place

with much structure. Teachers do not raise their voices at children and children are allowed to take naps or have a snack whenever necessary.

Lessons are paced according to a child's ability. Technology is used to do so, with an iPad available for each student. Math and reading curriculum is delivered by iPad, so that each student can work at his or her own pace. At the same time, the teacher can access detailed reports showing the specific program being made by each child, down to how specific concepts are understood.

Classroom experiences are underscored by a robust extra-curricular program designed to help make up some of the lifestyle deficits faced by our students. Our after-school program includes Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, drama classes, physical activities such as rock climbing, crafts, nutrition classes, music lessons, field trips, and many other activities.

Typical school breaks may bring a break from the normal classroom lessons, but at Positive Tomorrows, lessons are delivered through activities during break camps. Day camps are held during fall break, winter break, spring break, and for six weeks in the summer. During this time, we go on field trips, teach swimming lessons, hear from special speakers, and participate in a number of activities, all designed to support the classroom experience.

Another basic program we provide which provides the basis for our success with students is the support we provide for our families. We work closely with each family, meeting with parents regularly. We assist them in determining their future goals and in laying out a plan to meet those goals. Parenting support groups and other educational activities are offered. Basic needs such as food, clothing, and adequate shelter are obtained.

At the same time, our relationship with the family helps us understand the classroom behavior and needs of the child. We are able to work with the family to help parents understand how to help their child be successful in school. Our parents have typically had bad school experiences and find it difficult to talk to teachers or support their children in other ways. We work with parents to make lifestyle choices to assist their children and to help them learn how to advocate for their children within the school system.

The students we serve are those who have heard a constant "No." They are the ones who never have new school supplies and who stay home from the field trip because they have no lunch money. They are the ones who go without dinner and don't have a bed to sleep in. They don't do Trick or Treat and the tooth fairy never comes.

When a child continually hears No, eventually he or she loses hope that life can be any different. They lose hope that they can succeed and live productive lives. Day by day, year by year, they gradually become helpless, lacking the capacity to make a difference for their own children.

At Positive Tomorrows, we believe it's our responsibility to turn the constant "No" into a "Yes. Yes, you are smart. Yes, you are worthy. Yes, you can succeed."

We work to instill into our students and their families the idea that success is possible. And as they work towards that success, we will stand with them to provide the support and understanding they desperately need.

## **Notable Achievements and Areas of Improvement**

### **Education**

Positive Tomorrows continues to make marked improvements to its education program. Each classroom now has a full-time assistant, making the student to teacher ratio 8:1. This coming May, Positive Tomorrows will be the latest school to become an Oklahoma A+ Demonstration School. This title means that Positive Tomorrows will serve as a model school for all other schools in the OKA+ network and for those wanting to join the network.

Thanks to a major gift last December, Positive Tomorrows was able to move its cafeteria to its building next door, thereby opening another room for expansion. The former cafeteria was transformed into the new 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, and the enrollment in that classroom was able to increase as well. Additionally the cafeteria next door was renovated, and Positive Tomorrows now employs its own part-time cook.

The former 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom became Positive Tomorrows' first ever pre-kindergarten classroom, serving ten students. Positive Tomorrows now has five classrooms, serving pre-kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The school can now serve up to seventy-four students at one time, the largest number the school has ever had. With the exception of pre-kindergarten, the current classroom structure remains age-integrated with a kindergarten/1<sup>st</sup> grade class, a 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> grade class, a 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> grade class, and a 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> grade class. This school structure continues to provide much needed flexibility in terms of student groupings.

Areas for improvement in education all center on the need for a new facility with the capacity to serve more students. With the number of homeless children steadily on the rise, the need for a new, larger space is paramount. At the time of this update, Positive Tomorrows had served 104 students in the first semester alone, only one student shy from the total number of students served during the entire 2015-2016 school year. In a new facility, Positive Tomorrows would like to expand to serve sixth grade, with the possibility of adding middle school as well.

### **Fundraising**

Over the last three years, Positive Tomorrows made huge strides in the area of fundraising. The budget has increased by a third, and fundraising has been able to exceed expenses each year. This has allowed the school to accumulate and sustain a 9 to 12 month operating cushion in case of emergencies. All fundraising efforts have significantly increased. The two main event fundraisers now raise approximately \$560,000, major donors to the organization have doubled in numbers, and all other line items have significantly increased. An additional fundraising position has been added in order to prepare for future fundraising plans as outlined below.

Areas for improvement in fundraising include increased relationship building with current and prospective donors and a focus on communicating diverse donation options to current donors (estate giving, gifts of stock, etc.) A continued focus on multiple-year pledges will ensure sustainability in future years. An ambitious fundraising plan is being developed to triple the capacity of students the school can serve. Plans for a capital campaign have begun and will launch later this month, and fundraising should

last 18 months to 3 years. At that point, a significant increase in annual budget dollars will be required in order to sustain the increased operations.

### **Family Support**

Family Support offers many services to Positive Tomorrows' families, including regular contact with an assigned case manager, monthly parent workshops, coordination of parental involvement in such school events as Open House, Parent Teacher Conferences, and holiday events, and provision of basic necessities such as clothing, coats, hygiene and household items. With the increase in student enrollment, the Family Support department was able to add a third case manager to the team this school year. Positive Tomorrows also contracts with a licensed clinical social worker and a licensed professional counselor to provide therapeutic counseling services for students as well as parents.

During the 2015-2016 school year, Family Support provided supportive services for a total of 65 student families. 47% of these 65 families had a positive change in their housing status. Many of these families were able to move into permanent housing, subsidized or unsubsidized housing. Another 20% maintained stable housing in a long-term transitional housing program. Only 15% left the program unexpectedly with no information as to their whereabouts.

At the midpoint of the 2016-2017 school year, Family Support has already serviced a total of 66 student families, one more family than was serviced in total last school year. One-third of parents have attended at least one of the parent groups provided each month, and there was 87% participation in Fall Parent-Teacher Conferences. 23% of families have already seen an increase in housing stability, 60% are in permanent housing or a long-term transitional housing program, and 38% have at least one adult in the home in part-time or full-time employment.

Case managers have begun using a unified system of assessing client needs which drives goal-setting with parents. Family Support is also utilizing the Self-Sufficiency Matrix, an evidenced-based assessment tool, to measure clients' level of functioning in 19 different life domains such as housing, mental health, substance abuse, and safety. Clients receive a score of 1-5 on each of these domains. The head-of-household is assessed every 90 days by their assigned case manager when possible. So far this school year, 31% of families have received an initial assessment and their first interim assessment, demonstrating a 6% increase in self-sufficiency scores.

Areas of improvement for Family Support include furthering clients' awareness and knowledge of housing options and employment support services. With Oklahoma's affordable housing crisis and the current application closure for housing subsidy programs, the need to connect families to programs that improve their employability, increase their income, and provide them safe housing has become critical. Family Support is also exploring ideas to increase parent engagement in monthly parent groups. Family Support will be developing a questionnaire to gain better insight into what kinds of information and support families feel are most valuable.

### **Additional Information**

Positive Tomorrows continues to use its community platform to be an advocate for children of homeless families. We are building relationships with both sides of the aisle in the Oklahoma House of Representatives and talk often with legislators about the needs of children in poverty.

In addition, we also have strong relationships with those in city government and with those nonprofits which deal with other homeless populations in the city. It is easy for the needs of children to be invisible and we will advocate on their behalf whenever possible.

One of our priorities for the next few years is to continue to develop more of a community presence to inform the public about our students and about homeless families in general. It's our desire to build a relationship with the Oklahoma City Public Schools to meet the needs of homeless children whether they are our students or at OKCPS.