

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 5th 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.

During the past year, the school has completed a capital campaign and has begun the construction of a \$15 million building project which will triple the student capacity to 210 students, add an Early Childhood Head Start program and add capacity for 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. It is currently anticipated that the new building will be completed and ready in October of 2019. New grades will be added as funding is available for staffing the new classrooms.

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 2017-2018 school year, 63% of the students served lived in an emergency homeless shelter, 13% lived in subsidized or transitional housing, and 16% were classified as couch homeless. The remaining 10% resided in unsubsidized housing, motels, or sober living facilities. 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 serves students from a variety of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. During the 2017-2018 school year, parents identified their children as African-American (34%), White (29%), Mixed Ethnicity (28%), Hispanic (3%), and Native American or American Indian (7%).

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 is one of only thirteen A+ Demonstration schools in the Oklahoma A+ Network and an Oklahoma A+ Fellow apprentice is on staff here at the school. Positive Tomorrows has weekly paid music and art instruction, and ballet lessons and PE classes are taught weekly on a volunteer basis. There are weekly guitar and golf lessons for select students as well as a school basketball team. The PT Children's Choir was recently formed, and plans are in the works for both a spring film festival as well as a science fair.

Areas for improvement in education 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 98 students. In the new facility, Positive Tomorrows will expand and scale its programming to include Head Start, Early Head Start as well as grades sixth through eighth. Again, the new facility will open in the fall of 2019.

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 \$400,000, major donors to the organization continue to increase annually, and all other line items have significantly increased.

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.), and retaining donors. 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.

Family Support

Family Support offers many services to Positive Tomorrows' households, including intensive case management, parent workshops, coordination of parental involvement in such school events as Open House, Parent Teacher Conferences, and holiday events, as well as provision of basic necessities such as clothing, coats, hygiene and household items. Family Support has expanded the department, including 2

Certified Case Managers, a Family Support Worker, and added a Transition Coordinator to the team this school year. Positive Tomorrows also contracts with a licensed clinical social worker and 2 licensed professional counselors to provide therapeutic counseling services for students as well as parents. Family Support introduced a Summer Learning Lounge, parent folder program, and a basketball team, to increase opportunities for parent-child and mentor-student growth opportunities.

Upon enrollment at Positive Tomorrows, Family Support pursues goals with the entire household. Family Support's role in the life of students includes: Second Step social emotional curriculum lessons, arranging and transporting students to regular optometry, dental, and medical screenings (including follow up care as needed), facilitating licensed therapist sessions or support counseling, arranging psychological evaluations, advocacy for student rights under the McKinney-Vento Act and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and delivery support services for students transitioning to public school.

Family Support's role in the life of parents focuses on securing and stabilizing healthy homes and pursuing meaningful sources of income. Additional services include: school enrollment, development of individualized action plans (goal-setting), transportation and resource linkage, parent education classes, peer-led support groups, safety planning, facilitating parent-teacher conferences, acting as school-parent liaison, conducting supportive home visits, as well as linking families to additional therapeutic services. Family Support's role in the life of household includes: weekly food bags distribution, twice monthly hygiene bags, connecting and hosting wrap-around service meetings and family therapy sessions, crisis management, emergency motel funds, attending child welfare and Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, and ongoing provision of clothing, household items, books, and tools to strengthen parent-child relationships.

Parent education groups are offered once to twice monthly on a variety of beneficial topics (determined by compiling parent-survey and focus group input). Parent group topics include but are not limited to: SNAP employment training, healthy relationships, resume writing, landlord tenant rights, positive parenting, financial literacy, health and nutrition, bullying, McKinney Vento Act rights, Early Head-Start and navigating child support. Our Transition Coordinator offers an 8-week Circle of Security curriculum built on decades of research about how secure parent-child connections can be reinforced and strengthened. Peer-led support groups are held monthly in the summer and quarterly through the school year. Each peer group is facilitated by a past or present Positive Tomorrows' parent who has successfully secured safe and stable housing and is attended by parents and family members at various stages of their transition out of homelessness. Parents working with one another decreases isolation, builds a sense of community, and allows a supportive environment for mothers and fathers to share the struggles, victories, and hopes of parenthood.

Case managers utilize a unified system of determining client needs and strengths which drives goal-setting with parents. Family Support uses 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 120 days by their assigned case manager when possible. So far this school year, 53% of families have received an initial assessment and their first interim assessment, demonstrating a 15% increase in self-sufficiency scores. Additional evidence-based tools implemented by Family Support include Adult Hope Scale, Second Step Social Emotional Curriculum for 4th and 5th grade students, and Safety Planning Intervention.

At the midpoint of the 2018-2019 school year, Family Support has already serviced a total of 58 student families. Family Support has designated emergency grant funds to provide immediate motel or rehousing subsidies to reduce rapid residential transitions or unplanned relocation. The Director of Family Support and Executive Director have developed a housing task force and are currently exploring community partnership opportunities in order to meet a growing need for affordable, low barrier shelter and housing solutions. Family Support is currently interviewing candidates for a Family Support Coordinator position, in order to more effectively manage student health appointments and in-kind donations.

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. It's our intention to create policy changes to benefit the students we serve. Our board of directors has created a Public Policy Committee toward that end.

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.