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Janice Smith accepts Children's Cabinet post

TOP co-founder will replace Jim Redmon

By [Dave Ranney](#)
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TOPEKA — Janice Smith, a co-founder and former executive director of one of the state's best known early-childhood development programs, has been named executive director of the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund.

"I'm very excited to be here," said Smith, who helped start The Opportunity Project or TOP, a non-profit organization with three early-childhood development centers in Wichita, serving more than 650 children, ages 1 to 5. Most of the children are low-income.

Smith ran the program — before and after it was up and running — for the past 11 and half years.

"We built it from scratch," she said.

The program is well-known for blending public and private resources.

The Opportunity Project is supported by Head Start, Early Head Start, the Kansas Department for Children and Families, the Children's Cabinet, the Wichita and Derby school districts, and private foundations.

Smith co-founded the program with Barry Downing, a Wichita entrepreneur and philanthropist.

Downing's efforts were the subject of [a recent profile in The Wichita Eagle](#).

Smith's tenure at the Children's Cabinet began Jan. 6.

“Typically, low-income children are somewhere between the 35th and 45th percentile of where they needed to be for kindergarten,” Smith said. “The 4-year-olds who went through TOP were somewhere between 80 and 85 percent of the kindergarten readiness measures.”

Prior to joining The Opportunity Project, Smith was an administrator with the Wichita school district. She also taught English at Mulvane High School.

Smith has bachelor's degree in English and education from Park College, Parkville, Mo., and a master's degree in communications from Wichita State University.

Established in 1999, the Children’s Cabinet is charged with advising the Governor’s Office on early childhood development issues and on how best to spend money from the state’s tobacco master settlement agreement.

Its three-person office also oversees the awarding of several grants to programs that promote early childhood development.

“I would like to nurture a culture of private-public partnerships in the state, a culture where diversity of thought is regarded as an asset, and where past work is valued,” Smith told KHI News Service. “And I’m very, very interested in looking at successful programs that have evidence-based research that backs up their work. That’s what I’m looking for.”

Children's advocates said they welcomed news of Smith accepting the position.

“I’ve known Janice for about eight years now,” said Leadell Ediger, executive director at Child Care Aware of Kansas, a nonprofit agency dedicated to improving the quality of the state’s child care programs. “She is an extremely thoughtful and extremely passionate about early childhood development. She’s going to be good.”

Smith replaces [Jim Redmon, who resigned late last year](#) after his wife accepted a teaching position in New Hampshire. He had been executive director for nine and a half years.

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