

# Baylor's Project Promise makes impact on gifted low-income students

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WACO—Baylor University's School of Education is making an impact on lower-income gifted and talented students through the Project Promise summer program.



Arash Abnoussi, a graduate student at Baylor University, teaches a “Geometry in Action” class. Students in grades 4 to 12 volunteer to take three extra weeks of school to develop skills to prepare them for the future—in a school district where 90 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunches.

Project Promise is one part of the Baylor School of Education's University for Young People program. University for Young People began in 1982 as a tuition-based program, and Project Promise was launched in 1999 through a grant that funds the tuition for low-income gifted students.

Baylor created Project Promise with the idea low-income students have a higher likelihood of success if given the right tools.

Susan Johnsen, professor in the School of Education, and Mary Witte, director of the Center for Community Learning and Enrichment, built Project Promise from the ground up. Johnsen is the principal researcher for Project Promise, and Witte is the program's administrator.



Kathe Barbur, a longtime instructor in the University for Young People program, teaches an art class. Project Promise began as a proposal from Johnsen after Waco's mayor told her the city had funds available in its urban development budget, she recalled.

The program incorporates academics, social interaction, creativity and leadership for a rounded experience to develop gifted students, she explained.

"As opposed to 68 percent in the national average, 100 percent of our students (who complete Project Promise) have graduated from high school; 89 percent go onto post-secondary education options," she said.

The national average for low-income students going to post-secondary education is 52 percent.

Beyond academic achievement, Witte and Johnsen have noticed an increase in self-esteem and stronger social relationships among students in the program. Family ties also grow stronger due to siblings learning together.

Spirituality is not a component of the program, but when Witte works with the students, she seeks to demonstrate the love of Christ. The staff as a whole realizes Project Promise has been too successful not to be blessed by God.



University for Young People students (left to right) Elijah Zarraga, Soledad Valenzuela and Karin Rodriguez work on creating a stop-action animated movie. “We have a saying that is ‘Who’s in charge?’ And the response is, ‘God’s in charge, not us,’” Witte said.

She acknowledges the challenges of navigating all the variables involved in the program—everything from working with Waco teachers, to buses to transport students, to funding—but “somehow it all comes together.”

Many graduates of the program have returned to serve in Project Promise

as mentors and teachers. Former program participants Kianna Ford and Kristen Chapman both are students at Baylor University now.

“It was really impactful when I was younger, because it was giving me something to do during the summer,” Chapman said. “I had a different perspective going into school, and it made things easier.”

Ford hopes to be an example to students in the program.



Researcher Corina Kaul leads a class on having a “growth” mindset. “People like us can reassure them that they can go to any school you want,” she said. “These kids are all smart enough to do that and get it paid for, too.”

Mentoring constitutes a critical part of the program. College students in the School of Education are asked to serve as mentors for a small group of Project Promise children. The mentors know the students, have personal conversations with them and are able to help them get the most out of the program.

“I’ve always wanted to work with inner-city youth since high school. This was the exact group I wanted to work with,” said Shannon King, a graduate student at Baylor. She served as a mentor last year and worked as an

instructor this year. “It’s been an incredible program to be a part of.”

One of her favorite aspects of the program was building real relationships with the students she mentored, she added.

Students in the program tap into the things they’re passionate about and expand their creativity.

“I enjoy the building and robotics class,” said Hannah Okafor, incoming seventh grader. “I’ve always wanted to be a mechanical engineer.”



Hannah Okafor (right) draws plans for a “Geometry in Action” class. The last four years, she enjoyed a robotics lab class, in which students follow a set of instructions to build a robot from interlocking plastic blocks.

While many of the students attend Baylor University, others have ventured outside Waco. One former student earned a graduate degree in architecture at Yale, and another is pursuing her doctorate at the University of Georgia.

Project Promise is bringing hope to lower-income children who have exceptional talent but lack the resources to use their skills fully,

participants noted. The longest-lasting program of its kind, Project Promise looks to be in the business of creating scholars and leaders for the long haul.