

KS Zoo Educates Kids Worldwide

Thanks to Kan-ed



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For more than five years, the Kan-ed network's videoconferencing capabilities have allowed the Lee Richardson Zoo in Garden City, Kansas, to offer Interactive Distance Learning (IDL) programming on wildlife, conservation, animal science, and more to students throughout Kansas, the U.S., and the world. Beginning with a partnership with Garden City USD 457, the zoo was able to send IDL content to elementary and middle school students in Kansas through the Kan-ed network. This program has since expanded to include audiences from more than 30 states, as well as international connections in Mexico, the United Kingdom, and Canada.

Lee Richardson Zoo's Misty Ayers, Distance Learning Coordinator, describes the programs as "self contained; they are very similar to the ones we actually give in person at the zoo." In a typical week, the zoo will provide 10 to 15 distance learning programs. In 2009, formal IDL programming reached an audience of nearly 12,000 comprised primarily of elementary school students between kindergarten and fourth grade; however, the programming also reaches high schools, Pre-Ks, Senior Centers, children's hospitals, and libraries across Kansas and the US.

Ayers appreciates the network services Kan-ed provides, like the video bridge and the Renovo Scheduler for scheduling automatic connections with the sites. "There are so many schools that have firewalls and things that prevent them from connecting to us that the bridge just patches those areas allowing us to reach out to more places. Without the bridge, I don't think we could do a majority of our connections," she comments.



Kathy Sexson, Zoo Director, describes program feedback from recipients as very positive. "The teachers really enjoy it and feel that it has value for their students; we try to align our programs with standards at least here in Kansas so they know that it's a quality program," she says. "We have a lot of the same teachers that come back each year or each semester and request programs." She emphasizes that everyone benefits from participating in IDL programs: students, because it "would be fun for them, it would fill their time a little bit better," the zoo, in that "it allows us to get our message out," and teachers, because "instead of coming to the zoo once a year in the spring for their tour, they would be able to come four or five times during the year, through the network." This type of program also allows the zoo to "spread our tour calendar out across the year regardless of weather."

Sexson notes that the Kan-ed network services allow "students to be connected to the rest of the state, to the rest of the world. Either way you look at it, Kansas is benefiting whether it's our students here in the southwest or any place else in the state that have the opportunity to get a program from NASA, or get a program from a drilling rig on the east coast, or something in California." Ayers also emphasizes the ways in which distance learning has overcome geographic isolation, saying, "Garden City is in the middle of Southwest Kansas; it's kind of just isolated and out there, but distance learning has really put us on the map. People across the United States, the country, and even world know about our programs because of distance learning." Sexson sums it up by saying, "I think it's a good use of funds for education and economically in just promoting our state."



"Being out here in southwest Kansas we especially appreciate Kan-ed. We're maybe a little bit more dependent on technology to keep us connected to the rest of the world." – Kathy Sexson