



Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Friends,

Despite an economic environment that is difficult (to say the least), it seems the nation is waking up to the possibilities and importance of early childhood. For instance:

- An Ohio senator recently co-sponsored a bill aimed at implementing Ready School efforts nationwide,
- New federal regulations will ensure that Head Start programs focus on school readiness, and
- U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has proposed establishing an Office for Early Learning within the Department of Education.

And the future here in Ohio seems promising as well. As Ready School efforts gain even more momentum, as SPARK families make breakthrough after breakthrough, and as yet another class of kindergarteners begins school eager and prepared, we see a better future for Ohio's children and families.

During this season of giving thanks, we are grateful for the support and enthusiasm of so many partners working so very hard to help make that brighter future a reality. Their dedication is what makes SPARK so exceptional, and it's what keeps us all so hopeful and committed.

Sincerely,

Joni T. Close, President
Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton

School Readiness Comes to the Forefront

Legislators seek to codify a crucial component of early learning success.



While those on the front lines in early childhood have always understood that school readiness is a linked system involving families, schools, and the community, the notion that schools must be made ready to receive all children is gaining increased awareness. Legislators, administrators, and community stakeholders are beginning to understand that school readiness does not and cannot rest solely in the hands of families.

In Ohio, the Ready Schools Initiative is growing by leaps and bounds; what started as a pilot with eight schools in eight Ohio counties has burgeoned into an initiative with 42 schools throughout the state, with plans to add 10 more during the 2011-2012 school year.

Making schools ready is becoming a focus nationally as well. In July 2011, U.S. Senators Sherrod Brown of Ohio and Kay Hagan of North Carolina introduced the Ready Schools Act of 2011. This bill, aimed at preparing elementary schools to serve all children, is endorsed by the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators, the Ohio Head Start Association, the National Education Association, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the HighScope Educational Research Foundation, and the National Women's Law Center.

Senator Brown specifically cited SPARK Ohio as a major influence on this legislation: "Ensuring that our schools are ready to educate and



serve our children is just as important as ensuring that our children are ready to learn,” Brown said. “The building blocks critical to a lifetime of learning are laid during the elementary school years. That’s why it’s so important that we make our elementary schools the best they can be—from supporting professional development for principals, teachers, and other school personnel to fostering a climate that is conducive to learning. I am proud of the work of the SPARK Ohio partnership and the more than 40 ‘ready schools’ in Ohio, and this bill will help ensure that even more schools are the best they can be for our children.”

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Senator Sherrod Brown

More good news: Senators Tom Harkin of Iowa and Michael Enzi of Wyoming recently released a draft of a comprehensive bill to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (currently known as *No Child Left Behind*). The legislation would allow school districts to support early educators’ professional development, including joint professional development opportunities with early learning program staff. The legislation also requires schools to develop plans for family and community engagement. In other words, these legislators are seeking to nationally codify the exact kind of work we’ve been doing in Ohio, where Ready Schools have for some time been reaching out to families and the early education community and including early childhood educators on their Ready School teams. Although it’s too early to tell what parts of the bill will ultimately become law, it’s encouraging that school readiness is on legislators’ radar.

We’re also seeing other signs that early education is coming into sharper focus. As part of President Obama’s *We Can’t Wait* campaign,

Our three- and four-year-olds don’t have lobbyists, but if we want to close achievement gaps—if we’re serious about giving every single child a chance to be successful—we have to enter kindergarten ready to learn and ready to read.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

Head Start programs will be required to establish and work toward school readiness goals.



U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has announced a plan to create

a new government office devoted solely to early learning. According to Duncan, “Establishing a dedicated office underscores a critical step in progressing the national dialogue about improving outcomes for young children.”



All of these elements add up to an auspicious future for early education—in Ohio and across the nation. As Secretary Duncan has stated, “Our three- and four-year-olds don’t have lobbyists, but if we want to close achievement gaps—if we’re serious about giving every single child a chance to be successful—we have to enter kindergarten ready to learn and ready to read.” We couldn’t agree more.



SPARK Expands in Cuyahoga County

Only a year into its work, SPARK Cuyahoga has expanded to serve 180 children and families. The impressive growth of this relatively new program reflects the deep dedication of area funders to their roots, as well as the rich history of Cleveland's neighborhoods.



Central Neighborhood: George Washington Carver Elementary School

The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland has always been committed to the Central Neighborhood, a high-poverty area near downtown Cleveland. St. Vincent Charity Hospital was founded in Central in 1865 and has been an integral part of the neighborhood since. Both the hospital and the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland were founded by the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine.

The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland worked with more than 13 organizational partners and numerous community residents to plan and implement a *Promise Neighborhood* initiative aligned with the U.S. Department of Education's *Promise Neighborhood* grant program, focusing on improving education outcomes for students in Central. When asked, Central residents overwhelmingly expressed a need for school readiness efforts. Together, the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland, in partnership with PNC, United Way of Greater Cleveland, Invest In Children, and The Literacy Cooperative, brought SPARK to Central's George Washington Carver Elementary School. Twenty children and their families will receive SPARK services this school year.

Slavic Village Neighborhood: Mound Elementary School

At around the same time, the Third Federal Foundation approached The Literacy Cooperative about bringing SPARK to the Slavic Village neighborhood, where Third Federal Bank has had a presence for more than a century. Similar to the Central Neighborhood, Slavic Village has seen its share of hard times; several years ago, the neighborhood had the highest rate of foreclosures in the nation. To support and help revitalize the neighborhood, Third Federal worked with The Literacy Cooperative to bring SPARK to Mound Elementary School. SPARK will help 20 children and their families work toward kindergarten readiness.

The Roots of Dedication

The call for such similar expansions in two neighborhoods at around the same time is a testament to the deep commitment of local funders. Because both the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland and Third Federal Bank have roots in their respective neighborhoods that go back more than a century, they are committed to the improvement of those neighborhoods.

These funders could have chosen any number of initiatives to bring to their target neighborhoods. Why SPARK? According to Robert Paponetti, executive director of The Literacy Cooperative, word was spreading about the promising effects of SPARK. The program was having a positive impact on parents, and group meetings were generating a great deal of excitement. According to Paponetti, "The general consensus is that it's a great program."

I've heard families say, "I didn't realize my child was so smart!"

Robert Paponetti
Executive Director
The Literacy Cooperative

SPARK is changing the way Cuyahoga County parents think. He's heard families say, "I didn't realize my child was so smart!" and "I didn't realize I could incorporate daily tasks into learning."



So, how is SPARK Cuyahoga faring as a whole? Wonderfully, according to Paponetti. In addition to community enthusiasm and financial backing, the program has gained the support of schools and principals. Last year, school district representatives attended SPARK group meetings to register children for kindergarten. As a result, 100% of Cuyahoga SPARK children registered early for kindergarten.

He's pleased that local funders are investing in this early childhood initiative so that SPARK can continue to make a difference in Cuyahoga County.



What Did You Think of *Get Ready for School*?



We came every day and enjoyed it tremendously.

Hamilton Parent

It helped calm my child's nerves about starting school and made him excited for school to start.

Stark Parent

It reassured me that my son would be ok on his own.

Summit Parent

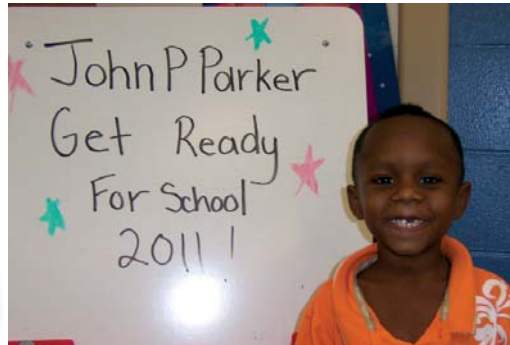
These students leave this program feeling confident and assured that school is an engaging place to learn and meet other people.

Summit Teacher



SPARK Ohio Gets Ready for School

SPARK and the Schools Ease the Transition into Kindergarten



Get Ready for School

Get Ready for School is offered to both SPARK and non-SPARK children in August, just before the school year begins. The 12-hour program familiarizes incoming kindergarteners with their new school and helps them know what to expect when they begin kindergarten.

From meeting the principal to learning to recite the pledge of allegiance, the children get a feel for the routines of the school day. They learn school rules and teacher expectations, are guided through basic lessons based on Ohio's Early Learning Content Standards, and meet their classmates, their teacher, and other school staff, including their principal, so that the experience is not as scary once the school year starts.

This year, nearly 450 children participated in *Get Ready for School* programs in Hamilton County, Stark County, and Summit County.

And the best news? Nearly all (93%) of the participating families reported that the program did help their child prepare for kindergarten!



Kindergarten Kick-Off

In Cuyahoga County, Family Connections held *Kindergarten Kick-Off* camps for SPARK and non-SPARK families.

Similar to *Get Ready for School*, the camps introduced the families of incoming kindergarteners to the school buildings and to school expectations.

Administrators and teachers from each school building actively participated and engaged in activities with parents and children. Families engaged in activities designed to develop language arts and social-emotional skills.

Feedback from participating parents and children, as well as school personnel, was very positive. Additional funding for *Kindergarten Kick-Off* was provided by PNC Foundation.



Celebrating a Milestone

Celebrations mark most of our life events and significant transitions, such as quinceañeras, graduation ceremonies, and weddings. It's only fitting that the transition into kindergarten should be celebrated as well. It's a big deal! This year, several SPARK communities formally recognized the transition.



Each Canton SPARK school hosted a kindergarten celebration on the final day of *Get Ready for School*. The celebrations were as unique as the children themselves.

At Youtz Elementary, students celebrated with a pizza party. Belden Elementary held a balloon release. And at Belle Stone Elementary, they marked the transition with bubbles and snacks.

In partnership with SPARK, the Minerva Local School District held its own celebration of the transition to kindergarten. The event was described in the *News Leader* as a somewhat dramatic undertaking:

“Preschool teacher Edie Macksyn invited this year’s kindergarteners to high-five the preschoolers as they crossed through a huge banner proclaiming *Hooray for Kindergarten*. Lined up in the hallway, the preschoolers rushed in a few at a time to burst through the banner. After they were all through, the children, with their little fists in the air, declared, “Hooray for Kindergarten!”

Each incoming kindergarten child also received a welcome certificate and a book from SPARK. The celebration was part of Minerva Elementary School’s focus on transitions prioritized through its Ready School work.



The children, with their little fists in the air, declared “Hooray for Kindergarten!”

Minerva News Leader

Summit County held a celebration of “Rising Kindergarteners” to mark the important transition of 59 children into kindergarten.

The celebration was attended by the families of the incoming kindergarteners and the principals of four of the five Summit SPARK schools. Also in attendance were Akron Public School District Superintendent David James, Assistant Superintendent Ellen McWilliams, Summit County Executive Russ Pry, and even Gilby the dog from Akron Public Schools’ Ask Gilby educational television series!

The rising kindergarteners were formally recognized and received backpacks full of all the school supplies they will need for the year.





SPARKing Family Engagement



*SPARK Cuyahoga Parent Partner
Keesha Tolliver-Funches.*

Cleveland's Fox 8 news recently aired a segment about SPARK entitled *Parenting: Sparking Interest in School*.

Fox 8's Todd Meany interviewed Keesha Tolliver-Funches, a Literacy Cooperative SPARK parent partner with Family Connections. Keesha feels that what makes SPARK different and effective is that while other home visiting programs focus only on children, SPARK works directly with families, and "we're enabling them to enable their kids."

Todd also spoke with SPARK mom Melissa Hale, who appreciates that direct work with families. According to Melissa, preparation for kindergarten "starts at home," and she feels that SPARK makes parents "accountable for what they're doing as well."

Melissa has been impressed with the progress her son Gabriel has made while in SPARK. Among other things, he can now write his name, use scissors, and count to 20.

SPARK Cuyahoga program services are provided under the umbrella of Invest in Children, Cuyahoga County's public-private partnership serving young children and families.

Funders, the Families of Ohio Thank You

Securing funding for early childhood programming is no small feat. Even programs with documented results can struggle, especially in an uncertain economy.

SPARK Ohio is very fortunate to have received such broad support throughout the state.

Over the past three years, more than \$4 million has been invested in SPARK sites across

the state by school districts, foundations, United Way chapters, individual donors, and other sources.

That amount is in addition to the \$1.5 million grant that the W.K. Kellogg Foundation awarded to support Ohio replication efforts, and also does not include the numerous in-kind contributions from schools, libraries, public agencies, community organizations, and individuals that continue to support SPARK programming by providing meeting space, services, supplies, and labor.

Over the past year alone, more than \$700,000 has been invested in SPARK throughout Ohio.

Over the past year alone, more than \$700,000 has been invested in SPARK throughout Ohio.

We are seeing broad support for SPARK by school districts, especially as they continue to witness the positive results of SPARK programming. For instance, to solidify the partnership between Community Solutions and the Warren City School District, the District recently provided \$10,000 to support the costs of delivering the SPARK curriculum within the district.

It's a blessing that so many empassioned invididuals and organizations understand that the future of Ohio depends on making sure the state's youngest citizens are ready to succeed in school.

We thank all of you for sharing the commitment, support, and common vision that make SPARK such a powerful program. Ohio's future is brighter because of you.





Making Progress with Robert

by SPARK Summit Parent Partner *Monika Hale*



*SPARK Summit Parent Partner
Monika Hale.*

This is my second year with Robert.* When he began SPARK, he had some delays. It was very hard to communicate with him, he did not understand most questions that I asked him, and he couldn't follow my verbal directions. Sometimes it was still a challenge even if I demonstrated the task to him.

Most of the time, I didn't understand what he was saying to me when he would speak, and I had to constantly rely on his dad's interpretation. Robert has an awesome dad who cares about his child thriving and being successful. Dad has taken in all recommendations given to him from myself, our speech pathologist, and Robert's preschool teacher.

As of today, Robert can hold a conversation and I can understand most of what he is saying. He can follow simple verbal directions, answer questions about a story, and complete tasks during our lessons without cues from me.

At our last appointment he was able to finish the phrase, "No one makes cookies like Grandma." He was also able to complete a specific picture-find activity without assistance from me or his dad.

I am so excited for Robert, and I can't wait to see how much more he grows this year.

**The child's name has been changed to preserve anonymity.*

I am so excited for Robert, and I can't wait to see how much more he grows this year.

**SPARK Summit Parent Partner
Monika Hale**

SPARK Changes Lives

by SPARK Summit Parent Partner *Tina Penzenik*



*SPARK Summit Parent Partner
Tina Penzenik.*

I first met this SPARK child's family in November 2009. The SPARK child's mom is single with three girls, ages 11, 5 (SPARK child), and 3. The family moved from Thailand to the United States in 2006 speaking only Cambodian. When I first met the family, a friend of Mom's would come to every visit to translate. She even sat with me to read the book in Cambodian so that Mom could read it to the SPARK child following my visits! Another wonderful support for the SPARK child is her big sister, who also sits with me through our visits. Big Sister speaks, reads, and understands English beautifully, so she also helps to follow up with the SPARK child and Mom with the lessons in English.

The SPARK child spoke very little English, and according to Mom, very little Cambodian too. The SPARK speech therapist and I had worked with the family for over a year when we decided to refer the

SPARK child to the Early Learning Program (ELP) with Akron Public Schools to help with her speech delay.

We met with a team of Intervention specialists who found that the SPARK child's scores on the testing qualified her to begin speech services and attend the ELP. The SPARK child started school in January 2011 with an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) that emphasized speech. Since that time, I have been visiting the family without a translator. This May, I learned that the child has tested out of the speech therapy program and will be entering Kindergarten without an IEP. Her English has improved so much that she no longer qualifies for services! I'm very excited to start working with her younger sister this fall, and also to see how much more she will grow over the next couple of years.

This May, I learned that the child has tested out of the speech therapy program and will be entering Kindergarten without an IEP.

**SPARK Summit Parent Partner
Tina Penzenik**



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News Briefs

The Canton *Repository* recently cited SPARK as one program that’s making a difference, especially as public dollars devoted to early childhood are declining. Joe French, executive director of the Early Childhood Education Alliance, agreed that SPARK is a crucial component of kindergarten readiness, because it focuses on all aspects of readiness. Joe stated, “The academic piece is important, but the social and emotional pieces are just as important.”

In August, the Youngstown *Vindicator* recently featured SPARK’s role in helping Youngstown families prepare for kindergarten, focusing on the family of Akeim Smith. Akeim’s parent partner, Felicia Fuller, told the *Vindicator* that Akeim recently started kindergarten with a smile on his face, knowing he was prepared for the challenges of kindergarten. According to Felicia, SPARK has “...helped (Akeim) with his skills and helped him progress.”



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