



Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Friends,

The importance of our work with children and families is validated every year when SPARK children enter kindergarten eager and confident. Our evaluation results continue to show that SPARK is helping children and families enter school ready. However, as exciting as these results have been, they don't adequately reflect the whole picture.

SPARK Ohio is about ready schools, too. Without schools as partners, our work would be incomplete. The importance of strong leadership, smooth transitions, high-quality instruction, and supportive environments cannot be overstated. Schools must welcome and engage families from diverse backgrounds, build strong connections with families, and support adult learning communities.

We are fortunate to have a strong partnership with the Ohio Department of Education and the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators in this work. What began as a small pilot project has blossomed into a statewide effort to support elementary school principals. Now *that's* progress!

We are also very proud that our replication sites are flourishing. The children, families, and schools are benefiting in their communities while attracting media attention and community donations. Not a surprise with dedicated parent partners like Doris in Warren, who is featured on the back page.

I can't close without welcoming Medina into SPARK! We are delighted they will be joining Stark, Summit, and Trumbull counties in implementing this important program. We can't wait to work with them and share their successes with all of you.

Sincerely,

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



Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan, co-director of the National Center for Children and Families

Photo courtesy of Ralph Aliswang

Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools

SPARK Ohio Featured at National Conference

After a six-year journey, SPARK Ohio was spotlighted for its strong evaluation and scaling efforts during the forum *Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools: Building Policy on State and Community Successes*, which was held in Washington D.C. on March 30-31. The forum was sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Education Commission of the States, Voices for America's Children, the Children's Leadership Council, and select members of the Learning First Alliance. SPARK Ohio was featured as one of two successful program case studies in a publication released at the meeting.

The forum was held as a "call to action" for linking ready kids to ready schools, and drew more than 250 community

leaders, education and early learning experts, and policymakers from 35 states. Throughout the forum, SPARK Ohio was repeatedly commended for its effectiveness in getting young children ready for kindergarten, and for its leadership in the Ohio ready schools movement, an innovative statewide initiative to get elementary schools ready to receive and teach all children.

Chet Lenartowicz, former principal of Youtz Elementary School in Canton, appeared on a panel discussion on community connections. Lenartowicz spoke of his experiences with community early care providers and the challenge of closing the achievement gap, especially in a school with a nearly 90% poverty rate, where students are actually "born

Continued on page 2



into an achievement gap.” Lenartowicz feels that SPARK works to close that gap and to reach the population, out in the community, where he, as a principal, cannot venture. He stated that he felt



Photo courtesy of Ralph Alswang

Chet Lenartowicz, former Youtz Elementary School principal

“Early childhood education. That is where we have to put our resources. That is what I need at my school to be successful.... I’ll tell you why I wanted SPARK Ohio:

- **They know what they are doing. They have great programming.**
- **They have been effective and they continue to be effective, and**
- **Quite simply, they can go where I can’t.**

...I have no jurisdiction over (ages) 0-4, that is not my territory...I don’t have mechanisms in place to reach that population. SPARK Ohio does, through parent partnerships, putting a third party individual into a home, ...as a living resource for that family, to help them rediscover the skills that they have lost... through generations of poverty. To develop early language programs. To bring children, schools and parents together in the schoolhouse, long before they formally arrive there as a kindergartner. That is why I wanted SPARK Ohio in my school. I am fortunate that they are there.”

fortunate to have SPARK Ohio in his school.

Forum speakers also included Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education; Sterling Speirn, president of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation; Barbara Bowman, Chicago Public Schools’ chief officer of early childhood education; and Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan, co-director of the National Center for Children and Families and national early childhood expert for the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton.

Joni Close, Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton president, and Shana Rozier, SPARK Ohio program coordinator, attended the meeting, along with Dr. Sandra Miller, director of the Office of Early Childhood at the Ohio Department of Education; Alicia Leatherman, director of Ohio Governor Strickland’s early childhood cabinet; Dr. Julie Davis, executive director of the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators; Candy Wallace, SPARK Ohio chairperson; and Ronald Young, chair of the board of directors of the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton.

Ms. Close spoke on a panel entitled *Linking Early Learning to Early Grades: What Policymakers Can Learn From Communities*. She also met with staffers from the offices of Senator George Voinovich, Senator Sherrod Brown, Representative Marcia Fudge, Representative Charlie Wilson, and Representative John Boccieri, to drive home the point that support for early education is crucial to children’s development. She participated in radio interviews and press briefings, addressing the importance of looking to communities and identifying best practices when setting policies affecting children, families, and schools.





Ohio Ready Schools: Lessons Learned



The W.K. Kellogg Foundation introduced its ready schools program in 2006 to help SPARK grant recipients address school readiness. The original W.K. Kellogg Foundation SPARK grant included funding to help

prepare schools beyond the SPARK initiative. That funding was combined with funding from the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton to support an Ohio Ready Schools movement.

SPARK Ohio, the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators (OAESA), and the Ohio Department of Education partnered to develop a Ready Schools resource guide for elementary principals and early

childhood educators. The resource guide was piloted in eight elementary schools, and each pilot school received a \$10,000 grant to implement transition activities. The state intends to eventually deliver the resource guide, along with training in its use, to the approximately 2,500 public and charter school elementary principals in Ohio.

The Wexford Institute, a nonprofit educational agency, prepared a mid-year report of the eight pilot schools to evaluate their progress. Although there were many accomplishments and challenges, we were most interested to read about their lessons learned:

Systemic District Support

Systemic district support is needed at all levels to ensure the ongoing success and sustainability of the Ohio Ready Schools program. All district structures need to be informed and strategically involved in planning, implementation, and development from the outset of the program.

Promising strategies for gaining district support include:

- Providing ongoing updates on the program's progress to the key personnel,
- Placing strategic district personnel on each school's Ready Schools team,
- Presenting the program and perhaps the action plan at a board meeting,
- Inviting board members to Ready Schools events, and
- Making apparent links to district initiatives and existing programs.

Stakeholder Involvement

The viewpoints of all stakeholders need to be heard and integrated into each school's action plan. Schools are sometimes surprised to learn of the perceptions of parents and community members. What the parents and community perceive as necessary for a smooth transition to school



Pilot school principals with Ohio Governor Strickland and former Ohio Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Susan Tave Zelman

is often different from what the school staff perceives. When one pilot school reached out to parents, they found that the parents rated the school much higher in home-school-community connections than did the staff. Pilot schools are still learning what other strategies or procedures can be employed to encourage respect for and sharing of differing perspectives.

School Action Plan Alignment

The activities selected in a school's action plan should address the identified needs of the site using the self-assessments in the resource guide, and consequently its chosen goals and indicators. If a site's activities are to help achieve the site's goals, their selected activities need to directly address those goals and indicators. Without an alignment of the three – goals, indicators, and activities – monitoring progress and the possibility of achieving the goal is severely diminished.

Development of a Shared Vision

Sufficient time needs to be devoted to collaborative discussion and planning

in order to develop a shared vision of the outcome. Some schools are using their grants to hold day-long, off-site planning sessions with community and parent representatives, in order to develop common visions. These sessions allow for collaboration and deeper discussion.

Structured Resources

There is a need to develop structured resources in addition to the resource guide, as a framework for sites as they begin the planning and development process. Such resources provide discussion starters for Ready Schools teams, foster the development of a common language within and across sites, provide guidance in alignment of the action plan, and offer examples of activities that address specific needs.

Teacher Leadership

The program provides opportunities for teacher leadership. The principal cannot do the project alone. A Ready Schools coordinator who monitors planning and implementation has been identified at several sites. In addition to the coordinator's role, some sites have created teacher-chaired committees around each of their identified activities.

What's Next?

Each school and district must learn what works for them. The pilot presents an exciting opportunity to fine-tune the initiative, so that the next round of schools doesn't need to reinvent the wheel, but will still have the flexibility to mold the program to meet their needs.





Ready Schools Grant Funds Five Schools


The Ready Schools bug is spreading fast, and we couldn't be more pleased. The Foundation to Advance Childhood Education, which is the nonprofit foundation of the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators, has received a \$50,000 Martha Holden Jennings Foundation grant for participation in the Ohio Ready Schools project, which began its pilot phase in September, 2008.

The grant will fund the participation of five additional schools in the project, located in the Franklin Monroe Local, Woodmore Local, Crestview Local, Troy City, and Licking Heights Local school districts. Their work will be informed by the lessons learned during the first-year statewide Ready Schools pilot funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton, and SPARK Ohio.

These five schools will join the ten other Ohio schools that began in the 2009-









2010 school year, as well as the four Cincinnati-area schools receiving Ready Schools funding through the United Way of Greater Cincinnati. Each school will receive technical assistance from Ohio Ready Schools coaches, be mentored by the eight pilot schools, and participate in evaluations conducted by the Wexford Institute that will monitor their progress.

SPARK Ohio and the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton congratulate our partners, the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators, the Ohio Department of Education, the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, and United Way of Greater Cincinnati for expanding this important work across Ohio.

For more information about the Ready Schools project, contact Julie Davis at the Ohio Association of Elementary School Administrators at jdavis@oaes.org, or visit their web site at www.oaes.org. 



Ready schools and school districts follow an eight-step process:

-  School districts sign an agreement committing to the work of the project;
-  Schools form a Leadership Team composed of local stakeholders, including early childhood educators;
-  Schools conduct self-assessments to identify their current readiness status;
-  Schools develop and implement an action plan identifying goals, indicators of progress, activities, persons responsible, and timeline;
-  Schools identify and arrange for technical assistance with Ready Schools' coaches;
-  Schools identify a site data coordinator and conduct an evaluation guided by the state project evaluator;
-  Schools plan for program sustainability once initial funding has ended; and
-  Schools share their progress and lessons learned with school staff members, district personnel, other district schools, other Ohio Ready School sites, and other interested entities, both local and national.



McGregor Elementary Creates a Supporting Environment

Annie Arvidson’s animated demeanor makes it obvious that she loves her job and is excited about the outreach efforts occurring at McGregor Elementary School in Canton. McGregor has been a SPARK school since the program’s inception. Annie, the school’s curriculum and intervention coach, and Victor Johnson, the principal, have been conducting some very innovative outreach efforts to try to involve families in the learning process, while creating a supportive school environment.

McGregor Elementary recently received a grant from Target Corporation, which was used to plan events for McGregor families. The school will be holding family events throughout the year. Each event will have its own theme. The first event was held shortly after school began in late August, and was deemed a “Kindergarten Learning Celebration.” The new kindergarteners had just taken the KRA-L test (Kindergarten Readiness Assessment – Literacy, which is the Ohio Department of Education mandated test that helps teachers identify early reading skills). The school wanted to not only share test results, but also engage parents from the outset of their children’s time at school. The kindergarteners were sent home with event invitation stickers placed

on their shirts, so that the youngsters wouldn’t lose them. As this was the first event of its kind, school staff were unsure of how many attendees to expect. To their delight, of the 44 incoming kindergarteners, 42 had family members attend.

All the parents were brought together for a quick presentation about kindergarten learners. Parents were then free to visit “stations” that had been set up:

- A “number sense” station, where they received a math game and kindergarten math information;
- A book station, where they received a free book;
- An ice cream station, where kindergarten teachers served parents and students;

- A “read me to sleep” station, where parents received personalized pillowcases with their child’s handprints; and
- A KRA-L conference station, where parents met individually with teachers to learn their child’s test scores. Based on what those scores revealed, each parent received a game designed to help them strengthen their child’s literacy skills.

The school also held an open house event in early September. All McGregor families were invited to learn of McGregor’s latest Ohio Department of Education report card scores, and to visit their children’s classrooms.

The response from families was very favorable. Annie says that “parents have stopped us in the hallways saying they’re very excited about the welcoming feeling they’re getting from McGregor.”

The McGregor Elementary School principal and staff are to be commended for connecting with the school’s families and actively helping them to become their children’s learning advocates. It is their breed of enthusiasm and creativity that also sustains the SPARK program and furthers efforts to create ready schools, families, and communities.



McGregor teachers Amy Wheele and Sherry Trapani with student Keigan Hayes.

Schools that are ready for all children recognize that safety, security, engagement, and belonging can have a significant impact on students’ attitudes toward learning and on their ability to pay attention, think, and remember subject matter.

A Ready School:

- Creates a welcoming atmosphere,
- Meets the individual needs of all children, and
- Promotes the physical and social-emotional well-being of all children.


Excerpt from Strong Beginnings, Smooth Transitions, Continuous Learning: A Ready School Resource Guide for Elementary School Leadership.



SPARK Summit Update

SPARK Summit held a celebration on August 13, 2009 at Mason Community Learning Center in the University Park neighborhood of Akron. The purpose of the gathering was to recognize the incoming kindergarten class who had participated in the SPARK program over the last year. The celebration, *Special Recognition of Rising Kindergarteners and Learning Advocates*, was attended by 200 SPARK family members, partners, and supporters from the Summit County area. Judy Joyce, CEO of Greenleaf Family Center and a partner with Summit Education Initiative, welcomed the families and guests. She introduced Russell Pry, Summit County Executive, who spoke about the importance of early childhood education. Ellen McWilliams, assistant superintendent for Akron Public Schools, stated that SPARK should be in all schools throughout the district. David Jennings, director of Akron-Summit County Public Library, said, "I love the way the ceremony is the introduction to kindergarten. It's great to see the eagerness of the kids."

As part of the celebration, the SPARK students were given certificates of completion of the SPARK program. They also received book bags donated by Honeywell, Inc., which were filled with school supplies and books. Some of the books were donated by FirstBook-Greater Akron. The SPARK parent partners and the two principals from the schools where the students will be attending kindergarten this fall greeted the children and welcomed their families into the Akron Public Schools. Everyone enjoyed refreshments following the program.

SPARK Summit is now in the process of expanding for the 2009-2010 year. They are recruiting children for the three-year-old and four-year-old SPARK programs from four elementary school neighborhoods within Akron Public Schools. 

"I love the way the ceremony is the introduction to kindergarten. It's great to see the eagerness of the kids."

David Jennings
Director of Akron-Summit County Public Library




Parent Partner Monika Hale and student Devin Lough



SPARK Warren Update

SPARK Warren is excited to announce that during their first year they were able to secure a grant from The Community Foundation of the Mahoning Valley for the purchase of SPARK early learning library kits. The Warren-Trumbull County Public Library assembled over 50 of these preschool book bag kits that are now available to all families using the public library and bookmobile services. The kits were designed to broaden the outreach of SPARK, promote

the benefits of the SPARK program, link families to Ohio's Early Learning Content Standards, and provide hands-on materials that promote literacy and early developmental skills.

On June 23, the kick-off of the circulation of the book bags was coordinated with a SPARK family night. The library sponsored a book reading for all families and SPARK families participated in an activity that featured the book *Whistle for Willie* by Ezra Jack Keats. Fifteen families participated, and a few families became new patrons of the public library! 



SPARK Ohio Expands

Despite the state of the economy, SPARK Ohio is fortunate to be able to expand its services to more schools in Canton City and add a new replication site in Medina County. With start-up support from the United Way of Medina County Community Investment Committee, efforts are underway to replicate SPARK in Medina County. SPARK Medina will serve the Brunswick School District beginning this fall. This makes SPARK Medina the third replication site. SPARK now operates in seven schools in Stark County and has replication sites in Summit, Trumbull, and Medina counties!

Welcome, Medina! We're thrilled to have you on board.

Letter from SPARK Medina

When we began researching best practices for early childhood education programs for the Medina County Partnerships for Success (PIS) in 2006, little did we know about the great work being done in Stark County by the SPARK partners. All we knew was that our early childhood task force chose three priorities:

- to increase the number of children entering kindergarten ready to learn and be successful,
- to improve parent engagement as advocates for their young child, and
- to improve quality of childcare in the county.

After core members of our task force attended the first educational seminar to learn more about SPARK, we were sold! Now our challenges were to choose the best school neighborhoods that shared our goals and enthusiasm, replicate SPARK activities, and talk to anyone who would listen about how SPARK would deliver the best return on investment.

From the beginning, our core team consisted of staff and parent advocates from Family First Council, Help Me Grow, Medina County Schools' Educational Service Center, Brunswick City Schools, Brunswick Library, and United Way of Medina County. Help Me Grow staff were already in homes assessing children under the age of three and worrying about those three- to five-year-olds that would drop between the cracks if their learning and developmental delays weren't severe enough to qualify for public preschool. When we learned that the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton planned to replicate the SPARK Ohio initiative in several more Ohio communities, the Medina County core team reached out to the administrators of three Brunswick elementary schools, and we were warmly received. We knew that we had all the components necessary to implement the program, except for the funding. We approached the United Way of Medina County Community Investment Committee for start-up funds; initial funding was approved in May, 2009.

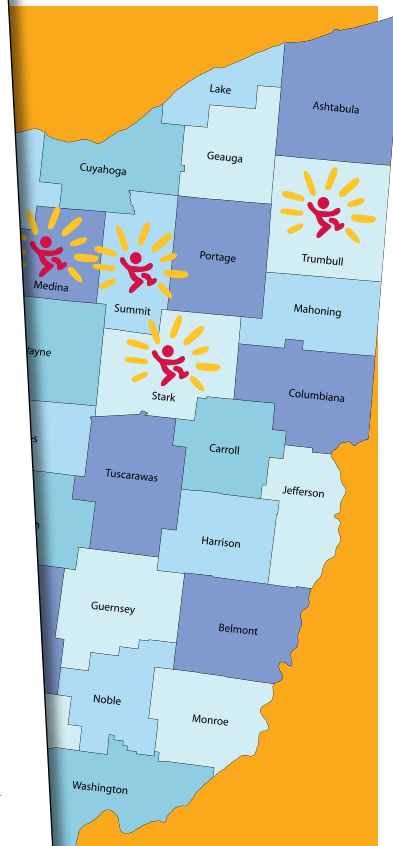
The partnership with United Way was timed perfectly as new ten-year goals in education, income, and health were being rolled out in communities across America. The SPARK Medina program will be the first results-driven youth program funded by United Way of Medina County, with the goal of increasing by 25% the number of children entering kindergarten ready to learn by 2018. The evaluation metrics using KRA-L scores and fourth graders reading at grade level mirror the United Way's goal of increasing the number of youth who graduate from high school on time. We are very pleased to be working with Dr. Peter Leahy on program evaluation, and we look forward to adding our data to the 2010-2011 results.

Chris Ruf, director of Help Me Grow and Family First Council, and Nancy Nimmo, director for special initiatives for Medina County Schools' Educational Service Center, will be co-coordinating the parent partners and organizing the responsive services team. They are looking forward to recruiting our new SPARK families and getting the home visits for our four-year-old program started early this fall. Pat Rainey, children's librarian at Brunswick Library, will assist us with our backpack project and has offered her facility for family support group meetings.

The Medina County core team is grateful to Joni Close, Shana Rozier, and the SPARK team, who have gone out of their way to make us feel welcome and important to the SPARK Ohio family. We have much more learning to do, but are glad to be in the company of so many wonderful people who genuinely care about the future of our youngest children. We look forward to a long, satisfying partnership.

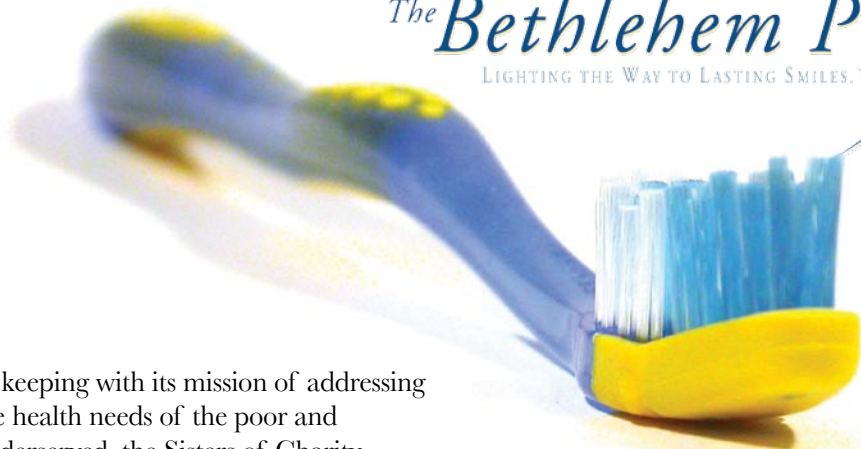
Sincerely,

Julie A. King
Executive Director, United Way of Medina County





SPARK Welcomes the Bethlehem Project for Oral Health



In keeping with its mission of addressing the health needs of the poor and underserved, the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton launched its Bethlehem Project for Oral Health in 2002.

The Bethlehem Project provides in-home oral health education and dental care services (offered by 19 participating dentists) for eligible Stark County children and adults. Until recent state budget cuts occurred, the program was offered to families enrolled in the Help Me Grow program. Beginning in January, 2010, Bethlehem Project services will be available to Stark County SPARK children and their eligible household members.

SPARK parent partners will be trained in oral health topics, so that they may provide Bethlehem services to families during their regularly scheduled SPARK home visits. The parent partners will use the *Help Me Smile* curriculum. This collection of training materials and assessments provides non-oral-health professionals with developmentally appropriate oral health information and activities for families. Topics include fluoride, brushing and flossing, dental decay, oral cancer and tobacco use, nutritious snacking, oral piercings, and establishing a dental home.

The SPARK parent partner will also provide dental case management and in-home dental health education, and will serve as the link to the Bethlehem

Since 2002, through the Bethlehem Project,

- 599 individuals have been assisted with making 1,369 attended dental appointments
- 185 of those had not attended an appointment in 2 or more years
- 227 had never been to the dentist, and 71 of those were age three or older
- 1,462 individuals were provided with oral health education through home visits

The Program has:

- 19 private practice dentists
- 4 safety net dental clinics
- 2 dental laboratories

Over a period of 12 months, each pro bono dentist provides \$8,000-\$15,000 in dental services and sees between 7 and 10 patients

patient provider relations coordinator. The coordinator will work with families to address barriers to accessing dental care, and will schedule appointments, make reminder/follow-up phone calls, and provide transportation assistance. The coordinator also works with current

and potential dental providers to support their participation in the program.

Through SPARK, the Bethlehem Project will provide high-quality, one-on-one, in-home oral health education and case management to its families and efficient and coordinated patient referrals to its participating dental offices.



“It has been a huge blessing for my husband to have his teeth fixed. My husband feels better. He had not been to the dentist in 10 years. He has more self confidence and he smiles more. We’re low-income. It provides us with a service that we normally couldn’t afford.”



“My husband just loved the dentist he saw! It had been more than 5 years since he has been. No other dentist has taken care of him the way this dentist did.”




“I was really nervous; it had been 10-12 years since I had been to the dentist. We all have better oral hygiene now. My husband even brushes better. The kids brush more often; before it was one time a day.”





Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton Receives Grant

In June, the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton received a \$10,000 planning grant to support a community-based effort to identify and apply for federal stimulus funds related to education from preschool through college. This grant opportunity was offered by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation through the Communications Consortium Media Center (CCMC), to the five states that hosted governor’s forums on Ready Schools. **Nearly 200 applications were received for this first round of funding. Only 11 were awarded—one in Ohio!** The Sisters of Charity Foundation will be using these funds to support its P-12 effort, led by the Stark Education Partnership, which will coordinate local collaborations applying for federal stimulus funds. We are currently monitoring the stimulus funding opportunities that arise, with the intention of applying for all appropriate funding. 



SPARK Receives School District Funding

With all the new stimulus money coming forth, school districts are diligently investigating how to maximize these dollars, and the Ohio Department of Education has provided them with some direction. We are pleased to note that the Ohio Department of Education recognized SPARK Ohio as a “promising practice” in a letter distributed to all school districts’ superintendents about suggested uses of stimulus funds.

SPARK is excited to announce that Canton City Schools decided to do just that. The Canton City Schools’ Leadership Team and the Canton Board of Education decided to use a portion of their federal stimulus funding to make a \$200,000 commitment to SPARK in two Canton City elementary schools over two years.


We feel this validates the school system’s commitment to SPARK Ohio, and we are proud to have such committed partners at the table, working with us toward a common goal—school readiness. 

SPARK Explores Sustainability



SPARK Ohio held a sustainability luncheon for SPARK directors and their primary funders on August fifth. The group reviewed the results of the SPARK stakeholder surveys that were recently administered, and also began to share and brainstorm ideas regarding SPARK sustainability.


The luncheon enabled sites to share how each community has attracted financial and in-kind support from a variety of sources,

while collectively identifying innovative strategies for securing funding. 

Many Thanks!

SPARK Ohio thanks The Triosis Book Club for its donation to support SPARK in Canton.

Thanks also go out to an anonymous donor whose generosity enabled us to expand SPARK to Youtz Elementary School in Canton.

To explore donation opportunities, contact SPARK Ohio at (330) 454-5800 or visit www.sparkohio.org. 





400 Market Avenue North, Suite 300
Canton, OH 44702-1556
330-454-5800 • www.sparkohio.org

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SPARK Contact Information

SPARK Stark County

Shana Rozier
srozier@scfcanton.org
(330) 454-5800

SPARK Medina County

Julie King
jking@unitedwaymedina.org
(330) 725-3926

SPARK Summit County

Sue Long
sue@seisummit.org
330-535-8833

SPARK Trumbull County

Kathie Marando
kmarando@csatrumbull.org
(330) 394-9090 ext. 110

Doris Freeman: SPARK Star – Going Above and Beyond

A Shining SPARK Star goes out to Doris Freeman, a Warren parent partner who demonstrated her commitment to her SPARK families by going far beyond the call of duty! Doris' mother was unexpectedly hospitalized on a day Doris had five home visits scheduled. As soon as Doris got her mother settled, she left the hospital to complete her visits, because she didn't want to disappoint the children who were eagerly waiting. Then after a very long day, she went back to the hospital to attend to her mother. The next day, she did not want to leave the hospital. When she



attempted to cancel her home visit, the SPARK mom asked if they could come to the hospital for the lesson. Doris agreed. We think this is the first SPARK lesson to be provided in a hospital setting! Now *that's* dedication to SPARK!

p.s. Doris' mother is recovering just fine at home.

To learn more about SPARK, please join us at the next open meeting.



For more information, please contact:

Beverly Gallagher
bgallagher@scfcanton.org
or (330) 454-5800



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