



Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Friends,

Even though the SPARK program has been helping children and families in Stark County for years, we feel like this is a new beginning. Our brand new newsletter design features our updated SPARK Ohio logo and beautiful new layout. This issue also celebrates two new SPARK partnerships, in Summit and Trumbull counties, with progress reports from each community. We are proud!

In addition, we are expanding our distribution list to include community organizations, business leaders, foundations, and schools from each of our new SPARK communities. Over 4,500 people are now on our mailing list—and it keeps growing!

We are excited about the opportunity to replicate SPARK in Ohio. We have spoken with people from all over the state who are interested in the program. We're planning to replicate SPARK in 6 to 8 additional communities over the next few years. Countless children and families will be impacted by this effort.

Despite all of the excitement, we remain determined to implement a strong, evidence-based program consistently in every neighborhood and in every community. We ensure and maintain these high standards through our commitment to evaluation and the constant feedback it gives on all aspects of our programming. We use screenings, assessments, surveys, and interviews to assess our progress and ensure the consistency of implementation.

The evaluation results included in this

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SPARK is Highly Effective – for the Fourth Straight Year.

The results are in: for the fourth straight year, SPARK is an overwhelming success. SPARK children in both rural and urban communities again significantly outperformed non-SPARK children at kindergarten entry in the fall of 2008. Based on these results, there's no doubt that SPARK children definitely enter kindergarten more ready to learn. This difference occurred at every SPARK site: Akron, Alliance, Canton, and Minerva, Ohio.

The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment of Literacy (KRA-L) is the current Ohio Department of Education mandated assessment, which is graded on a 29-point scale. On average, the SPARK children

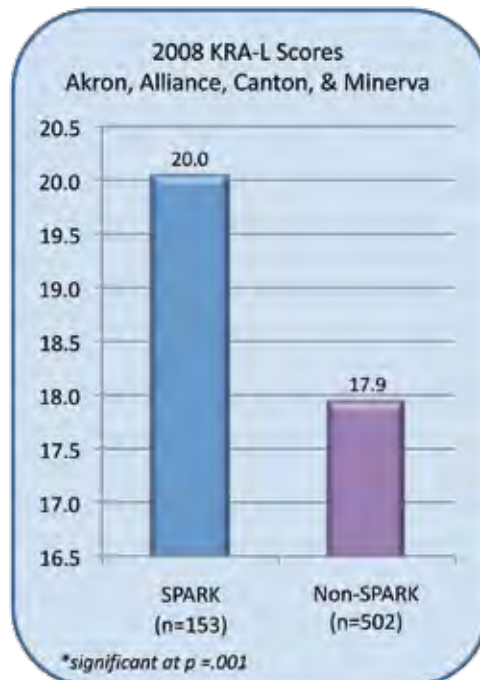


scored a 20.0 on the KRA-L, versus 17.9 for the non-SPARK comparison children.

Dr. Peter Leahy of the University of Akron is the third-party evaluator of the SPARK program. Leahy has been collecting evaluation data on SPARK participants since the program began in 2003. Leahy feels that these latest results are valid for several reasons. First, the comparison group design is strong. Second, the results show up in every SPARK community, urban or rural. Third, the results have been consistent now for four straight years of children entering kindergarten.

The evaluation also collects data on children and parents using standardized

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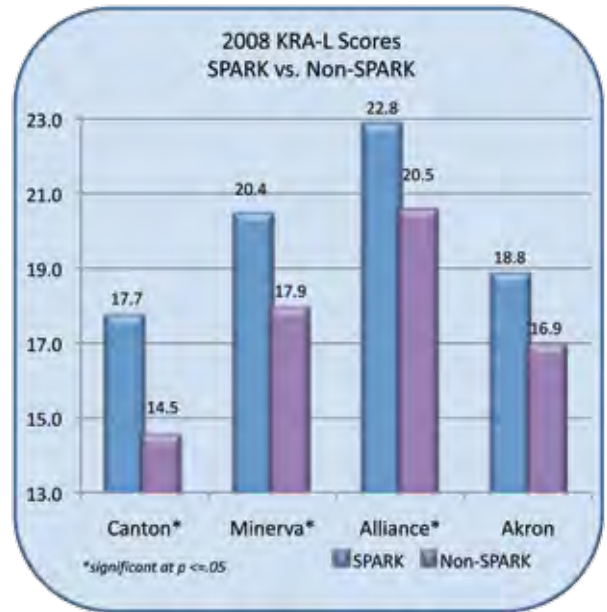
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test instruments while they are participating in the SPARK program before kindergarten entry. The data collected on parents using the Home Observation Measurement of the Environment (H.O.M.E.) instrument shows that parents have made large improvements in areas related to their ability to facilitate their child's education. The data collected on the children using the Woodcock-Johnson III assessment

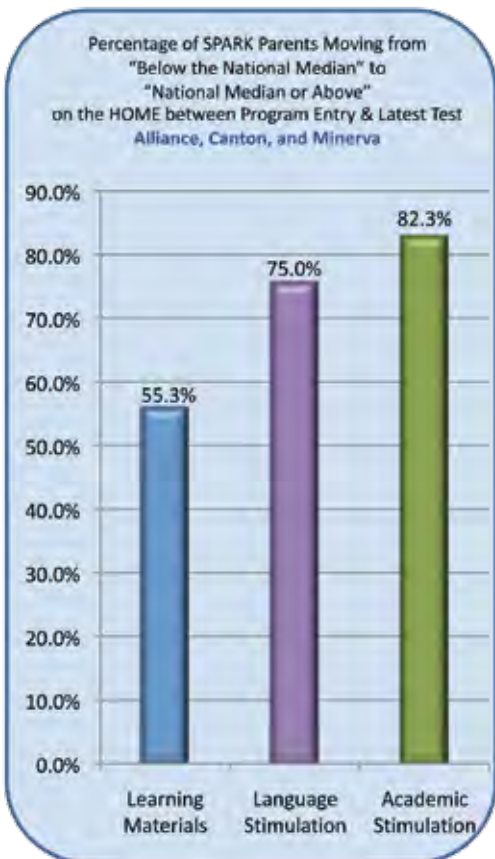
shows that the children made important gains on the six educational domains tested. Taken together, Leahy feels that the results paint a picture of a highly successful program.

Leahy feels that SPARK evaluation will get even stronger going forward, especially now that SPARK is expanding to other communities outside of Stark County. The expansion of SPARK will provide additional data to test how well the program is working across different types of communities. With the help of data provided by the school districts, the SPARK evaluation will follow each group of SPARK kindergarten and comparison children through third grade. This will show that SPARK not only gives a child an advantage at kindergarten entry, but also that the child maintains that advantage as they progress through school. In the groups of children who entered kindergarten in the fall of 2005 and 2006, SPARK children were promoted on time more often than the comparison group of non-SPARK children.



When asked to summarize the evaluation results for SPARK, Leahy noted: "SPARK is consistently improving parents' ability to serve as their child's first educator, and is effective in preparing children to enter kindergarten."

"Based upon these results, and knowing how important education is to our modern workforce, if I were a parent in a SPARK community, I would definitely want to enroll my family in the program."





SPARK Guiding Principles:

- We are committed to children as our primary focus.
- We are committed to providing children the opportunity to realize their full potential.
- We are committed to quality services and equitable treatment of all children.
- We are committed to the importance of families and their right to self-determination.
- We are committed to the recognition and support of the strengths and needs of families.
- We are committed to respect for and sensitivity to diversity and cultural and racial differences.
- We are committed to collaboration with a primary focus on the best interests of children and their families.
- We are committed to respect for and support of all who are entrusted with the care of children.
- We are committed to self-reflection, evaluation, and continuous growth.
- We are committed to advocating for the well-being of children.



Early Experiences Last a Lifetime

You may have heard the radio commercials or noticed the billboards throughout Stark County. The Stark County Early Childhood Communications Collaborative, a group of interested community and early childhood leaders, has created this local campaign to make parents aware of the importance of early childhood learning. If you haven't visited the website lately, you'll definitely want to check it out. The site has lots of new content, including health information and great tips for grandparents.



Igniting SPARK

The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton hosted an event on January 26, 2009 on *Igniting SPARK—Growing Together: Community by Community*. The one-day program was held at Walsh University in North Canton, Ohio. This event marks the first time that personnel from all SPARK sites—Stark, Summit, and Trumbull Counties—gathered to network and learn.



The audience included SPARK personnel and educators, as well as school superintendents and principals from each of the SPARK communities, who came to hear the latest SPARK evaluation results. Dr. Peter Leahy from the University of Akron discussed results that prove, for the fourth straight year, that SPARK is an overwhelming success.


SPARK personnel and educators also had opportunities to network, both informally and at round table discussions. SPARK parent partners shared recruitment strategies that worked in their communities, told anecdotes about daily successes with the program, and offered suggestions for navigating difficult situations.

The keynote speaker was Dr. Mike Dunphy from Walsh University, who encouraged participants to be self-aware and emotionally intelligent, and to search for new ways of accomplishing tasks. Dunphy advocated



its effectiveness and is committed to ensuring its success. SPARK parent partners and educators alike expressed an interest in attending future networking events, stating that they learned a considerable amount by speaking with

SPARK program personnel and educators from other communities.

Joni Close, president of the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton, closed the day's events by remarking about how productive the event was, and stating that SPARK is planning to hold more all-site events in the future. 



brainstorming, mind mapping, and seeking the input of all team members to find new, creative ways to recruit SPARK families and contribute to the success of the program.

Amy Swanson, executive director of Voices for Ohio's Children, spoke about educational policy at the state level. SPARK parent partners learned about the Ohio Early Learning Content Standards from early childhood advocate and consultant Pam Perrino.

At the close of the program, the overwhelming consensus was that such networking opportunities are all too rare. It was obvious that everyone involved with the program believes in





Letter from SPARK Summit

I am very excited about our initial efforts to implement SPARK Ohio in Summit County.

Summit Education Initiative (SEI) is proud to have been the first to replicate SPARK Ohio outside of Stark County and this would not have been possible without all the support and guidance we received from the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton, as well as the funding provided by the GAR Foundation.

We have a great team that has come together to make SPARK Ohio possible in Summit County.

First, we have a great partnership with Greenleaf Family Center that provides day-to-day implementation in working with and supporting the parent partners.

Second, we have a wonderful relationship with Akron Public Schools that recognizes that SPARK is a great way to help families prepare their children for kindergarten and to boost the way schools prepare for kindergartners.

Third, we are fortunate to have Dr. Peter Leahy head up the evaluation processes as he also had taken the lead in evaluation in Stark County.

Fourth, we have a terrific responsive services team that is headed by Dr. Pattie Millsaps-Linger, child psychologist.

Fifth, we have two superb parent partners that are committed to working with every parent to help them become their children's first and best teacher.

Clearly, SPARK Ohio is filling a real need. We certainly expect that the early results from beginning the program in March 2008 will continue as we scale up.

Sincerely,

Dr. Judy Hummel,
Executive Director, Summit Education Initiative



Letter from SPARK Warren

Community Solutions Association (CSA) is the lead agency implementing SPARK Warren. The agency employs Project Director Kathie Marando, Project Supervisor Kathy LaMarco, and four parent partners. Initial funding for the program was provided by the Raymond John Wean Foundation.

A fifteen-member advisory board, consisting of community leaders, early childhood advocates, business leaders, public education representatives, SPARK leadership team members, representatives from the faith-based community, and representatives from the Raymond John Wean Foundation, function to promote and enhance the image and public awareness of the project to the community at large.

Project oversight and monitoring is done by the SPARK Warren team, consisting of key project implementation personnel, school administrators, evaluation personnel, and responsive services providers.

From the beginning, our community has embraced the project and families are loving SPARK! Two neighborhood schools were chosen to receive SPARK, Willard and Jefferson Elementary schools. Willard Elementary was selected to receive one of ten Ohio School Readiness grants and their team has been diligently working to develop effective leadership and transition practices.

The Community Foundation of Mahoning Valley supported a grant request to purchase 40 pre-K backpack literacy kits for the Warren-Trumbull County Public Library, which should be available to the public this June.

Warren City Schools created a responsive services team under the leadership of Doug Dennis, Executive Director of Special Education, and the team is providing much needed services to several of our SPARK Warren children.

We are extremely pleased with our SPARK Warren initiative and are enthusiastically looking to next year as we begin recruitment efforts for the 2010 cohort of SPARK students.

Sincerely,

Kathie Marando
Director, Community Solutions Association



Strong Beginnings, Smooth Transitions, Continuous Learning

The Ready Schools Movement in Ohio

In 2006, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation implemented its Pathways to Ready Schools program, to help SPARK recipients address school readiness. The \$1.5 million SPARK Ohio grant included \$150,000 to help prepare schools beyond the SPARK initiative. That funding was combined with funding from the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton to support the roll-out of a Ready for School—Ready Schools movement.

According to Dr. Sandra Miller, director of the Ohio Department of Education’s

Office of Early Learning and School Readiness, “...school readiness is about that match between the environment of the child and the supports of their preschool, child care and community. School readiness is about the role and responsibility all of us have in creating the conditions and experiences in which children will thrive and develop to their full potential.”

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 funding provided a unique opportunity for the ready schools team to study how current practices facilitate or inhibit transitions between preschool and kindergarten in Ohio. In developing the guide, the team reviewed research on transition practices and surveyed a statewide team of elementary school principals, kindergarten and early childhood teachers, and higher education faculty to learn of their knowledge of ready school concepts and understand their challenges in implementing those concepts. After a year of research,



interviewing, and planning, *Strong Beginnings, Smooth Transitions, Continuous Learning: A Ready School Resource Guide for Elementary School Leadership* was finalized. The guide was released last September at a Ready Schools forum hosted by Ohio Governor Ted Strickland. Educators and education experts from across Ohio attended the forum to learn about the ready schools movement and the development and implementation of the guide. According to Governor Strickland,

The seven components of a ready school:

-  **Leadership.**
-  **Transition.**
-  **Supportive environments.**
-  **Standards, instruction and assessment.**
-  **Home-school-community connections.**
-  **Adult learning communities.**
-  **Diversity.**

Source: *Strong Beginnings, Smooth Transitions, Continuous Learning: A Ready School Resource Guide for Elementary School Leadership*



“There probably is no other expenditure of resources that brings us the benefits and the rewards like a modest investment in our youngest children can bring to us.” Forum speakers included Ronald Young, president of the board of directors of the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton, who emphasized the necessity of a dual focus on both ready children and ready schools. “What good would it have been,” asked Young, “to have children who are ready for education, and no school ready to accept them in a positive way?”

Former Ohio State Superintendent of Education Dr. Susan Tave Zelman agreed, stating that educators have a special responsibility to ensure that their schools are ready. “These are all our children,” stated Zelman, “and we must open the schoolhouse door, and we must take responsibility for strong results for all children, and

have strong leadership.”

According to Governor Strickland, “It is obviously becoming increasingly recognized through

research that when we provide the youngest of our children with a healthy start in life, with good, high-quality early child care and education, that the results of that investment and that involvement last into the adult lifetime. And a better start for our children will result in a lot of the problems that we are currently dealing with in our society to be minimized.”


Ohio defines a ready school as being:

- Ready to respond to the diverse learning needs of all the children they receive;
- Ready to look beyond “risk factors” and build upon the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills of all children as they make the transition from home or preschool to kindergarten and then adjust to school life; and
- Ready to make a decisive difference in every child’s life.

The ready school resource guide will be piloted in 20 elementary schools over the next two years. OAESA will help distribute the guide and will initially train up to 500 principals at regional meetings across Ohio. The goal is 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.

At the forum, Governor Strickland stated that SPARK Ohio has been influential: “What you do and what you will achieve can serve as a model for schools all across our great state to improve the lives and the educational experience of all of our children.” 

“The Ready Schools Project has provided us the opportunity to expand our perspective to a greater educational arena. We are grateful for our new partnerships with early childhood caregivers and for the byproducts of new knowledge, collaboration, and collegiality. We are in a better place due to our involvement in Ready Schools.”

Chet Lenartowicz
Principal, Youtz Elementary
Canton City Schools



SPARK in the News

SPARK has been getting some great press coverage lately! Here are some of the latest headlines:



SPARK hoping to ignite learning process for kids: Parent mentoring program in Akron's University Park neighborhood is helping to prepare youngsters better for success in kindergarten
Akron Beacon Journal, Feb 15, 2009

Alliance's SPARK program gets praise for student improvement
Alliance Review, October 30, 2008

SPARK of learning—The governor wants to make a difference in early education? He should pursue sufficient resources for this program that works.
Akron Beacon Journal Editorial, February 18, 2009

Alliance girl's story 'SPARKs' donation to Rodman Library for Braille books
Alliance Review, December 13, 2008

United Way funds aid daughter of blind woman
Alliance Review, December 2, 2008



Kindergarten: 'It's The New First Grade'
Canton Repository, March 30, 2009

Helping kindergarten transition
Akron Beacon Journal, March 31, 2009



SPARK early learning program is expanding in its second year
Alliance Review, October 7, 2008

"We are very fortunate to be receiving positive press coverage about our local SPARK initiative in Summit County. I truly believe this reflects the increasing emphasis on the need for top-notch early childhood education."

Dr. Judy Hummel,
Executive Director, SEI

"The recent press coverage is a true compliment to the work of the parent partners and the entire SPARK team. Together, we are providing early experiences that will last a lifetime."

Joe French, Executive Director,
Early Childhood Education Alliance



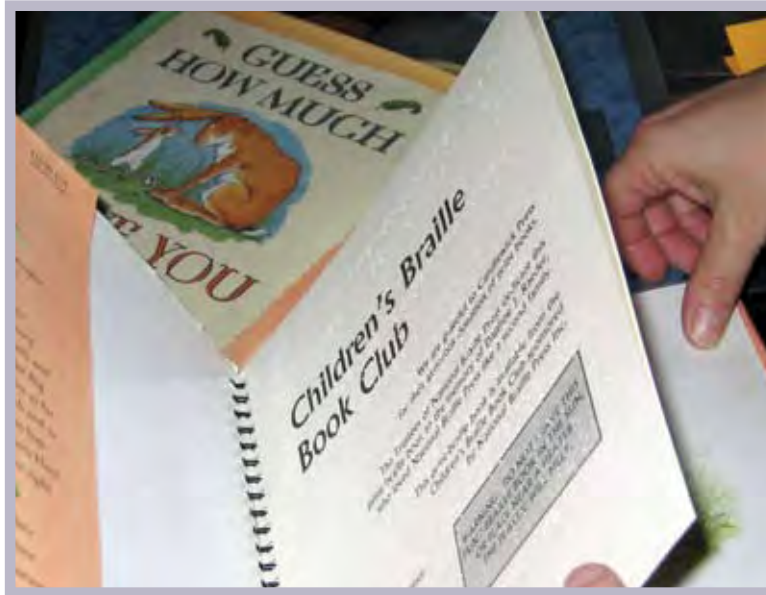
SPARK Ohio

Helps Blind Mom Read to her Daughter for the First Time

Celine Monastra is a bright, engaging five-year-old. She recognizes many letters of the alphabet, and can spell Dora's name when she sees it on a book cover. She has stuffed animals of all the characters from the film *Madagascar* (plus a ghost and a Halloween cat), and she'll happily count all thirteen of them for you. Like most five-year-olds, she loves to ham it up for the camera, and poses for shot after shot with each of her animals. She writes her name in huge, fat letters, and she can hold a pen properly and button her clothes. Celine's mom, Sandy, reads to her as they snuggle on the couch.

This seems like pretty unremarkable stuff, except that Celine's mother is blind. Sandy Monastra, who lost her sight at 16, had never read a book to her daughter until she was introduced to the SPARK program by a concerned neighbor. The neighbor insisted that her own SPARK parent partner meet with Celine's family, because she was confident that they would benefit greatly from the program.

SPARK Ohio arranged to have children's books translated into braille. SPARK initially provided *The Little Red Hen*, and has since given the Monastras *The Doorbell Rang*, *Guess How Much I Love You*, and *Green Eggs and Ham*. The special books resemble the original children's books, with the addition of a clear plastic braille overlay atop each page.




As Sandy reads, Celine can see the pictures that go along with the story. The Minerva Public Library also donated books to the family's growing collection. By the end of their time in the SPARK program, Sandy will have at least twelve braille books that she can read to her daughter.

The Monastras also received SPARK activity cards in braille. Their activities have included writing down the names of Celine's relatives, and making a plate into a puppet that looked like Celine but with blue hair. Celine gave the puppet to her grandmother, who loves it. Celine sat on Santa's lap at the library, and mother and daughter have attended SPARK's *Let's Talk* program and the library's storytime sessions.

The Monastras' SPARK parent partner, Amy Mangus, recalls telling Celine that her mom was going to read to her. "But my mom can't read to me," Celine said. "She can, honey," said Amy. "She can now, and she will."

Celine's favorite book is *Silly Sally*. When asked how she feels about starting kindergarten next

year, Celine says that she will need to bring her scissors. She's a little anxious about starting school, and asked her mother, "Without me, who will protect you?"

Sandy has assured Celine that she will be just fine. 

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newsletter are only a small fraction of the information that we've gathered. Please feel free to contact us if you would like more details.

For those of you who were able to attend the Governor's Forum on Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools, it was a great day for SPARK! We are grateful to Governor Strickland for his commitment to improving education in Ohio and his belief in strong private/public partnerships. More good news: a follow-up meeting was held on March 30-31st in Washington, DC. The meeting featured SPARK Ohio and gave representatives from Ohio the opportunity to discuss the program with elected officials there.

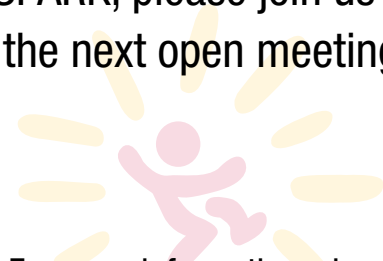
Despite all of the accolades for our state-level work, we still stay focused on serving

children and families, one child and one family at a time. That is why we've made sure to tell you about a special family in Alliance whose lives we were able to touch. That feature brings us back to our mission—serving children and families. Finally, please enjoy the highlights from recent media attention in our SPARK sites. There is certainly a growing interest in SPARK and recognition of the possibilities it provides for Ohio's children and families, and for that we are most grateful.

Blessings,

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

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



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