

**SPARK Advisory Board**

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**Evaluation Program Important to SPARK's Continuing Improvement - CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2**

**Program Measurements**

The Kellogg Foundation and Ohio Department of Education, among others, are interested in how the SPARK program affects children, families, and schools. Does the program make children more school ready? Does it help them succeed throughout their school years?

Nationally-accepted formats, including The Ages and Stages Questionnaire, the Home Observation Measurement of the Environment, and Woodcock-Johnson III tests, are used yearly to measure how children, ages three to five, improve while in SPARK.

Starting this fall, using readiness tests administered by the State of Ohio, an annual measurement will assess whether SPARK children reach school ready to learn and whether they maintain that edge. SPARK children entering kindergarten will be compared to other classmates without SPARK services.

The progress of SPARK children's performance in school through the third grade will be compared to those of non-SPARK children. All data will be provided by the schools and will be confidential.

**Program Goal**

SPARK's main goal is to improve the types of transitioning activities that public schools provide parents, children, and pre-school teachers prior to a child's entry to kindergarten. Surveys are conducted with kindergarten partners each year in Canton City and Minerva Local School Districts about various transition activities they use. Teachers and administrators are surveyed every other year seeking the same information.

The evaluators for the SPARK Program are Dr. Peter J. Leahy and Stacey Buckshaw of The Institute for Health and Social Policy at the University of Akron. Dr. Leahy has over 30 years of professional research and evaluation experience and has evaluated several other programs operated in Stark County by the Sisters of Charity Foundation. Stacey Buckshaw is currently completing her degree requirements for the PhD with a specialization in applied policy research at the University of Akron.

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**Dear Friends,**

We are gearing up for the new school year! In September, nearly 120 of the children entering kindergarten in the Minerva and Canton City target schools are SPARK kids! Parent partners are busy making sure children's final assessments are complete, learning plans are on target, parent questions are answered, and SPARK children have new backpacks full of school supplies. They are ready to go!

But our job doesn't end there. The next leg of the journey will require that parents, parent partners, and teachers work hand in hand to ensure that every child has the support they need to succeed in school.

While we are excited for these children, we are also analyzing our evaluative information to learn how to do even better next year. Nearly five hundred families have expressed an interest in enrolling their children in SPARK thus far. With ever increasing numbers, we must focus on expanding while maintaining the program's quality.

SPARK recognizes the importance of parent and parent partner relationships. By analyzing recommendations from annual parent surveys and interviews, we can continue improving the program. These changes are approved by our parent partners and coordinated through our school partnerships.

While the most important aspect of any program is what we offer to individuals and organizations, the success of SPARK Ohio

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**Programs Help Children and Parents Prepare For Kindergarten**

With the help of SPARK, the Minerva Local School District and the Canton City School District are using two innovative new programs to prepare children for their first experience inside a school.



The first, called *Transition*, is designed to excite future students about the prospect of attending school for the first time, and also serves to take the mystery out of what they will find in the classroom.

In Minerva, *Transition* begins for a new student when they receive a post card with information about kindergarten registration times, dates, and a "gift" that awaits them. For convenience, registration times include evening as well as day times at each elementary building.

On registration day, families in both districts receive readiness packets that suggest activities for their children, materials for parents to read with suggestions for helping their children prepare for school, and a gift - a book to encourage the child to start reading. To familiarize them with "real" school, parents can sign their child up for a tour of a kindergarten classroom. Canton City also provides every incoming family with a video, entitled *Great Public Schools for Every Child - Begins with Kindergarten*. Minerva kindergarten teachers will send a letter to each incoming child and attempt to call each family before school starts.

The second program, *Let's Talk*, is an intervention program piloted in both districts that encourages parents to work with their children on developing verbal language skills. This is key because research has shown that children with below average verbal skills almost always experience difficulty in later grades when learning to read. *Let's Talk* was adapted from a program created by Dr. Ron Sinclair and his colleagues at Kettering City School District.

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## The SPARK Plug- CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

depends on developing state level partnerships. We continue to work for Ohio's children by supporting initiatives funded through state departments and agencies. Representatives of Stark County are helping to develop infant and toddler guidelines, expand and align professional development opportunities for early childhood providers, and create a local-to-state network. Many SPARK representatives spend countless hours in Columbus in an effort to change and improve policies and practices across the state. We are grateful for the opportunity to make a difference for all of Ohio's children.

Sincerely,



**Joni T. Close**  
SPARK Project Director

## SPARK Helps Families Get Ready for Kindergarten

We all have memories of the excitement of starting school. There's something special about making that trip to school for the first time, armed with brand-new pencils, papers, rulers, notebooks, crayons, and glue.

That is why SPARK is making sure that every one of "our kids" start their school experience with everything they need to get a great start to learning. Before entering school this year, each "SPARK kid" will be given a backpack filled with essential school supplies – compliments of SPARK.

This is just part of the SPARK readiness program. By the time these children enter kindergarten they will have had a reading readiness screening, a developmental screening test, and will have participated in several activities based on the Ohio Department of Education Preschool Standards to help improve their learning development.

In addition, parents of SPARK children have help in preparing for their child's first day of school. One of our trained parent partners will help them to complete the registration process for kindergarten, making sure everything is in line for a problem-free beginning to the child's learning career.

## External Communications: Presenting SPARK to the Business Community

In an effort to sustain a dialogue with the local community about the importance of early childhood education, the SPARK External Communications Committee is preparing to take the SPARK program on the road.



Over the past few months, committee members have been hard at work scripting a video presentation that will highlight some recent work of the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton including, detailed information on the Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC), *Quality Child Care Initiative* (QCCI), and the SPARK Initiative.

In regard to the SPARK program, the presentation will inform the community of what SPARK is as well as its accomplishments thus far. The External Communications Committee plans to construct two separate scripts: one geared for legislators and one for public advocates. Donor brochures will also be created and handed out during scheduled community presentations to encourage financial support for these programs.

The Committee is currently working to designate speakers and secure presentation opportunities within the local business community. Video presentations are set to begin in 2006.

The SPARK External Communications Committee is dedicated to improving quality early education and care for children. Committee members include: Pat Gramoy (Chairperson), Joni Close, Marva Jones, Susanna Krey, Sue Kunkle, Norm Kutz, Todd Locke, Christin Perdue, Rabbi John Spitzer, Candy Wallace and Dianne Warren.

## Evaluation Program Important to SPARK's Continuing Improvement

The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton has designed an evaluation process to measure the effectiveness of SPARK's services and delivery programs as a means to ensure the program's continuing improvement.

### Program Report Cards

Annual postage-paid surveys are mailed to SPARK parents, giving them an opportunity to anonymously record their concerns and recommendations.

Parent partners are also surveyed each year to find out more about their needs and accomplishments. Evaluators monitor the collection of all program data and records to assure accuracy and to meet deadlines.

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## A Special Thanks...

The entire SPARK team would like to extend our sincere thanks to those in Canton and Minerva who volunteered to pack the children's backpacks. A special thank you also goes out to Brenda Parsons who organized the Canton volunteers and Susie Brothers for organizing volunteers in Minerva.



Canton: Volunteers from Arlington Avenue Church of God



Minerva: God's Body Shop Children's Ministry of Minerva Assembly of God

## Programs Help Children and Parents Prepare For Kindergarten - CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Let's Talk sessions are held for seven weeks. Parents attend with their children, and receive a kit of activities that includes books, puppets, games, videos, cassettes/CDs, and instructions on how to use these items to effectively build their child's oral language skills. After a week they exchange kits and discuss how the activities worked. During the parents' "class time", the children participate in fun oral language activities, have a snack, and play in the kindergarten classrooms.

At the conclusion of the program, each child has completed the activities in each kit, and parents have learned new ideas for developing readiness skills in their children. In addition, by spending time with kindergarten teachers in the kindergarten classrooms, parents and children both should have a smooth transition when school starts.

SPARK plans to screen incoming kindergarten students in August, and identify additional children who might benefit from the Let's Talk program. Both districts are planning a second series of Let's Talk soon.

### 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.

## Minerva Local Schools Participate In Ready School Assessment

Minerva Local School District's two elementary schools recently participated in a pilot study designed to help schools be prepared for all students entering their buildings. The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation received a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to work with 80 school systems across the country to train their staffs in what constitutes a "ready school" and to develop a profile of each building's strengths.

In March, a High/Scope trainer spent the day with select Minerva school staff members. The day-long session included an explanation of the Ready School Assessment program, hands-on training in the use of the materials, and a description of how to complete each building's assessment. Later in the month, the groups from each building met to review the document, complete the demographic information, and rate their individual buildings. The material was sent to High/Scope for review, and returned in May with a profile of each building's strengths and suggestions for improvement.

Those involved felt that the Ready School Assessment brought together many diverse parts of school operations and gave them a concrete way to look at how their building compares to best practices. In the fall, the two principals plan to use the profiles to identify goals to work toward as part of a program of continual preparedness for future students.



*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."*

*-Margaret Mead*