


SPARK CONTACT INFORMATION

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The SPARK Plug- CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

SPARK Florida. Following the breakfast 70 people stayed on for a half day mini-retreat for all SPARK stakeholders — the planning group, implementation team, advisory board, schools, and families — to provide them an in-depth look at our efforts.

The first year of progress has been amazing. Inside this newsletter we have highlighted several of the SPARK Initiative's long-term goals and progress to date. Although there were many ups and downs, there has never been a time where the obstacles and challenges were deemed insurmountable. We appreciate the understanding and support from the Kellogg team. We were given permission to do it right and take the time necessary to implement a high quality program...and we are.

Sincerely,

Joni T. Close
 SPARK Project Director

Children and Families- CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1


Standards. Parent partners work with the children and their families to insure that continued progress is being made and that children are experiencing and learning what is necessary for their kindergarten readiness.

Our first group of children enrolled in the SPARK program will be entering kindergarten in September, 2005. By then, the State Department of Education's new kindergarten assessment instrument will be in place and used by all schools to measure children's readiness. Utilizing the county education management information system, we will be able to make a comparison of the readiness of SPARK children and other children of similar backgrounds.

Goal 2: Parents understand readiness for learning and advocate for their child's learning.


Every SPARK child's family is asked to identify who will serve as the learning advocate when they enroll in SPARK. Usually this is a parent, but there are instances where others have served in this role such as an older sibling, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or friend. The child's learning advocate becomes the main contact person for the parent partner.

Involving parents in children's developmental screenings helps them to understand developmental milestones and monitor their progress. In addition, the parent toolbox, provided at one of the first visits, gives parents a number of resources and activities related to kindergarten readiness. One of the more helpful documents was developed by the Ohio Department of Education's Office of Early Learning and School Readiness, *Preparing for Kindergarten Success: A Guide for Families*.

Parents appreciate this information in a format that they can understand and utilize. In addition, the toolbox contains a special folder with information on kindergarten registration and a list of the required documents that they will need to gather in order to register their child for kindergarten. It is clear to us that parents want their children to be successful in school. 

SPARK in the Community- CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

In addition to the SPARK events on September 23, 2004, a breakfast was sponsored by the *Quality Child Care Initiative* for community leaders, business representatives, elected officials, and state level policy makers. David Lawrence from SPARK Florida was featured as the event's keynote speaker.

Our progress has been supported by individuals in the Office of Early Learning and School Readiness at the State Department of Education and representatives from the Ohio Department of Health, the BUILD Administrative Board, and the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services. Numerous individuals from the aforementioned organizations were present at the September 23rd event. 



Dear Friends,

After many months of hard work, the SPARK program is gathering steam and catching on — finally! Already, over 280 children and their families are actively participating in SPARK. There has been progress at every level — children and families, schools and early childhood organizations, and community and state.

Schools have been very receptive to the SPARK program. We have gone out of our way to make this a true partnership and to be sensitive to their schedules and priorities. Relationships at the highest levels—school superintendents, principals, and administrators—have helped open doors but it is clear that our continued success is dependent upon positive relationships at every level.

On September 23rd, we hosted our first community event which combined the release of the Sisters of Charity Foundation's *Quality Child Care Initiative* publication with a SPARK update to the community on the first year of progress. Over 150 business and community leaders, elected officials, and state representatives gathered to hear our keynote speaker, David Lawrence, from

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The Year in Review: SPARK'S 2003/2004 Summary of Progress Toward Goals

Children and Families

Parent participation in a child's earliest stage of education is a key component contributing to the overall success of the SPARK program. As we seek to provide the proper care and support so that children are eager and ready to enter kindergarten, we would like to share with you our progress on two of our goals for children and families in regard to school readiness and parental involvement.



Goal 1: The readiness of children is improved.

SPARK parents, with the help of Parent Partners, screen their children using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) and the Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social and Emotional (ASQ: SE) screening instruments. If necessary, further screening of speech and language is completed by the parent partners utilizing a locally developed, research based screening instrument compiled by a volunteer Speech and Language Pathologist. Screening is repeated, as needed, or at least every 6 months. Consultation is provided by the SPARK Assessment Team for special issues and needs and can lead to further assessment and intervention.

Results of the screenings are combined with other sources of information (parent report, observation, intake information, previous interventions, and assessments) to arrive at a child's summary of development. This is used to develop a Learning Plan containing three or more relevant goals for the child to develop readiness for kindergarten. The Learning Plan is tied to the Ohio Academic Content

SPARK OHIO'S 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.



Our Progress with Transition Plans for SPARK Schools

SPARK's transition team, consisting of Judith Hynes, Carolyn Laughlin, and Deborah White, worked hard to gather baseline information from schools and early childhood centers regarding current transition practices. Early discussions led to the development of transition packets for families of children entering kindergarten. These packets include contact information for parents, *Getting School Ready* (a booklet with practical tips and parenting advice), a developmentally appropriate book about the first day of school for children, and other materials targeted specifically to parents and children entering kindergarten. Not only is this a great benefit to the families, but these packets provide a concrete example of the benefits of SPARK for kindergarten teachers and principals. Meeting with kindergarten teachers and providing them the opportunity to be involved in the selection of materials for a transition packet helped them to buy into the process of "institutional change."

Goal 1: SPARK schools will implement model institutional readiness policies and plans.

Using the analyses from the surveys of teachers, principals, and early childhood providers, the first meeting of Canton City and Minerva Local Transition Readiness Committees engaged people immediately. It was apparent that what was on paper as transition activities or expectations did not always play out in the real world. Everyone agreed that there was much work to be done.

In early childhood settings, it is even more apparent that transition practices are desperately needed. Even more challenging, the children in any kindergarten classroom can include children from Head Start programs, child care centers, school based preschools, family child care homes, and kith and kin care. It became clear that the best approach would be for SPARK to focus first on transition practices at the five schools involved in the program and support children's transitions through one-on-one relationships with families and their parent partners.

Members of the Minerva Local and Canton City Transition Readiness Committees also participated in a professional development meeting with Robert Pianta that gave them an opportunity to hear the latest research and hold small group sessions to discuss and generate plans for their work over the next year. The Stark County Educational Service Center organized this effort which provided support for transition changes in all 17 districts within the county. For the second year in a row, the Ohio Department of Education's Office of Early Learning and School Readiness also sponsored Pianta at their annual conference.

Finally, the transition facilitators have begun exploring programs that will help children transition into kindergarten by offering children and their parents opportunities to meet and work with kindergarten teachers and participate in literacy programs and activities prior to their entry into school. ✨

SPARK in the Community

The SPARK program owes much of its success to local community leaders and business organizations for their dedicated efforts in bringing SPARK to Ohio. In the following paragraphs, you will see that as we continue to work alongside our community partners, we have set ambitious goals for aligning program content with Ohio's Pre-K standards and ongoing communications efforts to stimulate program awareness.

Goal 1: School and early childhood program content and pedagogy will be aligned with State of Ohio Pre-Kindergarten Standards.

The Ohio Departments of Education and Job and Family Services have joined together to produce a literacy training and tool kit for centers based on the Department of Education's Pre-K standards. These were available through a limited number of meetings held in four locations in the state. The closest meetings for Stark County providers were held over an hour away and few were able to attend. We approached the state departments and requested a special training session for Stark County. They agreed to provide the state's trainer to support a group of local Stark County individuals to become trainers. Over 20 local individuals were trained on the literacy toolkits and we were able to obtain toolkits to distribute to all licensed centers in Stark County. This project, led by the Early Childhood Resource Center, has reached nearly 40 sites in Stark County to date.

In addition, the BUILD Ohio Board has agreed to include an effort to bring together representatives of six local initiatives from all over the state, as part of their work for 2005. Bringing this group together will provide a vehicle for interaction between state policymakers and local leaders. Providing input into ongoing state efforts will solidify the work being done at the state level and allow for information to be shared that will impact their success at the local levels. The Sisters of Charity Foundation's *Quality Child Care Initiative* and SPARK Ohio will represent Stark County at these meetings.

Goal 2: The community will have increased awareness of and support for SPARK Ohio.

Press releases were written and distributed upon receipt of the SPARK Ohio grant. Our first community newsletter was mailed to over 3,000 individuals across the state in September 2003. Information about the SPARK project, the planning process, and the five year action plan was included. We work closely with education reporters at the *Repository*, the largest paper in the county and the *Minerva Leader*, a local paper in our rural area. Both publications have printed at least two stories on SPARK and are following our progress closely.

Information on SPARK has been included in a number of church bulletins, various nonprofit organizations, and community newsletters. Presentations to Rotary Clubs, schools, and other civic groups are ongoing.



Visit the SPARK Website!

www.sparkohio.org

The SPARK website allows parents and community leaders to...

- Learn more about the SPARK program
- View answers to FAQs about SPARK
- Discover program benefits
- Gather parent tips
- Meet the SPARK Team & Parent Partners
- Download newsletters
- Obtain contact information
- Join SPARK!



"Unless there is investment in children, all of humanity's most fundamental long-term problems will remain fundamental long-term problems." UNICEF 1995