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Practice Summary & Implementation
Guidance

Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK)

The Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) program helps prepare 3- and 4-year-old children to enter school by strengthening each child's math, early literacy, and fine and gross motor skills, as well as their social-emotional development. SPARK's curriculum was designed around state standards.



Location

Ohio



Topic Area

Family/Youth Engagement,
Health Equity



Setting

School-based



Population Focus

Child Health,
Families/Consumers



NPM

NPM 6: Developmental
Screening; NPM 13.2
Preventive Dental Screening
Visit-Child/Adolescent



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Section 1: Practice Summary

PRACTICE DESCRIPTION

According to Groundwork Ohio, only 40% of Ohio's children enter kindergarten ready to learn (groundworkohio.org/equityreport). The remaining 60% start school without the fundamental skills they will need to succeed. Moreover, when a child starts school already behind, there is little chance that child will ever catch up to their peers. Research indicates that children who are ready to meet kindergarten expectations when they start school are far more likely to complete high school, find employment, and become positive, productive contributors to society. Children who are not ready typically get increasingly further behind, making success improbable. The SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) kindergarten readiness program sets out to provide children the foundation for school and life success.

SPARK serves Ohio communities with high rates of economic disadvantage and racial disparities in academic achievement. Participation is voluntary and free for families. SPARK, which began in two Stark County communities, now serves 22 school districts in nine Ohio counties. Program evaluation results show that the program is making a clear difference in the lives of participating children and families.

The program helps prepare 3- and 4-year-old children to enter school by strengthening each child's math, early literacy, and fine and gross motor skills, as well as their social-emotional development. SPARK's curriculum is based on and designed around meeting state standards. The program aims to:

- Strengthen parent engagement. When a parent is engaged in a child's learning, it has a positive, lifelong effect. The SPARK parent partner's job is not to teach the child, but rather to empower the child's parent to engage with the child. The lessons and materials given to SPARK families consistently reinforce this.
- Cultivate school (kindergarten) readiness. SPARK sets children up for success by strengthening the child's math, early literacy, and fine and gross motor skills, as well as the child's social-emotional development.
- Increase readiness. SPARK resources, services, guidance, and connections significantly increase readiness for school, increase the parent's effectiveness as the child's (learning) advocate, and improve transitions into elementary school.
- Address barriers to readiness. SPARK's Responsive Services Team process ensures barriers to school readiness are addressed long before kindergarten begins, including issues with speech and/or hearing, health, and trauma.

In 2001, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation provided the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton a one-year planning grant to develop a five-year action plan for the SPARK initiative. Through this project, a diverse, 42-member SPARK leadership team gathered input from more than 350 individuals. Informed by the perspectives and expertise of the parents, professionals, and community members surveyed, the SPARK leadership team developed a comprehensive five-year plan to improve children's readiness for school.

In 2003, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation provided an additional \$4 million grant to support that five-year plan to serve 500 urban and 500 rural children in Stark County, Ohio. Two decades later, SPARK sites throughout Ohio, supported by multiple funders, and are helping thousands of families get ready for school. The program has served more than 18,500 children since inception. In September 2013, operation and management of SPARK Ohio transitioned from the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton to the Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC).



CORE COMPONENTS & PRACTICE ACTIVITIES

In order to foster consistent outcomes for children and families, the required core elements must be implemented and evaluated at every SPARK (replication) site. These core components are:

- Evaluation
- The 4-year-old program
- Professional development for SPARK Parent Partners
- Educational continuity
- Oversight and monitoring
- External communication

SPARK replication sites may also choose to implement several optional elements of the program, as budgets allow. These optional elements include a full-year program for 3-year-olds, and supplemental programs, including *Let's Talk Math*, *Let's Talk Language and Literacy*, *Let's Talk Kindergarten*, and a two-week *Get Ready for School* program that's offered right before the school year begins.

Core Components & Practice Activities		
Core Component	Activities	Operational Details
Evaluation	Evaluation data is systematically collected while a family is participating in SPARK. The independent evaluation team evaluates program effectiveness annually, to show each individual child's progress and trends in performance. The data allows for continued program effectiveness and refinements.	<p>SPARK requires all replication sites to have three types of evaluation studies: 1) implementation evaluation, 2) fidelity evaluation, and 3) outcome evaluation.</p> <p>Implementation evaluation gauges how well or how poorly implementation was conducted. Fidelity evaluation assesses how closely the intervention adhered to the protocol. Outcome evaluation determines the degree to which the intervention has had an impact upon those served.</p> <p>The ECRC conducts implementation, fidelity, and outcome evaluation for all sites. Outcome data includes pre- and post-participation administration of the Get Ready to Read (GRTR), Preschool Early Numeracy Skills (PENS), and Parenting Interactions with Children: Checklist of Observations Linked to Outcomes (PICCOLO) screening instruments. Replication sites are encouraged to examine their own evaluation data and use it regularly to inform program operations.</p> <p>Third-party outcome evaluation is required for the first two program years of implementation. After two years of successful implementation, a site may</p>



		<p>choose one of the following evaluation options:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing with comprehensive evaluation services that provide all forms of evaluation and include the services of an outside evaluator for outcome data • Continuing with only the mandatory fidelity, implementation, and outcome measures <p>The outcome evaluation documents the impact on both the participating child and parent. Once the child reaches kindergarten, school-based outcome data can be examined as well, with the SPARK child’s progress followed through the third grade or beyond and compared with children in the same school who did not participate in SPARK.</p>
<p>Four-year-old program</p>	<p>The SPARK 4-year-old program includes developmental screenings, learning plans, follow-up screeners (ASQ-3, ASQ:SE-2, health, and trauma), PICCOLO, PENS, GRTR, Responsive Services Team process, individual therapies as needed, assigned SPARK Parent Partners who work closely with children and families, and up to 14 home or group visits.</p>	<p>While participating in SPARK, each family receives up to 14 developmentally appropriate books, along with learning supplies and activity cards. SPARK also provides participating parents with support and resources for fostering kindergarten readiness. SPARK Parent Partners further support children’s transition into school by providing families timely kindergarten registration information and encouraging them to take advantage of opportunities to tour the school and meet school personnel.</p>
<p>SPARK Parent Partner professional development</p>	<p>Professional development (both initial training and at least 15 hours per year of ongoing training) is essential for SPARK Parent Partners.</p>	<p>Parent Partners are trained on all required SPARK forms, protocols, and procedures; prescribed lessons and learning plans; home visiting procedures; basic safety measures; and administration and scoring (as applicable) of the ASQ-3 and ASQ:SE2 developmental screenings, approved skill based instruments (PENS and GRTR), and the PICCOLO.</p> <p>The committee determines a lot of SPARK replication training content. Surveys are sent to determine needs, and steps are taken to provide training that addresses those needs.</p>



<p>Educational continuity</p>	<p>The educational continuity component entails working directly with administrators, principals, and teachers to ensure schools are ready to receive all children, regardless of developmental levels and learning needs.</p> <p>The focus is on providing a seamless transition into school for children and families through school outreach activities and practices known to advance family engagement and student achievement.</p>	<p>By instituting practices that enhance communication between early childhood providers, families, and schools, valuable information about children is uniformly transferred prior to kindergarten entry. SPARK Parent Partners work closely with schools to determine whether a standardized transition form for each SPARK child is desired. Transition forms can include information on developmental progress, individualized therapies, and assessments and may include the child’s profile information from the SPARK database.</p> <p>Parent Partners help families complete kindergarten registration forms, and they actively encourage families to participate in classroom visits, open house events, and other outreach activities offered for incoming kindergarteners and their families. Parent Partners may also help out in kindergarten classrooms during the first week of school, as seeing a familiar person in this new environment helps the children transition smoothly.</p>
<p>Oversight and monitoring by specific personnel</p>	<p>Ongoing oversight and monitoring includes program coordination and Parent Partner/recruitment supervision. Monitoring is conducted to ensure fidelity to the SPARK model, an understanding of and commitment to evaluation, and close work with other team members.</p>	<p>The SPARK site supervisor ensures ongoing coordination, program implementation, and program monitoring and evaluation. This requires regular meetings with members of the SPARK team, including (but not limited to) those who oversee SPARK Parent Partners, assessments and screenings, evaluation, communication, and educational continuity. The SPARK site supervisor also establishes an implementation timeline and focuses on sustainability.</p> <p>Support and close supervision of all SPARK Parent Partners is also necessary.</p> <p>Supervisory responsibilities include facilitating ongoing professional development for Parent Partners; fostering a team approach that includes children, families, early childhood providers, and SPARK Parent Partners; organizing and leading regularly scheduled meetings with Parent Partners and recruiters; and monitoring site data in the FileMakerPro database.</p>
<p>External communication</p>	<p>External communication includes, but are not limited to, periodic newsletters for parents and the community; website content; display and promotional materials</p>	<p>All program-related materials must carry the SPARK logo.</p>



for community events, meetings, and recruitment events; materials for local media, information transmitted to funders and schools; recruitment materials; social media activity; and general informational materials.

HEALTH EQUITY

The SPARK program cultivates school readiness via engaged parents; books, supplies, and educational activities; a caring, skilled home visitor assisting in a culturally relevant manner; individualized learning plans; and access to interventions (such as speech therapy) that might otherwise be out of reach in communities with high rates of economic disadvantage. The program's focus on serving low- to moderate-income families helps ensure that children don't enter kindergarten at a disadvantage. The goal of the program is to help students develop the skills needed to enter school on a level playing field, set up for success.

When a family begins participating, the SPARK Parent Partner interviews the parent to gain critical information about the child, such as previous interventions received, physical health, and early care and education experiences to date. This information is shared with the SPARK Responsive Services Team, which includes a child psychologist, educational specialist, speech and language therapist, mental health consultant, and school-based personnel. The team meets monthly to discuss each child's screening results and develop plans for addressing concerns that might otherwise prevent school readiness. Some children are monitored, while others are referred for services such as diagnostic testing, hearing screenings, Behavior management or speech therapy.

Intake assessments and screenings include the Ages and Stages Questionnaire and a brief trauma screening (developed by SPARK's consulting psychologist to determine whether there has been exposure to violence, a history of abuse, or other potentially traumatizing events). In addition, screeners that gauge early literacy and math skills are administered as pre- and post-participation measures to ensure the program is addressing children's individual academic needs. The SPARK Parent Partner notes concerns expressed by the parent and observes the child's behavior and parent-child interaction. If a learning challenge is noted (via observation or indicated from assessment or screening results), it is addressed by the SPARK Responsive Services Team.

The Responsive Services Team enables SPARK staff to address health equity. The team helps to identify the needs of SPARK families and connect them to the appropriate wraparound services. The intention is to teach families how to navigate the process of seeking assistance when needed, so that in the future, they are better equipped to access vital community services when needed.

The program also supports healthy families and health equity by enabling and equipping staff to refer families to needed services and resources, including community resources that can help meet concrete needs, job readiness programs, and the numerous other ECRC program offerings. The ECRC's safety initiatives, whereby items such as cribs, car seats, smoke alarms, and babyproofing kits are distributed to those in need, can also help support and build health equity among SPARK families. In some cases, SPARK parents have been hired as Parent Partners after completing the program with their own children, which increases health equity by fueling job attainment.



EVIDENCE OF EFFECTIVENESS

Evaluation is a crucial part of SPARK. Every year, an independent evaluation team from Kent State University analyzes the program's effectiveness using a quasi-experimental research design. Evaluation data is systematically collected while a family is participating in SPARK, to paint a picture of each individual child's progress. Aggregated evaluation results show trends in performance and aid in monitoring of continued program effectiveness in every SPARK community. Two research designs are used. First, the pre- and post-participation assessment scores of SPARK children are compared using a non-experimental design. These measures include the Get Ready to Read (GRTR) and Preschool Early Numeracy Skills (PENS) instruments. Data are collected by Parent Partners during intake visits and then again following program completion.

Second, post-intervention kindergarten readiness scores on Ohio's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) are compared between SPARK and non-SPARK (comparison) children using a quasi-experimental approach. KRA scores are collected by school personnel in each school district and entered into the Ohio Department of Education's data system. KRA scores are provided directly to the independent evaluators by each district. An independent evaluation team from Kent State University compares KRA scores of SPARK children with the scores of non-SPARK children in the same classrooms. Every year since 2005, SPARK children have outperformed their non-SPARK peers to a statistically significant degree. The results further show that the program is highly effective in all settings: urban, rural, and suburban.

The GRTR is administered at program entry and again when the child completes the program, to assess skills in print awareness, letter knowledge, letter-sound relationships, phonological awareness, and rhyming. Initial results inform the individual child's learning plan. Pre- and post-participation scores are compared to gauge growth. Average or above average scores can predict a child's level of school readiness.

The PENS is also administered at program entry and again when the child completes the program, to assess skills in counting, one-to-one correspondence, number knowledge, set and numeral comparison, number order, story problems, and number combinations. Pre- and post-participation scores are compared to gauge growth. Initial results inform the individual child's learning plan.

Aggregated results are examined annually to analyze effectiveness of lesson plans. Children who score below average at intake are given the PENS and or GRTR again midway through the program to check progress and inform needed revisions to learning plans. The goal is for 80% of children to score average or above average upon program completion, as the scores on these screeners are predictive of kindergarten readiness.

Preliminary results from the 2021-22 school year indicate that SPARK children made gains during program participation, as evidenced by their scores on the GRTR and PENS:

- GRTR: Prior to participating, 32.9% of children scored below average, 45% scored in the average range, and 22.1% scored above average. After participating, 16.1% of children scored in the below average range, 48.9% scored in the average range, and 35% of children scored above average.
- PENS: Prior to participating, 49.2% scored below average, 31.5% scored in the average range, and 19.3% scored above average. After participating, 26.6% scored below above average, 37.1% scored within the average range, and 36.2% scored above average.

Parenting Interactions with Children: Observations Linked to Outcomes (PICCOLO) is a reliable, user-friendly assessment of parenting behaviors. The PICCOLO gauges the parent's effectiveness as the child's learning advocate by assessing the positive parenting behaviors that predict good child outcomes. Pre- and post-participation scores are compared to gauge growth. Among other things, the Parent Partner observes and notes



when the parent explains the reason for something, suggests activities, repeats or expands upon a child's words or sounds, labels objects or actions for the child, engages in pretend play with the child, breaks down activities into a series of steps, mentions the characteristics of objects, or asks the child for information. The PICCOLO also assesses the learning environment the parent has created for the child, noting such attributes as the presence of learning materials. The PICCOLO is administered as the family begins participating in SPARK and again during the first two program visits. The Parent Partner also consistently assesses the parent's level of engagement during lesson visits.

Other screenings administered at intake include the Ages and Stages Questionnaires, Third Edition (ASQ-3) and the Ages and Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional (ASQ:SE-2); and a health and trauma screening. Informed by the results of the intake assessments, the Parent Partner and parent devise a learning plan tailored to the individual child's needs. At each visit, the family receives a book, activities, and supplies to keep the learning going. Learning plans are updated every nine weeks. They contain three goals for the child and one for the learning advocate.

Scores on the state's assessment of kindergarten readiness measure a child's school readiness in social, physical, and academic areas, and they provide important information to teachers and families about supports a child may need to be successful during kindergarten. Every year since 2005, SPARK children have significantly outperformed their non-SPARK peers in the same classrooms. In addition, significantly more SPARK children score 263 or higher on the Language and Literacy section of that assessment. That 263 score is the benchmark that's predictive of whether a child will be reading on grade level in third grade.

<https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Early-Learning/Third-Grade-Reading-Guarantee/TGRG-Guidance-Manual.pdf.aspx>

SPARK has negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding with all participating school districts, as well as with the Ohio Department of Education, to provide ongoing data to the independent evaluation team from Kent State University's Center for Public Policy and Health. This allows the evaluator to track all SPARK and comparison group children through the fifth grade, collecting data on standardized test scores, special education classifications, attendance, and promotion. Although the longitudinal results are preliminary, they appear promising. SPARK children retained a significant advantage as they progressed through school. SPARK children significantly outscored their non-participating peers in the same classrooms on the third and fifth grade state tests in math and English language arts. SPARK children also had significantly fewer unexcused absence hours than their peers.



Section 2: Implementation Guidance

COLLABORATORS AND PARTNERS

Our collaborators and partners help recruit children into our program. In addition, they bring valuable resources to the table that we may not offer, such as case management, intervention services, and other resources.

Practice Collaborators and Partners			
Partner/ Collaborator	How are they involved in decision-making throughout practice processes?	How are you collaborating with this group?	Does this stakeholder have lived experience/come from a community impacted by the practice?
Responsive Services Team Members	The team includes a child psychologist, a speech language pathologist, behavioral health professionals, an early childhood specialist, and school-based personnel. For children with barriers to readiness, the team members use their expertise to help devise plans for addressing those barriers.	The Responsive Services Team meets with SPARK Parent Partners monthly.	The Responsive Services Process emerged from Stark County's uniquely collaborative culture of using wraparound services to ensure a wide array of social services needs are met. Responsive services team members serve the families SPARK serves.
Community Behavioral Health Providers	When SPARK children are experiencing behavioral health challenges that might prevent school readiness, SPARK refers families to and collaborates with our community's behavioral health providers	Community Behavioral Health Providers address behavioral health barriers of SPARK children.	These are the primary providers who treat the behavioral health barriers of SPARK children.



Community
Speech-
Language
Pathologists

Speech-language pathologists conduct screenings and make recommendations based on screening results. They often work directly with the SPARK child when there is a need. When a referral is made to the school, SPARK will provide speech services until the school completes its evaluation.

These individuals serve as Responsive Services Team members who provide guidance to Parent Partners, provide speech services as needed, and conduct statewide training to help Parent Partners serve children with speech needs.

Most of the speech-language pathologists who work with SPARK are former in-school providers who have years of experience working directly with children in the field.

Schools

Local schools work closely with SPARK to provide referrals, promote the program, and invite SPARK representatives to school events in order to foster connections with families.

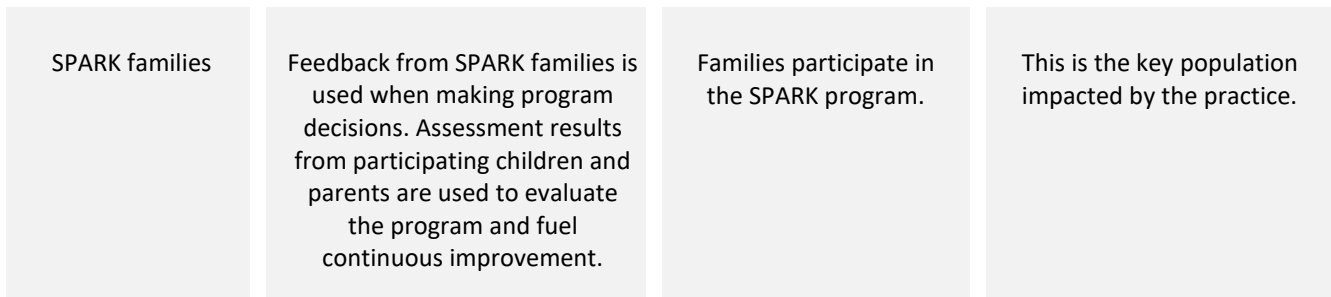
School-based personnel participate on the Responsive Services Team to ensure learning challenges are addressed early. Many school districts provide direct funding for SPARK services. Many schools refer families to SPARK, send recruitment materials home with families, and provide recruitment space for SPARK staff during school events. SPARK-affiliated programs are offered right in the school buildings with school support, including *Let's Talk* and the annual *Get Ready for School* program that's offered for incoming kindergarteners right before the school year begins. Preschools that serve SPARK children invite SPARK staff to offer small-group tutoring during the school day.

School staff serve the same children and families that SPARK serves.



<p>Numerous local child care centers</p>	<p>SPARK staff meet regularly with child care center staff to provide referrals.</p>	<p>Centers encourage family participation in SPARK and provide space within their facilities for SPARK recruitment.</p>	<p>Child care center staff serve the same populations as SPARK.</p>
<p>Community organizations/ social services agencies, i.e., Head Start, County Health Department, and County Department of Job and Family Services</p>	<p>SPARK staff meet regularly with organization and agency staff to provide referrals.</p>	<p>These organizations refer families to SPARK and promote the program to the families they serve.</p>	<p>These organizations serve the same populations as SPARK.</p>
<p>SPARK program staff</p>	<p>SPARK leadership, including replication site administrators, are deeply involved in decision-making related to program implementation. Replication sites are engaged in continuous improvement of the program, such as regular curriculum updates stemming from program feedback. Staff also provide program feedback in other ways.</p>	<p>SPARK program staff, including program leadership, replication sites, and SPARK Parent Partners, all work together to operate with fidelity to the program model.</p>	<p>SPARK leadership have a wealth of experience in serving the targeted SPARK population, as do replication site administrators. Many SPARK Parent Partners share lived experiences with the families they serve or come from the communities they serve. Therefore, staff are very familiar with the key populations with whom they are working and are able to provide services in a culturally relevant manner.</p>
<p>SPARK Oversight Committee</p>	<p>The committee includes SPARK replication directors, evaluators from Kent State University, and community stakeholders and advocates.</p>	<p>Replication site directors serve on committees to inform program changes and provide continuous feedback about program implementation.</p>	<p>Replication sites directly serve SPARK families.</p>





REPLICATION

The SPARK program began serving two communities in Stark County, Ohio: Canton and Minerva. SPARK now serves the following Stark County school districts: Alliance City, Marlinton Local, Massillon City, Fairless Local, Sandy Valley Local, and Perry Local. Outside of Stark County, additional SPARK replication sites are operating in eight other Ohio counties: Ashland, Butler, Clark, Cuyahoga, Franklin, Hamilton, Mahoning, and Summit. The program is serving families living in 22 different school districts. In the resources at the end, we have included a *History of SPARK Replication* document that outlines the program’s growth.

Each new SPARK replication site is required to be evaluated for two full years to ensure effectiveness of implementation. After two years of proven results, a site may choose to opt out of full evaluation, as long as the site continues to operate with fidelity to the program model. Regular fidelity and implementation checks are conducted on an ongoing basis, in order to ensure all sites are following proper implementation procedures. The resources include a Fidelity and Implementation Checklist and a Replication Agreement Sample document, which provide additional details on this process, as well as outcome evaluation data.

Program evaluation data support that a majority of participating children show improvement on program assessment measures. This has remained constant throughout the 20 years of program implementation, at all replication sites.

Many changes to the program have been made since it was first implemented, informed by the lessons learned during replication; however, these modifications represent changes that allow continuous improvement and not major changes to the core elements or structure of the program. For example, the assessment tools used for the program have changed from validation-type screeners (Woodcock, Johnson, & HOMES) to the PENS, GRTR, and PICCOLO screeners, which better inform program work. A trauma screener was also added to the pre-assessment process.

There was no need to change core program components when replicating; however, these elements may look slightly different from one site to the next. This is acceptable, so long as fidelity is met. For example, the educational continuity element may look different at each SPARK replication site.

INTERNAL CAPACITY

Cultivating buy-in and support from a community of early childhood advocates is critical, especially when initiating a new SPARK site. Additionally, the implementing agency must have the capacity and passion to



directly serve families and children, and must employ Parent Partners to deliver the program. Individuals with a background in early childhood are preferred for this role, but others have been successful in the role, including parents who participated in the program with their own children. The number of Parent Partners needed depends on the number of children the site plans to serve. Each site also needs a Program Coordinator to oversee staffing and implementation. Additional recommended staff members include a Data Specialist, a Recruiter (Retention Specialist), and administrative support staff.

In addition, a multidisciplinary Responsive Services Team (RST) is required. This is a mixed team consisting of both internal and external individuals. SPARK staff participate, including Parent Partners. The team also includes school-based personnel and other individuals, including speech-language pathologists and community behavioral health providers. If the replication site does not have internal capacity to staff a full RST, they can contract with external partners/individuals to fill certain team member roles; however, the RST is a mandatory component of the program.

PRACTICE TIMELINE

Ideally, a program should begin the implementation process a year before it plans to serve children. However, that process could be condensed into a three- to six-month period, if needed. Each new site will need to secure sufficient funding to operate the program, and will need to determine whether the program will be delivered only to 4-year-olds or to both 3- and 4-year-olds. The site will further need to determine the number of children to be served in the upcoming year. At the latest, a site could hire and train staff in May to be ready to begin serving families in August, with participant recruitment and purchasing of supplies occurring during the months leading up to August. It is best to create partnerships with the school district and community agencies to assist in the recruitment process.

The first two home visits (ideally June and July) include intake paperwork and assessments, with the first complete SPARK lesson to be delivered in August.

In order to sustain the program, the site will need to secure funding each year to operate. The site must continue to operate in fidelity to the program model.

Phase: Planning/Pre-Implementation		
Activity Description	Time Needed	Responsible Party
The replication site cultivates support and buy-in throughout the community, including developing relationships with funders, and secures the funding needed to operate a SPARK program	One year prior to implementation	Replication site
The site signs the replication agreement, pays the replication	One year prior to implementation	Replication site



fee, and gains access to program materials		
The site determines whether it will serve 3- AND 4-year-old children OR only 4-year-olds	One year prior to implementation	Replication site
The site determines the number of children it will serve and the cohort year to be served (cohort is determined by the year the child will enter kindergarten)	One year prior to implementation	Replication site
The site hires and trains staff	May to June	Replication site and SPARK Ohio
The site orders the needed technology and materials, including iPads or laptops, books and activity supplies, Parent Partner kits, FileMaker Pro license, and phones	May to June	Replication site and SPARK Ohio
The site recruits eligible children	Ongoing, beginning in June	Replication site
The site selects an independent external evaluator (if not located within Ohio)	Beginning with initial implementation and ongoing over at least the first two years	Replication site
The site convenes its Responsive Services Team (Parent Partners, school-based personnel, community mental health providers, speech-language therapists, SPARK supervisor, etc.) and selects a team leader	Beginning with initial implementation	Replication site and community partners



Phase: Implementation

Activity Description	Time Needed	Responsible Party
The first two visits include intake paperwork and screenings. Thereafter, the Parent Partner will deliver SPARK lessons to the children enrolled in the program. There are 12 lessons in the 4-year-old program and 10 in the 3-year-old program	August to July	Replication site
Enter data	Begins at intake and ongoing throughout program participation	Parent Partners
Connect with the school district and community agencies to build partnerships and recruit children	Ongoing	Replication site
Convene responsive services team meetings	Team meets monthly from September through July	Replication site
Supervise data entry and program implementation to ensure prescribed schedule is followed and documentation is completed in a timely manner	Ongoing	Program supervisors
Collect and analyze data to be evaluated	Ongoing	Independent evaluator in conjunction with replication sites

Phase: Sustainability

Activity Description	Time Needed	Responsible Party
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Operate with fidelity to the SPARK program model	Ongoing	Replication site and SPARK Ohio
Continue to deepen relationships with the school district, community partners, and funders, and communicate program results to the community	Ongoing	Replication site
Continue to secure funding needed to operate the program year after year	Ongoing	Replication site



PRACTICE COST

Budget Considerations and Sample

Activity/Item	Brief Description	Quantity	Total
Parent partner kit	Contains materials parent partners need when conducting lessons	1 per parent partner for each lesson	Varies, based on program size
Four-year-old program	Program books (books for first two in-take visits, plus books for the subsequent 12 lessons/visits), and leave-home materials and supplies	14 individual books, bagged with leave home materials, activity card, and learning tips If bimonthly visits are offered, more books are supplied, so the family receives a book at each visit	Varies, based on program size
Three-year-old program	Program books (books for first two in-take visits, plus books for the subsequent 10 lessons/visits), and leave-home materials and supplies	12 individual books, bagged with leave home materials, activity card, and learning tips	Varies, based on program size
Electronic Devices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phone • either a laptop or iPad • Wi-Fi hotspot, as needed 	<p>Phone needed to connect with families and colleagues</p> <p>An iPad or laptop is needed to enter data into FileMaker</p> <p>Hotspot may be needed for internet access</p>	<p>1 phone per parent partner</p> <p>1 laptop/iPad per parent partner, supervisor, and administrator</p> <p>Hotspots, as needed</p>	<p>Phone: Device cost and monthly cost for service</p> <p>Laptop/iPad: Device cost and monthly cost for service</p> <p>iPhone can sometimes be turned into hot spot for iPad, when needed to access database, pending device purchased</p>
Claris License or concurrency used to access database	To provide access and security, the SPARK database software is needed at all replication sites. The license is used for	1 per parent partner	Varies, based on program size



	laptops, while concurrency is used for iPads		
Initial/start-up Replication fee			\$20,000

**See below sample budget for additional considerations/ costs

Total Amount:

This information shows a general overview of basic budget components to be considered, which can be adjusted to the replication site's needs. SPARK leadership can offer budgeting guidance, as requested.

See example budget on next page for additional details.

Budget will vary based on number of children being served and components included.



**Sample SPARK budget:

SAMPLE* SPARK Budget

(Sample for 4-YEAR-OLD PROGRAM ONLY; based on serving 48 children)

**Note, costs will vary, based on number of children served. This budget reflects sample/ESTIMATED costs*

DIRECT COSTS:

Item Description	Narrative	ESTIMATED Amount	
		1st year cost	2nd year cost
Parent Partners			
Professional Service Contract	Sample calculated at: 1 full-time staff working 40 hours a week earning \$17.00 per hour + 25% for taxes. Time includes monthly lesson visits, meetings, school visits, and data entry <i>Sample estimates 1 FTE serving 48 children; Wage/amount of parent partners can be adjusted, as needed.</i>	\$44,200.00	\$45,526.00
Staff Education	Training/professional development necessary to ensure qualified staff are sent into family homes. Sample includes estimated initial training in year 1 (from SPARK Ohio) and then an estimated amount in subsequent years for training that fulfills annual training requirement of 15 hours (replication site can potentially find free community trainings to meet requirement)	\$500.00	\$50.00
Supplies	I.E., for Parent Partner office supplies/Parent Partner totes containing materials necessary for lesson delivery	\$340.00	\$50.00
Mileage	Parent Partner Estimated Mileage; calculated based on 2000 miles @ \$.58/mile	\$1,160.00	\$1,160.00
Parent Partner Phone	Estimated annual cost of Parent Partner phone with data plan	\$1,000.00	\$1,000.00
Recruitment			
Supplies	Books for recruitment--giveaways to families (optional)	\$100.00	\$100.00
Marketing	Print materials, fees for recruitment booths, logo printing, etc.	\$200.00	\$200.00
Postage	Mailings for recruitment, family connections, and birthday cards for SPARK children	\$50.00	\$25.00
Responsive Services			
Professional Contract Services Team psychologist	Monthly consult meetings (1 hr. x 1 Psychologist x \$80 Per hr. x 10 months)	\$800.00	\$800.00
Professional Contract Services Speech therapy	Speech Therapy Services; In our experience, 10% of children within a SPARK site require service Estimate calculated at 2 children x 24 session @ 1/2 hr. session x \$50 per hr.	\$1,200.00	\$1,200.00
Program Supplies	ASQ booklets (kit to administer screenings is one-time cost in year 1; year 2 cost is for new scoring sheets)	\$450.00	\$25.00
Program Supplies	Get Ready to Read, PENS, journal, & Piccolo assessment kit (First year kit fee @ \$275.00 and then in subsequent years, there is just the new scoring sheet cost)	\$400.00	\$150.00
Children and Family Supports			
Supplies	2 introductory books plus 12 lesson session books & supplies Calculated at \$125 per child for the 4 yr. old SPARK program	\$6,000.00	\$6,000.00
Professional Contract Services External evaluation	Independent evaluator - Outcome Evaluation and affiliate fee (approximately \$76 per child) Two years full evaluation cost is required for new locations. <i>* If not located in Ohio, would need to secure local external evaluator; Amount shown here is estimated.</i>	\$3,648.00	\$3,648.00
Administrative			
Salaries & Benefits	Supervision for project (calculated at 6 hours/week @ \$20/hr + benefits)	\$7,800.00	\$7,800.00
Mileage	For supervisor shadow visits, school meetings, etc. (Sample calculated at 400 miles @ .58/mile); Will vary.	\$232.00	\$232.00
Supplies	Office supplies and administration needs	\$100.00	\$100.00
Computer Software/Hardware	iPad for Parent Partner, plus FileMaker License and Data (Will vary based on number of devices needed.)	\$2,000.00	\$2,000.00
Affiliate Fee	Variable annual fee, calculated at a rate of \$25.00 per child served. Sample value shown here; Will vary.	\$1,200.00	\$1,200.00
Initial/Start-up Replication Fee	\$20,000 start up replication fee	\$20,000.00	
Estimated Program Budget		\$91,380.00	\$71,266.00



LESSONS LEARNED

When a replication site is planning to implement the program, it's critical that community partners be involved and on board from the start. It makes a world of difference to successful implementation when partners understand and believe that by supporting each other, we are supporting the children and families in our community.

It is also important to know which local early childhood funders are likely to support initial start-up costs and invest in the ongoing cost of program operations. Independent evaluation results are key, as funders typically require consistent data that shows the program successfully prepares children for school and gives them an equitable start. We have also learned that it's important to:

- Hire staff with experience in either early childhood or education in general;
- Hire from within the communities being served, so programming is delivered in a culturally relevant manner;
- Create a consistent presence within the community to raise awareness and engage families and community partners.

Additionally, through replicating across the state, we have learned to:

- Ensure the replicating organization is invested in early childhood and can adequately carry out the mission;
- Ensure the replicating organization demonstrates a record of fundraising success to ensure sustainability;
- Provide thorough training and onboarding of staff;
- Provide training and technical assistance on using the SPARK database effectively and productively; and
- Make regular visits to replication sites, shadowing at least one home visit per replication site annually.

Several aspects of operations have proven challenging, and the program is stronger because we've addressed them. These include challenges with:

- Finding SPARK Parent Partners who are willing to work during non-traditional hours, at times when many families are available to participate. We addressed this challenge by advocating for a higher wage for Parent Partners, and by being patient during the hiring process.
- Hiring Parent Partners who were not suited to the role. We addressed this challenge by increasing scrutiny of candidates during the hiring process, increasing the pay rate in order to attract more highly qualified candidates, having the candidate shadow a staff member on a home visit prior to hire to help them better understand the role, and following up with the candidate after the shadow visit to answer questions and enter into honest discussion about how well the individual could fulfill the role without judgment and in a culturally relevant manner. Once candidates had been on-boarded, they participated in training on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging before conducting any home visits.
- Ensuring the budget allowed for providing a living wage and cost of living increases. This was addressed by securing additional funding from local and state funders.

All experience related to implementation and replication has helped to strengthen the SPARK program and replication process, as successes and failures are equally valuable to future implementation and replication. That said, one thing SPARK leadership would have changed is to have established a control group at the onset of implementation. As this was not done, we have only been able to conduct qualitative analysis. While we can (and do) evaluate the performance of children participating in SPARK by comparing the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment scores of SPARK participants with the scores of non-participating children in the same classrooms, we often do not have information regarding what kind of skills preparation, if any, the non-participating children had before entering kindergarten. For example, did these non-participating children attend preschool? Establishing a control group would have allowed for more comprehensive quantitative analysis.



We are currently arranging to have the external evaluation team review the prior experiences of non-SPARK children in the Canton City School District, which offers full-day preschool for 4-year-olds.

NEXT STEPS

It is our hope that the best practice designation will facilitate program sustainability and expansion by increasing awareness. We anticipate that the designation also could lead to increased replication.

SPARK operates using a Continuing Quality Improvement (CQI) process. Every year, we take a deep dive into program data to identify trends and determine where improvements can be made. One example of this CQI process in action is our commitment to revising the curriculum regularly. In 2021, we updated our 4-year-old program by using a diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging-informed lens to strengthen the program's math, literacy, and social-emotional activities. The review also entailed making sure that lesson plans spell out clear steps for engaging the parent in the lesson, thereby equipping the parent to engage productively with the child in between SPARK visits. We updated three books during the recent 4-year-old program review, to ensure cultural relevance and adherence to changing best practices. This year, we have begun the same review process with our 3-year-old program. The regularly occurring program update process includes an opportunity for multiple stakeholders to provide feedback. Thus, curriculum revisions and program improvements will continue in the future, guided by a committee of stakeholders.

Another modification we will be exploring (and hope to implement in the near future) is to incorporate use of a texting system to help us better communicate with SPARK families. We feel using a targeted texting platform will increase our outreach significantly, compared to using only email. Anecdotally, we've found the families we serve respond more consistently via text. This is backed up by recent research showing that the vast majority of Gen Z individuals rank texting as their preferred method of communication (edisonmail.com/blog/study-across-generations-email-remains-a-critical-tool), and that [98% of all text messages are opened, compared to just 20% of emails](#). Each month, we will text developmentally appropriate information to SPARK parents and suggest activities relevant to kindergarten readiness. This will provide additional support, enabling parents to better engage with their children between SPARK lessons. The texting platform will also enable us to easily cross-promote helpful community resources, such as Help Me Grow and Head Start.

Additionally, SPARK leadership plans to create a parent advisory group to give SPARK parents the opportunity to share their opinions and feedback about the program. The purpose of this group will be two-fold. First, it will provide SPARK administrators an opportunity to hear what parents think about the program. The group will also ensure SPARK parents have a full understanding of how lessons are developed to cover all the developmentally appropriate skills for preschool age children, in addition to covering areas like social emotional learning and looking at matters through a diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging lens.

Parent advisory group meetings will be held quarterly via a virtual platform to make them accessible to participants from various locations. Parents from all SPARK sites and from all cohorts will be invited to participate. The group will be led by the SPARK Director.

In the SPARK program, the parent or person engaging in the program/lessons with the child is referred to as a Learning Advocate. At each advisory meeting, the learning advocates will be given the chance to share their thoughts and opinions about the program openly with the group. Each meeting also will include educational sessions to help deepen the Learning Advocates' knowledge of the skills being delivered during SPARK lessons. Questions will be posed to the group, to generate feedback relevant to the most recent lessons/visits delivered. A tentative model/schedule for the first year of advisory group meetings is as follows:



Quarter 1: Getting to know SPARK

SPARK staff recognize that learning advocates are new to the program and may not have a complete understanding of the SPARK program. During this first meeting, SPARK staff will share information with families that stresses the importance of getting their child ready for kindergarten. Staff will ask questions to get a better understanding of what the learning advocates need and what SPARK staff can do to help prepare them to become their child's first and forever teacher.

Quarter 2: Language and Literacy

During the meeting, learning advocates will be introduced to the importance of nurturing language and literacy. Learning advocates will also be presented with simple activities to help their child as he or she begins to read and useful tips for communicating with their child. Staff will explain to learning advocates the purpose behind literacy activities that were delivered in recent lessons and expand on how they can help strengthen their child's language and literacy skills.

Quarter 3: Math

During the meeting, learning advocates will be introduced to the importance of fostering early math skills. Learning advocates will be presented with simple activities to help their child start to learn key math concepts and useful tips for working at home with their child. SPARK staff will share and model how math can be incorporated into everyday activities. For example, activities such as doing laundry, cooking, or going to the grocery store can be used to help introduce math skills to children. Staff will explain to learning advocates the purpose behind math activities that were delivered in recent lessons and expand on how they can help strengthen their child's math skills.

Quarter 4: Get Ready for Kindergarten

At the final quarterly meeting, learning advocates will receive information related to entering school and the practices of early learning. SPARK staff will share information to help learning advocates prepare themselves and their child for the transition to kindergarten that will take place in the upcoming near future. This information will include an introduction to kindergarten, how to register for school, and suggestions for what learning advocates can do at home to help their child prepare, such as practicing reading and writing.

Each learning advocate will receive a certificate of appreciation for participating in the year of parent advisory meetings. If the budget allows, staff could consider providing gift cards to learning advocates who attend all four quarterly advisory meetings. Learning advocates will be encouraged to stay involved with the parent advisory group, even after their child completes the program.

To ensure the group is inclusive, a director from a replication site will be invited to co-host the parent advisory group, so it is a shared responsibility.

The feedback collected from advisory group meetings will be shared with all stakeholders and SPARK families. This could be done as a quarterly newsletter.

This will provide SPARK families the opportunity to network and share what they have gained from participating in SPARK. By giving parents the opportunity to share, it empowers them to become a SPARK advocate and to encourage other eligible families to join the program.



RESOURCES PROVIDED

- [A History of SPARK Replication](#)
- [Program Elements Table](#)
- [Contact Table](#)
- [Sample Replication Agreement](#)
- [Fidelity and Implementation Schedule](#)
- [Sample Lesson](#)
- [Responsive Services Process Overview](#)
- [Community Newsletter Sample](#)

APPENDIX

- [Benefits of SPARK Continue Long After Participation Ends](#)
- [IdeaStream Article](#)
- 2022 Evaluation Results

Recent articles featuring SPARK that were published in academic journals include:

- Incorporating Math and Literacy with a SPARK, Ohio Journal of English Language Arts, Winter 2022. By Mary Brady, Michelle Meadows, and Joanne Caniglia. <https://octela.s3-accelerate.amazonaws.com/2022/01/OJELA-61.2.pdf> (Begin on page 65)
- Economic Disparities: SPARK Ohio and Narrowing the Kindergarten Readiness Gap, Child Development Research, vol. 2018. By Deric R. Kenne, Rebecca Fischbein, Thomas A. DeLuca, et al. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2018/4383792>
- SPARK Ohio: An Early Childhood Intervention Program Description and Evaluation, The International Journal of Early Childhood Learning Volume: 23, Issue: 4, August 31, 2016. By Rebecca Fischbein, Thomas DeLuca, Jennifer A. Bryant, Peter Leahy, Diane M. Banks, Deric Kenne. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-7939/CGP/v23i04/23-37>

