

The Literacy Cooperative's Efforts to Support Cuyahoga County Parents as their Child's First Teachers

The statistics gathered from the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment for Literacy (KRA-L) can tell an important story about a child's opportunity to succeed in school and the differences across Cuyahoga County are striking. When a child begins kindergarten without the benefit of preparation in literacy basics such as knowing the letters of the alphabet or recognizing rhyming words, the odds are against their success. The KRA-L, given within the first several weeks of school, assesses this early knowledge and identifies students who need extra support. A 2008 Plain Dealer article by Martha Mueller Neff highlighted the stark contrast of kindergarten readiness between Bay Village and Cleveland children. In the case of Bay Village, based on state assessment data, it was likely that less than 2% of kindergarteners would need intensive intervention to be working at grade level. In Cleveland, 45% of the same age students would require intensive support to be working at grade level. The differences could be largely attributed to access to high quality preschool and other early learning opportunities that are tied closely to parent education level and income. Many Cleveland children were starting out behind their peer group and required early supports to change the odds.

The Literacy Cooperative (TLC) board and leadership responded strongly to the contrast of scores between cities. The newly formed organization was clarifying its strategic objectives and it was clear that early childhood literacy would be among them. Robert Paponetti, Executive Director of TLC recalled thinking, "if so many students were not ready to begin school, yet they are in fact starting school well behind grade level expectations, how do students catch up?" The organization began to look for best practices of interventions that would help improve kindergarten readiness and have a strong evaluation component to prove its effectiveness.

At the time, TLC board member Dr. William Hiller of the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation was also serving as a member of the National Institute for Literacy Advisory Board. This connection proved essential in identifying a Canton, Ohio based program, Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK), at that time coordinated by The Sisters of Charity Foundation. Hiller pointed to strong evaluation collaboration with the University of Akron (and later Kent State University) with ongoing annual results that underscored the efficacy of the program.

SPARK

According to SPARK Ohio, Kindergarteners who participated in the program were better prepared for school than their non-SPARK peers and maintained their advantage through fifth grade. Several years of intensive data collection and evaluation through a partnership with the University of Akron, and later Kent State University, has documented the success of the program. KRA-L scores from SPARK students are compared to non-SPARK students in the same schools thanks to collaboration with the Ohio Department of Education, and the improvement in scores remains consistent each year showing a ‘SPARK effect’. Other assessment tools reveal increases in SPARK students’ spelling, reading comprehension and other foundational abilities.

“Regarding its effectiveness, of course I believe that SPARK is a proven program. We have 10 years of evaluation results that show that SPARK children perform statistically significantly better than a comparison group of non-SPARK children in the same classrooms on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment of Literacy. We also have deep evaluation about the increases in language, academic stimulation and learning materials

provided in the home by SPARK families.” *Joni Close, President of The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton*

The compelling results of the SPARK program and its high standards of data collection and analysis made it strong match to bring to Cuyahoga County. TLC developed a partnership with the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton, then the coordinators of the SPARK program. Soon, other partners, such as Family Connections, were drawn to the basic premise as described by Paponetti, “what’s happening in the home needs to support outside learning.”

Building a Pilot Project

The SPARK program brought together school officials, community partner organizations and families to prepare students for kindergarten success. Importantly, the program required parent participation in monthly home visits that provide a book, materials and guidance on how to use them through working with a ‘parent partner’. The Literacy Cooperative managed the process of finding the most qualified organization to deliver these hands-on literacy services in homes. After careful consideration, Family Connections was chosen to implement the program. The organization knew the power of home visits and early childhood literacy efforts from years of program experience in these areas. Executive Director Joanne Federman explained that SPARK combined both elements thereby strengthening families and providing “an amazing return on investment as one is also reaching the parents with each visit.”

More partners joined the effort of The Literacy Cooperative to bring a pilot project of SPARK to several schools across three school districts Cuyahoga County. Key early financial support came from the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation. The United Way of Greater Cleveland also pledged essential support that was managed through Cuyahoga County’s Office

of Early Childhood: Invest in Children. This combined financial support allowed plans for a multi-year pilot project that would both introduce and test SPARK in Cuyahoga County. The county's Invest in Children (IIC) was an important partner from the beginning as a fiscal agent, but also helpful with sharing information and reporting. According to IIC Director Dr. Rebekah Dorman, SPARK fit well within a portfolio of IIC home-visiting programs that supported families through prenatal visits, new baby wellness check-ups and other efforts that support parents-as-teachers. Part of the interest in SPARK was the targeted focus on children through pre-kindergarten age and the new partnerships developed through the school districts, allowing for a "more forward look at outcomes."

Additionally, partners found that SPARK did not compete with pre-kindergarten (pre-k) initiatives. First, many areas in the county simply don't have quality, affordable pre-k options. Creating a SPARK program in these cases may be a more realistic option for communities to adopt. However, SPARK does require community partners and may or may not be a fit for a specific community. SPARK can also help fill in gaps that can be found where a community may have established preschool options, but simply lacks enough spaces for the number of children in need. When SPARK has been layered on top of a quality pre-K program, a student's potential for success increased even more. And, SPARK is for parents, too, building the skills of the whole family in a way that most Pre-K programs are not designed to do. Finally, Family Connections has built many relationships with families in home care or day care. Staff are able to refer SPARK families to quality pre-K where available, or to their own "Get Ready" five week program leading up to Kindergarten to ease the transition.

"It was never thought that SPARK would be available to every child. It is meant to be a targeted intervention for those children that need it the most. Some areas in Cleveland

have no preschool or quality day care available in the neighborhood.” *Robert Paponetti, Executive Director of The Literacy Cooperative*

SPARK in Transition

After a successful pilot program year, The Literacy Cooperative and partners attracted additional funding for the program and made adjustments to which schools participated. Careful program research demonstrated that SPARK effectively helped kids be more prepared for kindergarten and beyond. The Literacy Cooperative continued to advocate for the program’s long term implementation and planned for a natural progression away from a coordinating role. TLC’s Paponetti explained, “Just like families across the county put their kindergarteners on a bus each fall, we too are entering a new phase with SPARK. We know the program will continue to thrive from here, building on the strong foundation created through the pilot project.”

With five years of documented success, Cuyahoga County’s IIC has committed to the future of SPARK as a part of their portfolio of home-visiting programs that support families without TLC in a coordinating role. Family Connections has found working with SPARK to be central to the mission of the organization and enjoys a strong relationship as the implementing agency with the IIC going forward. Federman concluded that “SPARK fits more than ever organizationally as our board has reinforced our commitment to closing the achievement gap one child at a time.” This sense of strong match is echoed in comments from county staff as well. IIC’s Dr. Dorman explained, “I have a lot of confidence in Family Connections. A program is only as good as the implementation.”

Next Steps

SPARK Ohio continues to expand the program now serving nine counties across the state. In each community the essential relationships must be built with schools, community partners, parents and children. As Dr. Hiller suggested, “Sustainability requires reaching out, community by community, to build partnerships.” With the transition of SPARK completed in 2015, The Literacy Cooperative is able to focus efforts on providing policy guidance and technical expertise in significant ways. For example, recently TLC was invited to provide comments at the state level regarding a unified plan for literacy across Ohio. TLC is uniquely positioned to “provide linkages and bridges” according to Paponetti, “and SPARK is an example of what we were really created to do.” By leading the effort to bring SPARK to Cuyahoga County, and now, by moving away from the coordinating role, The Literacy Cooperative has further proven its importance as a collaborative, central organization amongst literacy service providers.

The challenges of early childhood literacy can be addressed one child at a time, and one community at a time, through programs like SPARK. However, equally important are efforts to impact the system as a whole through: 1) improving individual programs and provider skills; 2) increasing access to high quality services; and 3) impacting the broader literacy policy arena. The Literacy Cooperative’s demonstrated effectiveness as a change agent will bring to life the organization’s vision that ‘all children and adults in Greater Cleveland will reach their highest literacy potential for employment, self-sufficiency and lifelong-learning.’

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