



# ECRC Community Chronicle

EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE CENTER :: *Fall News 2013*



## Igniting a SPARK for Families

**A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SCOTT HASSELMAN**

*In August, the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton transferred the management of the SPARK kindergarten readiness program to the ECRC. SPARK is a natural fit with the ECRC's mission to promote the healthy development of young children by providing programs, resources and support services for families and early childhood professionals.*

In this edition, you'll see that SPARK's work with parents is key to its success. Most early childhood programs focus on the child, with much of the intervention happening outside the home. SPARK is unique because it comes to the home and focuses on the parent as the child's first and most influential teacher.

When education becomes important to parents, it becomes important to children. Parents who participate in SPARK consistently show improvement in their ability to facilitate

language and academic stimulation in the home. Parents are key to kindergarten readiness when they engage with their children throughout the day. Even basic conversations stimulate language development and simple activities promote the building blocks for what children learn later on in school.

As a parent, I suspect one of the primary reasons children who participate in SPARK maintain an advantage through the fifth grade is that parental expectations remain high once they are established. As parents, we consciously create an environment conducive to learning—we communicate expectations, establish routines, eliminate chaos in our homes and partner with teachers. Established in the early years, these practices form the foundation for success as children progress through school.

SPARK is celebrating 10 years of working with parents to improve their children's learning experiences. Time and time again we see that parental involvement is a major key to success. We look forward to SPARK's second decade of helping families begin school ready and eager to succeed. ♦

# Sparkling School Readiness at Home and Across the State

*When Victor Johnson became principal of McGregor Elementary in the late 90s, many of the children entering his kindergarten classes weren't prepared to learn. McGregor was in an area of Canton hit hard by Ohio's industrial decline, with many economically disadvantaged children who needed special intervention. Help arrived in 2003, when McGregor was selected as one of the first SPARK schools.*



SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) is a family-focused intervention program where specially trained home visitors called *parent partners* work with families each month

to help preschool-age children build reading, language and social skills. The program began in Stark County as a collaboration between the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton, serving three urban schools in Canton and two rural schools in Minerva.

When a family starts in the SPARK program, the parent partner and parent assess the child's learning and developmental needs and craft a learning plan tailored to the child. At each visit, the family receives a book, activity kit and supplies. The parent partner engages the child and parent in lessons based on Ohio's Early Learning and Development Standards, and the parent receives guidance on how to continue supporting the child's learning between monthly visits. The goal: to work together to help the child be ready for kindergarten.

Initially intended as a five-year initiative, SPARK continues to thrive in Stark County after expanding locally into Alliance, Massillon, several more Canton schools, and, most recently, the Sandy Valley and Canton Local school districts. SPARK is now working with more than 380 Stark County families. The program has also been replicated in eight other Ohio counties.

SPARK officially became part of the Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC) in September, after being managed since its inception by the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton. The addition of SPARK rounds out the ECRC's diverse array of offerings for families, which include educational children's programs, family support services and parenting education.

Principal Johnson credits SPARK with helping McGregor achieve very encouraging results, including raising scores on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment—Literacy (KRA-L), which measures an entering kindergartner's mastery of the basic skills that are important for learning to read. According to Johnson, "SPARK helped change the culture and philosophy at McGregor. There were a number of factors, but every year we had SPARK, we always showed growth. Students who had been in SPARK had significantly higher KRA-L scores than those who didn't, which meant they came to us more prepared to learn."

Johnson now serves as principal of Sandy Valley Elementary School, which has also just become a SPARK school, thanks to a state grant that will bring SPARK to 100 Sandy Valley families.

**Students who had been in SPARK  
...came to us more prepared to learn.**

—VICTOR JOHNSON *former principal  
of McGregor Elementary School*

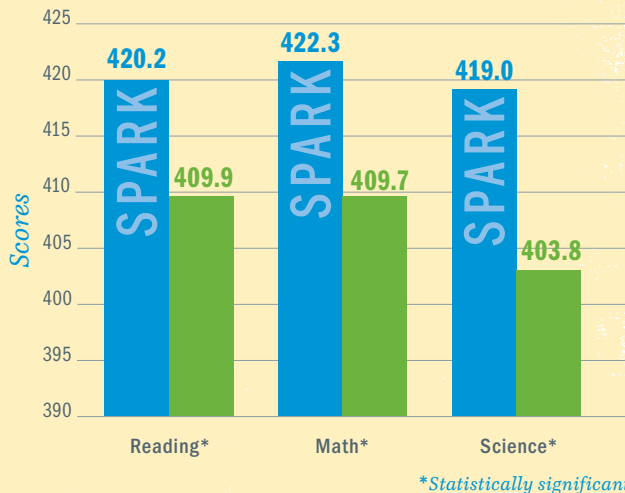
## REAL RESULTS

The first SPARK children entered kindergarten in 2005. Every year since, independent evaluators found that SPARK children outperformed their non-SPARK peers on the KRA-L, to a statistically significant degree.

The program continues to provide an advantage through the elementary years. Canton and Minerva SPARK children who started kindergarten in 2005 performed significantly better than their peers on the fifth grade Ohio Achievement Assessments in reading, math and science. This means that the benefits of SPARK participation have remained with these children, even six years after they entered kindergarten. The evaluators will continue following the children as they progress through school.

## 2011 5th Grade Ohio Achievement Assessment Scaled Scores

*Canton and Minerva children who entered kindergarten in the 2005-2006 school year*



The benefits of SPARK have remained with these children, even six years after they entered kindergarten.

## RESPONSIVE SERVICES: ADDRESSING BARRIERS THAT PREVENT LEARNING



The Responsive Services process is one of SPARK's defining features, and it's a major reason for the program's effectiveness.

In the communities SPARK serves, the low incomes, high rates of unemployment and lack of early education resources mean that SPARK families sometimes face very complex life situations. The children may have multifaceted issues that interfere with parents' ability to adequately prepare their children for school and life.

The Responsive Services Team works to ensure children's issues are addressed long before they ever reach the schoolhouse door. If they begin school on target, rather than behind, chances are much better that they will stay on target, and even excel.

While children are in SPARK, parent partners assess them for developmental delays and social and emotional problems. The Responsive Services Team (which typically includes a child psychologist, an early childhood

educational specialist, a speech and language therapist, a mental health consultant, school-based personnel and the parent partners) meets monthly to discuss screening results and share concerns. Some children are monitored, while others are referred to the school district for assistance or to community organizations that provide behavioral counseling, vision screening or speech therapy.

Dr. Cecilia Schweizer is the psychologist who heads up the local Responsive Services Team. She can readily cite statistics about program results, but she also knows first-hand the impact it has. "I visit with SPARK children and families in their homes and schools. I see how eager the children are to work with their parent partner, often waiting by the door for them to arrive. I also hear from parents how much they are learning by being a part of SPARK," said Dr. Schweizer.

"SPARK has proven its effectiveness in helping children get ready for school and in helping parents to promote their child's learning," Dr. Schweizer added. "I think that most of us who have had the pleasure of working in SPARK are awed by the magnitude of its impact on children, families, schools and our community." ♦

## Replication Brings SPARK to More Ohio Families



The SPARK program began in 2003 in five Stark County neighborhoods. Its well-documented results and comprehensive curriculum have helped make the program a model for replication. The program has served nearly 4,200 children over the past decade and is now serving families in nine Ohio counties.

“SPARK has expanded rapidly over the past five years because it has proven to be highly effective at

preparing kids for kindergarten and delivering results well into the fifth grade year,” said Angela Parker, director of SPARK replication. “The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton has been committed to sharing the program’s effectiveness with key partners and funders across the state, leading to the replication of SPARK across nine counties.”

As the program is implemented by an increasingly diverse group of school districts and nonprofit organizations, maintaining fidelity to the SPARK model becomes more challenging. Ensuring adherence to the model is a task for the ECRC, which centrally manages the program. “Everything in SPARK is very prescribed and extensive infrastructure is in place, which makes it easy to follow the model,” said Parker. The director of each SPARK site signs a contract agreeing to follow the program’s established steps, procedures and program model.

The ECRC works directly with each new site to provide training, mentoring and ongoing support. Since the sites are spread across the state, an intranet site helps SPARK personnel connect to resources (forms, manuals, etc.) and a message board that allows personnel to network and learn from one another.

In Franklin County, approximately 300 families will be served during the 2013-2014 school year. The governing board of Learn4Life, a collaborative organization focusing on “cradle to career” educational support in Columbus, wanted to improve access to school readiness programs for families through evidence-based initiatives.

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## The State Invests in SPARK

SPARK’s consistently positive results have not gone unnoticed at the state level. The Ohio Department of Education recently allocated \$1.1 million from its federal Race to the Top-Early Learning Challenge grant funding to expand SPARK programming into three rural Ohio communities.

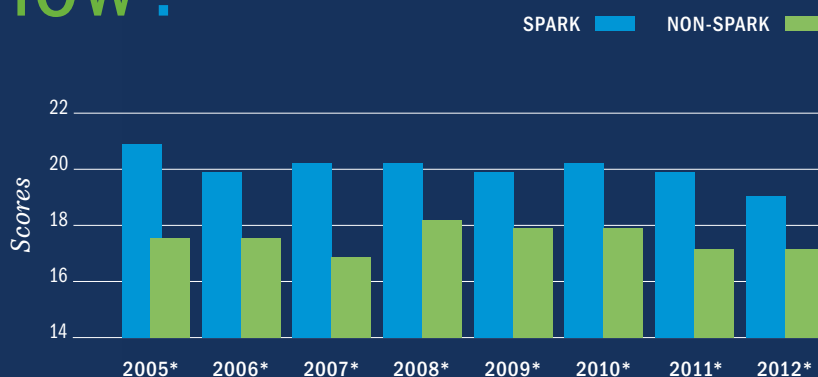
Sandy Valley Local School District, Logan Elm Local School District, and a partnership between Franklin Monroe Local and Mississinawa Valley school districts will each bring the SPARK program to 100 families, as a demonstration project to operate through the end of 2015.

Throughout the life of the project, the state will study the independent evaluation results and other measures to assess the project’s impact and scalability as it considers options for statewide early education policy and programming.

SPARK is a real solution that can make a difference throughout the elementary years. This help with—and financial support for—kindergarten readiness has been welcomed by teachers and administrators alike as they negotiate the requirements of the newly passed Third Grade Guarantee legislation. The legislation requires Ohio school districts to focus each year, from kindergarten through third grade, on making sure students are reading at grade level. Those who aren’t on grade level by the end of third grade risk being retained. SPARK appears to be one very encouraging preventive solution for districts that would otherwise need to provide a great deal of instruction and intervention to children after they enter formal schooling.

did you know?

### Eight Years of SPARK Ohio Results: KRA-L Scores 2005-2012



*\*Statistically significant*



# A Day in the Life of a SPARK Parent Partner

COMMUNITY  
PARTNERS

*Champagne Selman has been a Canton SPARK parent partner for five years. Her caseload includes 30 3- and 4-year-old children and their families. She has a bachelor's degree in psychology from Grambling State University and has worked in education for most of her career.*

## Q: How would you describe a typical day as a parent partner?

**A:** Working with young children, no two days are alike. But my morning usually starts with a trip into the office to check email, update my calendar, reschedule appointments if any families have cancelled, and then prep for home visits. I gather all the materials for that month's lesson, which may include books, worksheets, glue, markers, scissors and any extra materials. Then I head out to the homes on my schedule. I usually see five or six families on any given day. Some days also include recruiting events and/or group sessions.

## Q: What do the home visits typically involve?

**A:** First, we look over the work families have completed since the last home visit, which usually corresponds to goals from their learning plan or additional skills the parent would like their child to develop. We also complete an alphabet review and discuss group sessions or other resources available that month. Next, I read the child a book, modeling for the parent how to engage the child in the story. Then I show the child and parent how to complete corresponding activities. At the end of the visit, the parent and I discuss the child's learning plan goals to be worked on in between visits.



## Q: Why did you become a parent partner?

**A:** I truly believe that building a strong educational foundation begins within the home. Parents sometimes need help understanding the importance of being their child's first teacher. Without that appreciation, the benefits can seem out of reach. I am a very family-oriented individual who has faith in the old saying, "It takes a village to raise a child." Just knowing that I can be a part of such rewarding work is fulfilling.

## Q: What do you enjoy about your job?

**A:** Having children and parents treat you like you are a part of their family makes the work and its challenges seem minimal. I'm deeply honored to know I have provided families with resources that in their past may have seemed out of reach.

## Q: Is there one child or family that really stands out in your five years of being a parent partner?

**A:** Most of my families have been great and I love spending quality time with each one, but I really enjoyed working with one family in particular this past year. Both the parent and child had such outstanding personalities. Sometimes hours would pass before we realized that we had allowed the activity and great company to consume us. This family followed through on all suggestions to enhance the child's learning, faithfully attended group sessions and kept an open line of communication. During our last visit together, the mother told me how much she would miss our time together and everything I did to help prepare her child for kindergarten. The following day I was working at an elementary school and she surprised me with a gift to say thank you one more time. ♦

*Photo: Parent partner Champagne Selman works directly with 3- and 4-year olds to help prepare them for kindergarten.*

## QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PROJECT PROVIDES EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS WITH ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Providing early childhood professionals with the tools and knowledge they need to be successful is one of the primary missions of the ECRC. To help support that mission, the ECRC launched the Stark County Quality Enhancement Project (Stark QEP) earlier this year.

Step Up To Quality is Ohio's voluntary quality rating system for child care programs. Participating centers earn a one- to five-star rating by meeting an extensive list of quality benchmarks that exceed state licensing standards. The goal of Stark QEP is to help each center in Stark County obtain a Step Up To Quality star rating.

The project provides peer networking, support services and educational opportunities to early childhood professionals entering into and advancing through the Step Up To Quality tiered rating system. Representatives from sites participating in Stark QEP meet quarterly to provide support, hear guest speakers and share information on Step Up To Quality. Members are divided into groups according to star rating to share information with other sites in similar situations. Each month, participants receive 90 minutes of mentoring from ECRC Early Childhood Specialists Elisa Schleig and Cindy Gansmiller. Mentoring can include role play, observation and additional guidance as needed. Schleig and Gansmiller are currently mentoring participants from 24 sites. ♦

*For more information about Stark QEP, please call Elisa Schleig or Cindy Gansmiller at 330.491.3272.*

## REACHING OUT

### VOLUNTEER PROFILE: SHERRY KAUFFMAN



At the Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC), volunteers are essential to being successful. Over the past 13 years, many outstanding individuals and organizations have volunteered to help with events and family programming, and provide services to members and visitors.

Nobody has had a longer relationship with the ECRC than Sherry Kauffman. Kauffman, who is now retired, has been a member of the ECRC since its inception. While she was working as a preschool teacher assistant for Stark County in the special needs SCRIP program, she benefited from the ECRC's many services and resources for early childhood professionals.

Kauffman is no stranger to community service. She volunteered for many years with the Girl Scouts and served as a forensic and speech tournament judge for her local school system. For the past 12 years, she has worked in the ECRC production lab and library every Tuesday, where she always brings a bright smile and limitless enthusiasm. Thank you, Sherry! The ECRC couldn't do it without you. ♦

## SUPPORT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE CENTER

Last year, more than 5,500 parents and children learned and explored during our family programs, more than 500 parents completed parenting education, 2,800 educators and care providers took professional development courses, and 615 children throughout Stark County participated in our SPARK kindergarten readiness program. And the demand for our services grows daily. Your financial support helps equip teachers and parents to respond to the needs of young children and helps provide families the access to programs and resources that promote creativity, boost interest in learning and build healthy relationships.

**Your generosity today will have a direct and significant impact on children and families in our community for years to come. Please donate online at [ecresourcecenter.org](http://ecresourcecenter.org) or call 330.491.3272 to donate by phone.**

# A Day in Candy Land Fundraising Event a HUGE SUCCESS



Nearly 950 people turned out for the inaugural A Day in Candy Land fundraising event on September 29th at the Cultural Center for the Arts in Canton. Guests were part of a life-sized,

interactive Candy Land game board and had photos taken with live Candy Land characters. They also experienced live music, magic and dance parties, as well as face painting and games, and visited King Kandy's magical candy shop.

All net proceeds from the event went to support the ECRC's programs, resources, and supports for families and early childhood professionals. We thank everyone who came out to support the ECRC. Because A Day in Candy Land was such a huge success, next year's event will be even bigger and better!



## NEWS BRIEFS

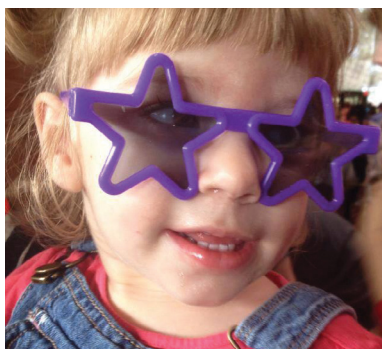
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**STATEWIDE STUDY RATES SPARK HIGHEST OF 14 PROGRAMS EVALUATED**

At the request of the state's Early Childhood Advisory Council, a research team from Teachers College at Columbia University recently reviewed evaluation studies of 14 Ohio-based early childhood programs, looking for those that had positive results and strong potential for replication. The team found that Ohio has a "solid array of different kinds of programs for children and families that bear replication." Of the 14 programs analyzed, SPARK received the highest ratings across all five evaluation categories. The study found SPARK to be "highly replicable" and found its evaluation results to be "highly persuasive."

### FIND US ONLINE

Visit [ecresourcecenter.org](http://ecresourcecenter.org) to learn more about our programs, services and volunteer opportunities, and make secure online donations.







## EARLY CHILDHOOD RESOURCE CENTER

*A Ministry of the Sisters of Charity Health System*

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CANTON, OHIO 44703

[ecresourcecenter.org](http://ecresourcecenter.org)

## OUR MISSION

*In the spirit of the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, the mission of the Early Childhood Resource Center is to promote the healthy development of young children by improving the quality of their early education and care through comprehensive programming, resources, and support services for families and early childhood professionals, to be leaders and advocates at the state level, and to promote the professionalism of the early childhood field.*

### CENTER HOURS

Monday	CLOSED
Tuesday, Wednesday & Thursday	8:30 a.m. – 8:00 p.m.
Friday & 2nd & 4th Saturday	8:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.

### REPLICATION BRINGS SPARK TO MORE OHIO FAMILIES

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Several agencies who work with Learn4Life expressed an interest in SPARK. Based on SPARK's extensive data showing positive results and because it had already been replicated in several communities, Learn4Life's board chose to pay SPARK replication fees for Franklin County.

Learn4Life coordinates the effort of six agencies that provide SPARK programming for six Columbus neighborhoods that had limited access to childcare and large gaps in school readiness as measured by the state's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment—Literacy (KRA-L).

"The home visitation model of SPARK really caught the attention of our board. We've worked closely with the ECRC as we've implemented SPARK in Columbus, and they've been a tremendous ongoing resource," said Dr. Sandra Miller, Learn4Life's project director for school readiness. "There have been challenges along the way, but it's clear that a group of passionate, committed agencies and people can accomplish a lot in a short time on behalf of children and families." ♦