



EARLY CHILDHOOD  
RESOURCE CENTER

**Ohio House Children and Human Services Committee  
HB 96 (Stewart) Operating Budget  
SPARK-Kindergergarten Readiness Program  
February 27, 2025**

Chair White, Vice Chairwoman O'Brien and members of the House Children and Human Services, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am John Neidert, Senior Program Director of Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC) in Stark County. In the last biennium budget, the legislature earmarked \$2.2 million to help support SPARK programs. The \$1.1 million annual allocation to counties was based on the number of SPARK children served by SPARK sites. Counties that benefited from this funding included Ashland, Butler, Clark, Cuyahoga, Hamilton, Franklin, Mahoning, Stark, and Summit. Today, I respectfully request the House to support an amendment to continue the funding for SFY 26 and 27.

SPARK is a voluntary, in-home visitation kindergarten readiness program that was created in Canton, Ohio in 2003 and has since been replicated across the state, serving more than 20,000 Ohio children to date. The program name is an acronym for what it accomplishes: Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids.

The primary purpose of the program is to support parents in their role as their children's most important teacher. The program is designed to collaborate with families and schools to increase children's readiness for kindergarten, increase parents' effectiveness as their children's learning advocate, and improve a child's transition into school. SPARK is provided for free to participants and typically serves low-income families who live in under-resourced communities with high rates of economic disadvantage and racial disparities in academic achievement.

Each SPARK family is assigned a specially trained home visitor (called a parent partner), who conducts lessons with the family once or twice a month over the course of a year. Following each lesson, a SPARK kit containing a new book, activity card, and educational supplies is given to the family, so parents can continue working with their child between lessons. SPARK parent partners model teaching behaviors to engage parents and show how narrating daily activities and reading books together will engage their child in learning. Parent partners are trained to identify family needs and stressors; they coach parents on how to cope by strengthening parental resilience, social connections, concrete support in times of need, knowledge of parenting and child development, and social and emotional competence of children.

Additionally, SPARK's Responsive Services Process ensures learning and behavioral health challenges are identified and addressed long before kindergarten begins. The process emerged from Stark County's uniquely collaborative culture of using "wraparound" supports to meet a wide array of social service needs. The multidisciplinary SPARK Responsive Services Team comes together monthly to address the challenges of individual children and collaborate to solve them. The team includes a child psychologist, a speech-language pathologist, behavioral health professionals, an early childhood specialist, and school-based personnel.

For each child, the team discusses intake information, screening results, parent partner observations, interventions received, and progress made to date. An action plan is devised, and progress is revisited monthly. When challenges require immediate action, suggested interventions may include providing activities individually tailored to the child's needs, behavioral health appointments, speech therapy, helping a parent enroll the child in preschool, or referral to the school district (if a disability is suspected).

Every effort is made to capitalize on existing community resources to efficiently provide specialized services. The Responsive Services Team helps parent partners connect families to needed services and makes a plan for appropriate follow-up.

SPARK programs are currently serving 23 school districts in nine Ohio counties. Early Childhood Resource Center oversees all SPARK replication sites to ensure program fidelity by providing program development, technical assistance, information management/evaluation oversight, bulk purchasing services for program books and supplies, communications materials that include the SPARK Ohio website, parent partner training, and additional replication support.

Because SPARK is grounded in practice-based evidence, the program has been designated as a Best Practice and included in the Innovation Hub Database of the Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs.

An independent evaluation team from Kent State University evaluates program effectiveness annually to show each individual child's progress and analyze trends in performance. The data allows for continued program effectiveness and refinements. Year after year, the evaluation results clearly show that participating in SPARK gives children an advantage that leads to success. The SPARK model is shown to be equally effective in rural, small town, suburban, and urban communities throughout Ohio.

The Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (or KRA) is the state-mandated instrument administered to incoming kindergarteners. The independent evaluation team from Kent State University compares KRA scores of children who have participated in SPARK with the scores of non-SPARK children in the same classrooms.

For 18 consecutive years, SPARK children have outperformed their non-SPARK peers on the KRA, to a statistically significant degree. 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.

The independent evaluators are tracking SPARK and comparison group children through the fifth grade, collecting data on standardized test results, special education classifications, attendance, and promotion. It is clear that well beyond kindergarten, SPARK children retain a significant advantage. SPARK children significantly outscore their non-SPARK peers in the same classrooms on the third and fifth grade math and English language arts state tests. SPARK children also had significantly fewer absence hours than their peers.

SPARK is grateful for the funding received in Ohio's last biennium budget. Public dollars help enhance the private dollars raised in support of the program, in order to expand the program in existing sites and new communities. In 2024, SPARK programming was sustained through partnerships that yielded over \$3 million in support from other sources, including school districts, foundations, and community organizations. These long-term partnerships will continue to support the program.

In closing, on behalf of 3- and 4-year-olds across the great state of Ohio, I ask that you show your support for this program by keeping SPARK funding in Ohio's budget. Thank you.

*A Ministry of the Sisters of Charity Health System*

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