

**Ohio Senate Education Committee
HB 96 (Stewart) Operating Budget**

**SPARK-Kindergarten Readiness Program
May 14, 2025**

Chairman Brenner, Vice Chairman Blessing, Ranking Minority Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Education Committee, 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 Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids known as 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 Senate 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. SPARK programs are currently serving 23 school districts in nine Ohio counties.** Early Childhood Resource Center (ECRC) 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.

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. 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 to set them up for success throughout their education journey. SPARK is grounded in practice-based evidence, designated as a Best Practice and included in the Innovation Hub Database of the Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs

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.

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).

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.

Third Grade State Test: English Language Arts Mean Score*	SPARK (1,215)	695.50
	Non-SPARK (8,436)	688.54
Third Grade State Test: Math Mean Score*	SPARK (764)	702.09
	Non-SPARK (5,677)	691.70

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.***

Absence Hours*	SPARK (2,258)	42.40
	Non-SPARK (17,691)	65.53

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.

We would greatly appreciate your support in this budget. I am available to answer any questions you may have at this time.



Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

SPARK: Kindergarten Readiness for Families!



Children who are ready for kindergarten are more likely to succeed throughout their lives. The SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) program partners with families to help their three- and four-year-old children get ready and excited for kindergarten.

SPARK Parents Agree:

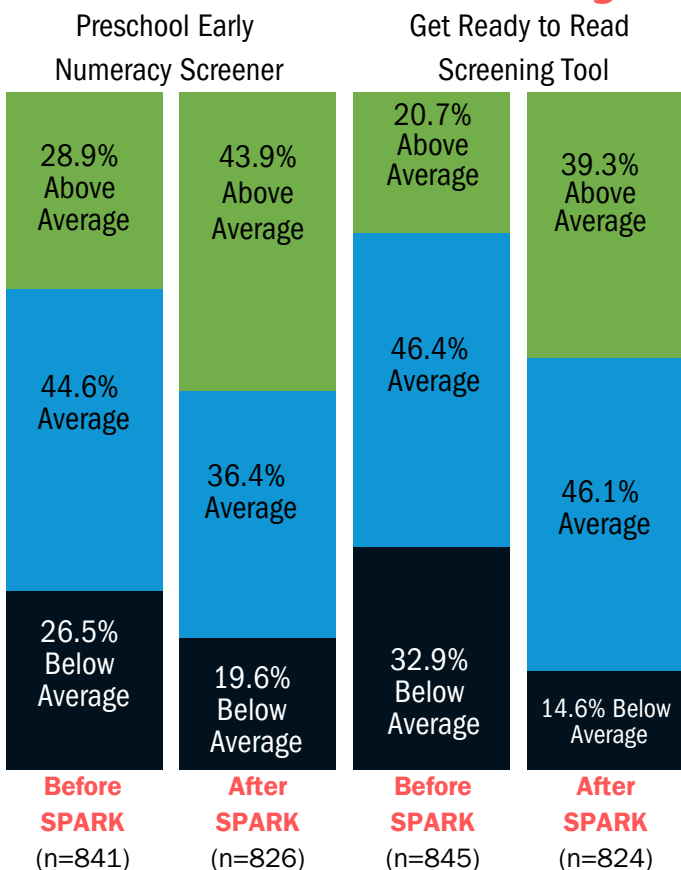
"SPARK is a great program. I definitely recommend it."

"It didn't only help my child; it helped me too, in understanding how to help him."

"It's amazing in one year what has happened here. My twins are learning numbers, colors, shapes, and can count to ten."

"SPARK was the best thing I ever did for my daughter."

SPARK Children Gain Reading & Math Skills



SPARK measures reading and math skills when a child starts the program, and again when the child finishes the program.

These charts show the scores of SPARK in all Ohio locations for children who began kindergarten in 2024.

Children who score Average or Above Average on screening tools also have higher scores on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment.

The SPARK Recipe for Readiness

Engaged Parents

Books, Activity Kits, & Supplies

Caring, Skilled Home Visitors

Individualized Learning Plans

Early Access to Interventions

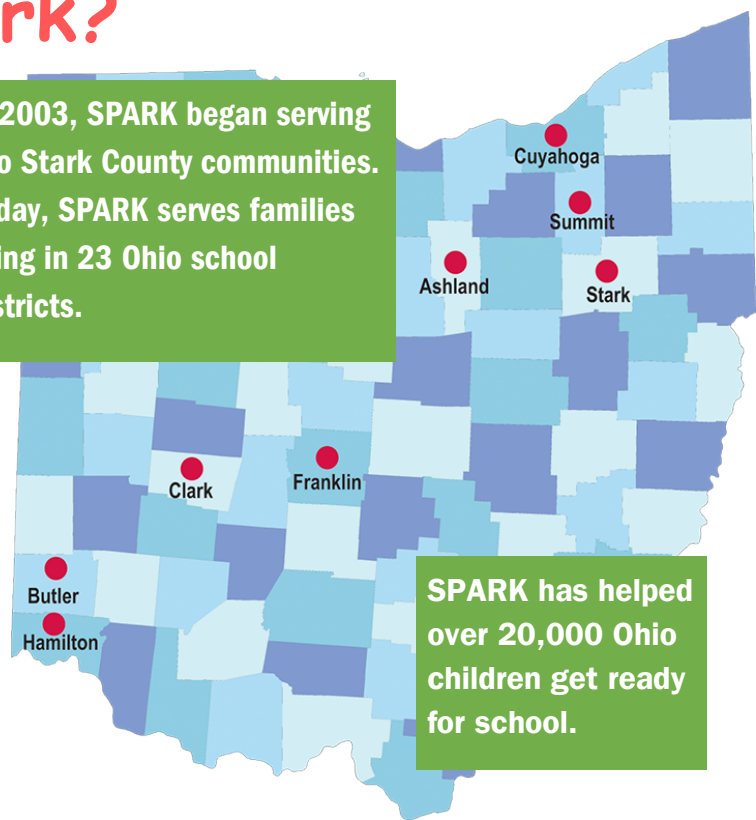
Help with Meeting Family Needs

How Does SPARK Work?

SPARK (Supporting Partnershipsto Assure Ready Families) is a family-focused program that prepares children for kindergarten by helping families engage their children in learning.

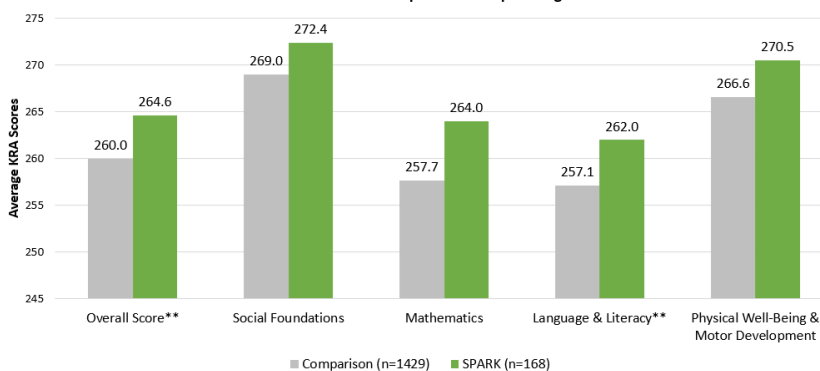
- SPARK gives families the books, supplies, guidance, and strategies they need to get ready for kindergarten.
- A trained home visitor, called a parent partner, visits monthly to engage the parent and child in lessons and activities that are aligned with state standards and designed to get the child ready for school.
- The parent partner's main focus is on cultivating the parent engagement that's critical for school success by consistently emphasizing the parent's crucial role in the child's learning.
- The parent partner conducts developmental screenings and links the family to community resources, to make sure any barriers to school readiness (speech concerns, behavioral issues, etc.) are addressed early.
- Every SPARK family is backed up by a SPARK team of professionals in the fields of early childhood education, mental health, and speech and language development.
- SPARK collaborates with administrators and school personnel to make sure children experience smooth transitions into kindergarten.

In 2003, SPARK began serving two Stark County communities. Today, SPARK serves families living in 23 Ohio school districts.



SPARK has helped over 20,000 Ohio children get ready for school.

2024 Stark Sites SPARK and Comparison Group Average KRA Scores



Year after year, SPARK children significantly outperform non-participating children on Ohio's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment as seen here in our 2024 Stark County cohort demographics.

SPARK is a program of the Early Childhood Resource Center.
Learn more at sparkohio.org

For more information, or to learn whether SPARK might be right for your community, contact SPARK Director Danielle Bunner:

(877) 691-8521 or dbunner@ecresourcecenter.org



Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

Benefits of SPARK Continue Long After Participation Ends

Even before the pandemic, according to Groundwork Ohio, only 41% of Ohio children entered kindergarten ready to learn. Kindergarten readiness is a strong predictor of how well a child will do in school, in their future career, and in life. With fewer than half of Ohio students coming to kindergarten ready to learn, it's no surprise that only 43% of Ohio's workforce has a degree or credential for the jobs that are available today. (bit.ly/3V24UNU) **There is a great need for a program to ensure children start school with the skills that will help them succeed.**

Many children enter kindergarten with readiness challenges that might have been diminished or eliminated with early identification and attention. **SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) provides that early intervention with a kindergarten readiness program for families with 3- and 4-year-old children.**

The program fosters school readiness through engaged parents; books, supplies, and educational activities; a caring and skilled parent partner mentoring in a culturally relevant and non-threatening manner; individualized learning plans; and early access to interventions, such as speech therapy.

SPARK is a program of the Early Childhood Resource Center in Canton, Ohio. The program was designed in 2003. Today, replication sites in nine counties serve families living in 23 school districts.

Higher Test Scores; Fewer Absences

SPARK's primary goal is kindergarten readiness. And the program certainly achieves that goal: year after year, SPARK children significantly outperform their non-participating peers on Ohio's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment.

SPARK children continues to have an advantage as they progress through school. They significantly outscore their non-participating peers in the same classrooms on the third grade state tests in math and English language arts.

**SPARK vs. Non-SPARK Children
Standardized Test Results and Absences**

Third Grade State Test: English Language Arts Mean Score*	SPARK (1,215)	695.50
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*** Statistically Significant**

The independent evaluators track SPARK and comparison group children as they progress through school, collecting data on standardized test results, special education classifications, attendance, and promotion.

It's clear that well beyond kindergarten, SPARK children retain a significant advantage.