Boys and Girls Club of Greater Milwaukee

SPARK Literacy Program

DID THE SPARK LITERACY PROGRAM IMPROVE THE READING ACHIEVEMENT OF EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS?

Project Overview

THE INTERVENTION

THE PROBLEM: What Challenge Did the Program Try to Address?

Students in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) have consistently demonstrated low proficiency in reading and writing. At the outset of the project, only:

- Fifteen percent of all MPS students were proficient in reading compared to 35% of students across Wisconsin.
- Fifteen percent of fourth grade students were proficient in reading. Of those fourth graders, just 7% of African-American fourth graders and 15% of Hispanic students were proficient in reading compared to 39% of white students. Seven percent of economically-disadvantaged fourth graders were proficient compared to 48% of non-economically-disadvantaged students.
- Fourteen percent of 11th grade MPS students met the ACT Reading Test benchmark threshold for college readiness.

THE APPROACH: What Strategies Did the Program Employ?

With an i3 development grant awarded[1] for 2010-2015, The Boys and Girls Club of Greater Milwaukee (BGCGM) implemented SPARK in seven predominantly low-income and minority elementary schools in Milwaukee to test its impact on early elementary students, kindergarten through 2nd grade. To help address the disparities, BGCGM created the SPARK literacy program in 2005. Based loosely on Reading Recovery, the SPARK model involves routine review of familiar content, word play (letters and words), reading instructional-level books, sentence writing, and listening to stories. The program was evaluated by a randomized controlled trial, where individuals who consented wre randomized into the program or non-program group.
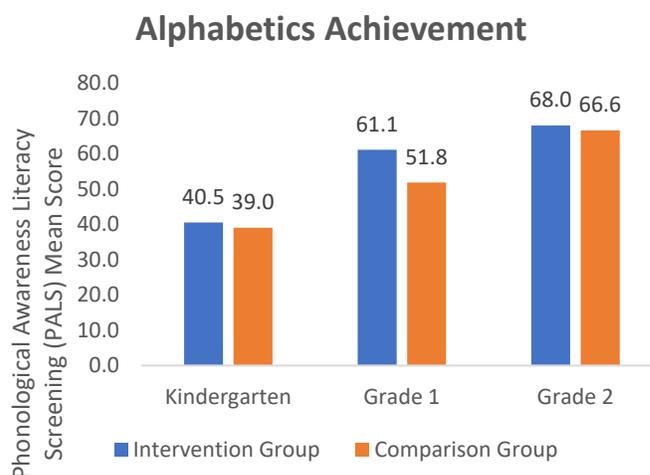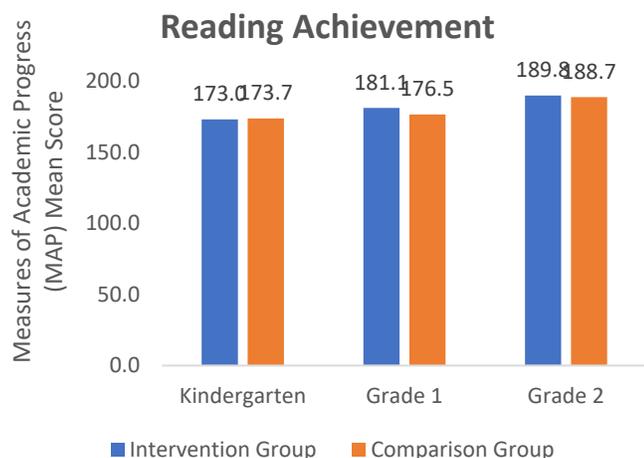
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[1] The Boys and Girls Club of Greater Milwaukee received an i3 development grant supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation program through Grant Number U396C100694. Development grants provide funding to support the development or testing of novel or substantially more effective practices that address widely shared education challenges. All i3 grantees are required to conduct rigorous evaluations of their projects. The quality of evidence required to demonstrate a project's effectiveness depends on a project's level of scale or grant type.

THE SPARK MODEL

- **In-School Tutoring.** Students are pulled out of non-core classes for 30 minutes during the school day, up to three times per week, for two years. AmeriCorps members and paraprofessionals are trained and supervised by program managers who are certified classroom teachers. In addition to informal observation and support, tutors are formally observed at least once a month via a structured observation instrument, allowing them to receive feedback

- **Family Engagement.** Each participating student's family receives individualized outreach services through a parent partner at each school. Parent partners create monthly newsletters, meet with parents at monthly school events, provide routine communication by phone and email, conduct two home visits during the summer between students' first and second year in the program, and visit parents on an as-needed basis during the school year.

Summary of Results

DID THE SPARK LITERACY PROGRAM IMPROVE READING ACHIEVEMENT?

Reading Achievement

Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Mean Score

	Kindergarten	Grade 1	Grade 2
Intervention	173.0	181.1	189.8
Comparison	173.7	176.5	188.7

- Intervention Group - Comparison Group

Alphabetics Achievement

Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) Mean Score

	Kindergarten	Grade 1	Grade 2
Intervention	40.5	61.1	68.0
Comparison	39.0	51.8	66.6

- Intervention Group - Comparison Group

SPARK STUDENTS OUTPERFORMED students who did not participate in the program on assessments of reading achievement and alphabetics. The program made a positive impact in the following areas:

- **READING SKILLS.** The SPARK literacy program had a non-statistically significant impact on reading achievement and early literacy development on both the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) and on the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) test.

- **STRUGGLING READERS.** SPARK had a positive, statistically significant impact on the reading achievement and literacy skills of students identified as struggling readers prior to the intervention. High performing students also saw statistically significant improvements across all grades.

SECONDARY FINDINGS

- **ATTENDANCE.** The SPARK literacy program also had a positive impact on regular school day attendance. At the end of the intervention, SPARK students across all grades averaged 24.6 absences, while comparison group students averaged 28.7.

Please see Appendices B and C for information about the evaluation's design and the quality of the evidence, respectively.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Study participants attributed the SPARK program's efficacy to a few program features:

- **PARENT LIAISONS.** SPARK maintains continuous communication with parents, keeping them informed of their child's literacy progress and any challenges or issues that come up.

- **COST-EFFICIENCY.** By utilizing in-school tutors instead of teachers, SPARK can reach more students at a lower cost, which helps the program meet the needs of urban and lower-income schools that may lack the capacity and resources required to provide effective literacy instruction for all students.

- **AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES.** Boys and Girls Clubs leverage other after-school programs to stay engaged with students and their families. This contact provides additional support to families and students and maintains SPARK's impact in the long run.

For More Information

Evaluation Reports

Final Evaluation Report (ERIC) (Socially Responsible Evaluation in Education, Spring 2016 conference abstract)[2]
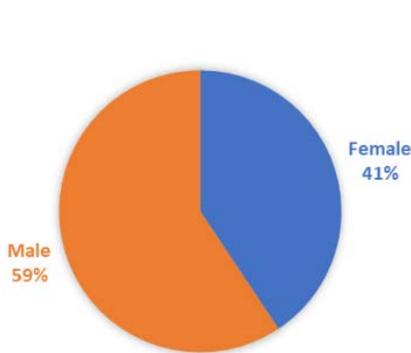
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[2] The information and data for this result summary was collected from the most recent reports as of 01/08/2020: "The Results of a Randomized Control Trial Evaluation of the SPARK Literacy Program", Socially Responsible Evaluation in Education, September 2015.
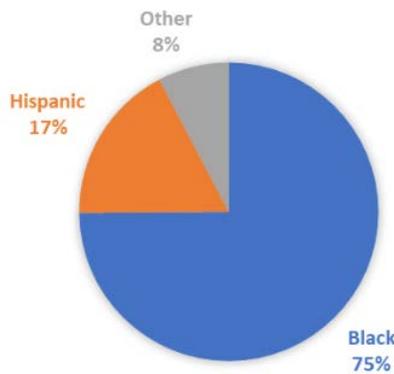
Appendix A: Students Served by the Project[3]

GRADE(S)

K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12

GENDER

Female 41%

Male 59%

RACE/ETHNICITY

Other 8%

Hispanic 17%

Black 75%

COMMUNITY

Rural 0%

Urban 100%
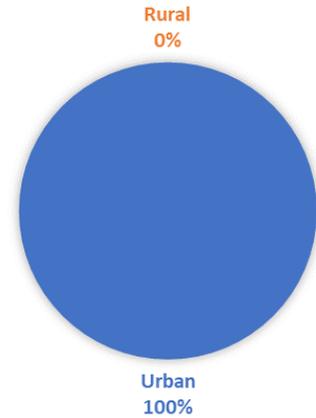
HIGH-NEED STUDENTS[i]

Economically Disadvantaged	English Learners	Students with Disabilities
96%	Not Reported/Not Applicable	6%

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[3]These data reflect the entire student population served by the intervention, not just the evaluation sample used in the impact study.

Appendix B: Impact Evaluation Methodology[4]

RESEARCH DESIGN:

Design:	Randomized Controlled Trial
Approach:	- Students consented to participate in the intervention and were randomly chosen to participate in SPARK. - The report presents evidence of baseline equivalence between the intervention and comparison groups of students.
Study Length:	Two years

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Study Setting	Seven public elementary schools in Milwaukee, WI
Final Sample Sizes	*Intervention Group:* 195 Students *Comparison Group:* 194 Students
Intervention Group Characteristics[5]	- Free/Reduced Priced Lunch: 187 - Individualized Education Program: 11 - Female: 100 - Black: 146 - Hispanic: 34 - Other Race/Ethnicity: 15
Comparison Group Characteristics	- Free/Reduced Priced Lunch: 185 - Individualized Education Program: 12 - Female: 96 - Black: 149 - Hispanic: 29 - Other Race/Ethnicity: 16
Data Sources	- Student assessments - Student progress records - School attendance data
Key Measures	- Reading Achievement (MAP standardized reading score) - Alphabetics (PALS standardized reading score) - Student Progress (Running Records) - Student Attendance (Total number of student absences during program)

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[4] These data reflect only the evaluation sample in the impact study, not the entire population served.
[5] Page 9 (*B*-3) of final evaluation report, Table 3.

Appendix C: Quality of the Evidence

WHAT WORKS CLEARINGHOUSE REVIEW[ii]

STUDY	RATING
The Results of a Randomized Control Trial Evaluation of the SPARK Literacy Program https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Study/32028	▪ Study meets WWC standards without reservations ▪ Alphabetic outcomes: Statistically significant positive effects found
Evaluation of the Milwaukee Community Literacy Project/SPARK Program: Findings from the First Cohort https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Study/81511	▪ Study meets WWC standards without reservations ▪ Reading achievement outcomes: Statistically significant positive effects found

EVIDENCE FOR ESSA REVIEW[iii]

STUDY	RATING
SPARK Literacy Program – Struggling Readers https://www.evidenceforessa.org/programs/reading/elementary/spark-literacy-program-struggling-readers	Strong
SPARK Literacy Program – Whole Class https://www.evidenceforessa.org/programs/reading/elementary/spark-literacy-program-whole-class	Strong

NATIONAL CENTER ON INTENSIVE INTERVENTIONS REVIEW[iv]

STUDY	RATING
Not reviewed as of 01/23/2020	N/A

*The **Investing in Innovation Fund (i3)**, established under section 14007 of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, is a Federal discretionary grant program at the U.S. Department of Education within the Office of Innovation and Improvement. i3 grants help schools and local education agencies work in partnership with the private sector and the philanthropic community to develop and expand innovative practices that improve student achievement or student growth, close achievement gaps, decrease dropout rates, increase high school graduation rates, and/or increase college enrollment and completion rates for high-need students.*

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[i] "High-need student" refers to a student at risk of academic failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support, such as students who are living in poverty, attend high-minority schools, are far below grade level, who have left school before receiving a regular high school diploma, at risk of not graduating with a diploma on time, who are homeless, in foster care, have been incarcerated, have disabilities, or who are English learners. For more information see: Applications for New Awards; Investing in Innovation Fund-Development Grants, 81 FR 24070 (April 25, 2016).

[ii] https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/FWW

[iii] https://www.evidenceforessa.org/

[iv] https://intensiveintervention.org/