

**Early-Phase Competition Absolute Priority 4 (SEL)  
Research Triangle Institute  
S411C220065**

**Speak to the Potential, Ability, and Resilience Inside Every Kid (SPARK): A Mentoring Intervention for Middle-School Students**

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Applicant Name: RTI International

Project Title: Speak to the Potential, Ability, and Resilience Inside Every Kid (SPARK): A Mentoring Intervention for Middle-School Students

Type of Grant Requested:  Early-Phase

Absolute Priorities the Project Addresses:

Absolute Priority 1—Demonstrate a Rationale (Early), Moderate (Mid), Strong (Expansion)

Absolute Priority 4-- Field-Initiated Innovations—Meeting Student Social, Emotional, and Academic Needs

Competitive Preference Priorities the Project Addresses:

Competitive Preference Priority 1—Promoting Equity in Student Access to Educational Resources and Opportunities

Competitive Preference Priority 2-- Addressing the Impact of COVID-19 on Students, Educators, and Faculty

Total number of students to be served by the project: SPARK will be delivered to a total of 176 classrooms. Assuming 25 students per classroom, a total of 4,400 students will receive the SPARK intervention.

Grade level(s) to be served by the project: 6, 7, and 8

Your definition of high-need students: All children who attend schools with inadequate SEL resources, especially those who live in communities and/or attend schools that are underresourced.

Brief description of proposed project, including project activities: Activities include (1) a pilot implementation and feasibility study and related curriculum improvements; (2) an evaluation of program implementation and fidelity; (3) a rigorous assessment of program impact with a multisite, cluster-randomized control design that meets WWC standards without reservations; (4) an exploratory study that refines the model for training teachers to deliver the SPARK curriculum and explores variation in outcomes by facilitator type; and (5) dissemination of findings to researchers, practitioners, and program constituents.

Summary of project objectives and expected outcomes: Objectives: The objectives of this study are to (1) conduct a pilot implementation and feasibility study and refine curriculum; (2) evaluate program implementation and fidelity; (3) conduct a rigorous assessment of program impact on middle school student SEL outcomes; (4) refine the teacher training model for implementing SPARK and conduct an exploratory study of variation in outcomes by facilitator type; and (5) disseminate findings to researchers, practitioners, and program constituents.

Outcomes: Implementation fidelity outcomes will include indicators of adherence to program curriculum and quality of delivery. Fidelity measures will be quantified and assessed against predetermined thresholds. Key outcomes for the impact study include measures of student discipline and attendance (obtained from school records); student ratings of facilitators; student-reported measures of knowledge and perceptions regarding social and emotional skills and

behaviors and engagement in learning; teacher ratings of student knowledge regarding social and emotional skills and behaviors; and teacher reports of student decision-making, core skills, and academic competence.

Describe how the proposed project is innovative: A key principle is the belief that everyone has SPARK (the program's metaphor for innate ability, potential, resilience, and mental well-being)—it simply needs to be learned. A focus on individual strengths and resilience supports a growth mindset that emphasizes the potential for development and improvement while avoiding placing blame on students for individual deficiencies.

Identify other studies and/practice related to the proposed project: The SPARK pre-teen program was developed in 2016 and has served approximately 5,000 participants. An experimental study of 357 students in two middle schools found SPARK to have positive effects on communication, decision-making, and problem-solving skills; emotional regulation; and resilience (Green et al. 2021).<sup>1</sup>

Proposed implementation sites: We have letters of intent from middle schools in Illinois, Texas, and Virginia.

List all organizations partnering with this project: RTI International, the SPARK Initiative, and Innate Health Research.