

SPARK

Strong, Prepared And Ready for Kindergarten

Focus on the First 5 Years



WHERE WE BEGAN

In 2012, fewer than half of the more than 3,000 at-risk three and four-year-old children in Aurora were enrolled in an early learning program like Head Start and Preschool for All.

**SPARK****Strong, Prepared And (celebrating 5 years of getting children) Ready for Kindergarten****"We're 5 years old!"**

As an organization focused on a child's critical first five years of development, SPARK looks at its own "first five years" as a measure of how prepared we are and how we've helped Aurora's families compared to a child's typical 5-year growth chart.

Where we began...

With a commitment to help children become "Strong, Prepared And Ready for Kindergarten," SPARK emerged just 5 years ago to bring together Aurora's vital early childhood community in a collaboration that would help everyone succeed – particularly our children.

SPARK was created in 2012 as the result of community concerns about the challenges facing Aurora families due to socio-economic, racial, and cultural barriers and the lack of authentic parent voices involved in addressing these challenges. That same year, the City of Aurora was selected as one of Illinois' Race-to-the-Top Early Learning Challenge Grant communities, and SPARK immediately served as the city's coordinating arm to set the stage and launch early planning in coordinating early childhood services. The SPARK initiative brings together community leaders, school districts, early childhood programs, and community agencies to work collaboratively to build an early childhood system that will ultimately improve outcomes for Aurora's children.

The conditions that called our community to action!

At the time of SPARK's inception, babies born in Aurora faced more than their share of factors that put them at risk of academic failure:

- 12.2% of adults (and an even higher percentage of parents of young children) had less than a 9th grade education
- 20% of children under age 5 lived in poverty, and one in two lived in a low-income family
- 33% of children in East Aurora School District 131 and 17% of children in West Aurora School District 129 had limited English skills--quadruple the percentage of a decade ago.

The Strategy...

SPARK's mission is to empower our diverse families and children to attain full success in learning and life by ensuring all Aurora's young children have equal access to exemplary early childhood care and education. Our purpose is the same as it was 5 years ago:

- Ensuring families are aware of the importance of early learning and connecting them with programs and services
- Coordinating efforts among the school districts' early childhood programs, Head Start, child care providers, and other early learning programs to maximize both impact and efficiency
- Supporting quality improvement in early childhood education and care programs in Aurora
- Supporting the expansion of formal and informal early learning opportunities in Aurora



Strong, Prepared And Ready for Kindergarten



Fox Valley United Way

An Education Initiative of Fox Valley United Way



First Year 2012-13

SPARK had a healthy first year, with nurturing and guidance from our Parent Council and Executive Committee. As is commonly expressed, “It takes a village to raise a child,” and SPARK was born and raised within a supportive, dedicated village of public officials, educators, early childhood professionals, and family-focused agencies working together with a single purpose: to serve the children and parents in our community.

As a catalyst for collaboration and change in Aurora, backed by a significant commitment of support, the Dunham Fund initiated a two-year grant to establish SPARK. The collaboration of community, school, and non-profit partners, collectively promotes school readiness skills, including socialization, early literacy, math and vocabulary skills for the at-risk, preschool child. Further, the grant from the Dunham Fund helped position the Aurora area to benefit from future federal and state investment in early childhood learning , including the then announced \$500 million federal Race to the Top Early Childhood Challenge fund.

With the SPARK collaboration, the City of Aurora was well positioned to improve early childhood services and to be awarded an Illinois Race to the Top Early Learning Innovation Zone Grant.

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Highlight: Dunham Fund awards Fox Valley United Way a two-year challenge grant to fund SPARK

Explores things in different ways, like shaking , banging and throwing

Gets excited when playing and interacting with other children and shows more independence

Second Year 2013-14

Understanding the parents' perspective was the focus of this year's work. SPARK hosted kindergarten readiness conversations, parent cafes, and strengthened the role of the SPARK Parent Council members to become early childhood ambassadors. In addition, SPARK deepened their relationships with agencies serving families and children.

Planning for the Race to the Top Innovation Zone pilot strategies also brought key stakeholders to the table to plan and launch the two chosen initiatives for the community:

- Shared Intake – The vision for a single point of entry for families to connect and enroll in early childhood programs throughout Aurora.
- Early Childhood Leadership Development – Improve the quality of care in early childhood programs by supporting and strengthening the leadership skills of its directors and staff.

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Highlight: Parent Council developed the parent tip sheet-
SPARK a Love of Learning





Third Year 2014-15

Aligning with statewide efforts, SPARK collaborated with the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development to promote knowledge and inform parents about ExceleRate Illinois, the statewide quality rating system, that sets the standards for quality child care programs.

SPARK launched the Shared Intake initiative and hired a Family Resource Specialist to assist three local social service agencies that serve high-need families. The goal was to help these families access early childhood resources. These pilot agencies selected were World Relief, Hesed House, and The Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry.

The Family Resource Specialist worked with parents one-on-one to help them complete the Shared Intake application form and find the best match for the services their children needed.

In June 2015, SPARK began partnering with DayOne PACT (the local Child and Family Connection) to coordinate services for children with disabilities, including a community-wide developmental screening process. The Community-Wide Developmental Screening events were held every three-months. At three screenings in 2015, more than 50 children were screened and two referrals made for further evaluation.

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Highlight: Practice of Collective Impact among community agencies begins to emerge through the Shared Intake Initiative.

Talks well enough for strangers to understand most of the time

Would rather play with other children than by himself



"We worked closely with the school district and refugee families to overcome language and cultural barriers, helping a family from Afghanistan—just two weeks after their resettlement with World Relief—enroll their three children into a Preschool for All program."
- Kassia Eide, Family Engagement Coordinator

Fourth Year 2015-16

Aiming for Quality...

SPARK aims to ensure that Aurora's youngest children have a quality early learning experience. Working in close partnership with Waubonsee Community College and the YWCA Child Care Resource and Referral Program, SPARK launched a Leadership Academy and ExceleRate Cohort program to increase the number of quality early childhood programs. To date, 50 percent of centers are participating in ExceleRate Illinois, the state's quality rating and improvement system for child care programs.

Aurora Early Childhood Programs

	FY 2013	FY 2016
Nationally Accredited Programs	0	5
Programs in the Quality Rating Improvement System	3	17

Connecting with our most vulnerable families...

In August 2016 we expanded the Shared Intake initiative by extending our outreach efforts to meet vulnerable Aurora families at the closest point of contact: their own neighborhoods. Through Play.Learn.Connect, SPARK, the school districts, and community agencies, are meeting with families to educate and enroll their children into early childhood programs and services. Additionally developmental screenings are offered and conducted at these neighborhood locations.

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Highlight: Aurora community expands early childhood programming through the Preschool Expansion Grant. A total of 21 full-day classrooms for four-year-old children are opened in Aurora West, Aurora East and Indian Prairie school districts and Aurora Early Learning Center.

Shows more independence and speaks very clearly



Fifth Year 2016-17

Before SPARK began its Race to the Top Innovation Zone efforts in Aurora, there were no nationally accredited programs, and only three ExceleRate programs. By the end of 2016, with 35 licensed centers in the community, Aurora had five nationally accredited early learning programs and 17 programs participating in the statewide ExceleRate Circle of Quality.

Early Childhood Leadership Development is continuing into 2017, with 17 directors and early learning and development professionals attending the Aurora Early Childhood Network. Interest is growing and the group now includes not only center directors, but also home visitors.

SPARK's work continues to address the challenges faced by the Aurora community in improving program quality and increasing enrolment of high-need children in early learning and development programs, including several programs originating from the Aurora Innovation Zone work:

- Early Childhood Leadership Development
- An effective and expanded pipeline of enrollment referral partners
- The Play.Learn.Connect. Initiative

Positive outcomes for families and children is the focus of SPARK's work. In the past five years, SPARK has assisted close to 5,500 parents and children to ensure that all Aurora children succeed in school and life.

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Looking Ahead: SPARK, in partnership with VNA Healthcare, will be transforming family waiting rooms by creating spaces for families to Play.Learn.Connect with early childhood programs and services.

The Collaborative Partnerships:

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- All Our Kids Network
 - Aunt Martha's
 - Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry
 - Aurora Early Learning Center
 - Aurora Christian Ministry Network
 - Aurora Fastprint
 - Aurora Housing Authority
 - Aurora Montessori School
 - Aurora Public Library
 - Aurora University
 - Big Brothers Big Sisters
 - Blessed Beginnings Preschool
 - Breaking Free
 - CASA Kane County
 - Catholic Charities
 - Child Care Resource & Referral
 - The City of Aurora *
 - Community 4:12
 - Community Foundation of the Fox River Valley *
 - Community Unit School District #308
 - Compañeros en Salud
 - Culture Stock
 - DayOnePACT
 - The Dunham Fund*
 - DuPage Children's Museum
 - East Aurora School District #131*
 - Exelon Foundation *
 - Family Focus
 - Farmers Insurance *
 - First Merit Bank
 - Fox Valley Association for the Education of Young Children
 - Fox Valley Montessori
 - Fox Valley Park District
 - Fox Valley United Way *
 - Girls Scouts of Northern Illinois
 - The Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development
 - Greater Aurora Area Literacy Coalition
 - The Gustafson Family Foundation*
 - Hesed House
 - Hollywood Casino
 - Hometown Child Care
 - IDOT, Div of Traffic Safety/Rush-Copley Medical Center
 - Illinois Action for Children
 - Illinois State Treasurer's Office
 - Indian Prairie School District #204 *
 - The Institute for Collaboration at Aurora University
 - Jugando Se Aprende
 - Junior League of Kane and DuPage Counties
 - Kane County Health Department
 - Kane County Home Visiting Collaborative
 - Kane County Regional Office of Education
 - Kiwanis Club*
 - Little Explorers Learning Center
 - Local Interagency Council
 - Marie Wilkinson Child Development Center
 - Music Together
 - Ounce of Prevention
 - PEN (Parent Educators Network)
 - People for Child Care
 - Physicians Immediate Care
 - PNC Bank – Grow Up Great Program *
 - Presence Mercy Medical Center
 - Project H.E.L.P.
 - Rotary Club of Aurora *
 - Rush Copley Medical Center
 - SciTech Museum
 - Share and Care (North Aurora)
 - STARNet
 - St. Marks Child Development Center
 - St. Olaf Lutheran Preschool
 - Two Rivers Head Start Agency
 - VNA Health Care
 - Waubonsee Community College
 - West Aurora School District #129 *
 - Wesley Nursery School
 - World Relief
 - YWCA Child Care Resource & Referral

*Denotes Funder

Through SPARK, the Aurora community has come together to “SPARK” a Love of Learning in our youngest children.

“One of the things we did through our partnership with SPARK was require that any of the families with children five and younger that move into our shelter’s Transitional Living Center have their children preschool screened. That’s a first for us, it has never happened in 30 years. This tells us if there are educational services we should be connecting these families with and it tells the parents that they can take an active role in their children’s development from an early age. To be able to reach parents with this tool that is not threatening to them and that gives parents the opportunity to be empowered in their kids’ lives has been huge. Collaborating with SPARK has been so much more important to our work at Hesed House than we ever anticipated when we joined.” ~ **Barb Thurlby, Director of Education and Advocacy, Hesed House.**

“We know early learning and development are important and we know it’s a priority to connect children with screening opportunities and quality programs, but our staff and volunteers don’t have time to dedicate to this because we’re struggling just to keep up with our own agency’s mission. To be able to be part of this collaboration and make sure these kids are finding out about the resources in our community has been great for the families we serve. Through participating with SPARK, we learned more about how to collaborate with other agencies that would come to us to connect with families and this opened our eyes to the opportunity to do more. We now have agencies on-site nearly every week so our families can learn more about and see what resources are out there for them...I think this shows that, when a model works, it can be very successful for both partners.” ~ **Kristan Ensminger, Director of Operations, Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry.**

Contact us if you want to join our efforts to ensure that all of our children are Strong Prepared and Ready for Kindergarten.

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