



SPARK

Strong, Prepared And Ready for Kindergarten

2022-2024

Three-Year Impact Report

*Preparing Aurora's Children for
Kindergarten and Lifelong Success*

AN EDUCATION INITIATIVE OF



Fox Valley
UNITED WAY

Welcome

Dear Friends and Supporters,

I am thrilled to welcome you to the 2024 Impact Report for SPARK (Strong, Prepared, and Ready for Kindergarten). As we reflect on the past three years, it is inspiring to witness the incredible strides we have made in supporting the families of our community. Our commitment to collaboration, ensuring that every child in Aurora has access to both high-quality early childhood education and resources remains at the heart of our mission.

At SPARK, we believe that a strong foundation in the early years sets the stage for a lifetime of learning and success. With the help of our dedicated team, partner agencies, and the unwavering support of our community, we have implemented a variety of programs that not only promote kindergarten readiness but also foster equity and inclusion for all families. From engaging playgroups and comprehensive parent workshops to utilizing new innovative systems like the digital ASQ platform, we have worked tirelessly to provide resources that empower parents and enrich children's development.

The impact of our efforts is evident in the stories of families who have benefited from our services. We are proud to report significant increases in developmental screenings, access to bilingual books, and parental engagement—all crucial elements in nurturing the next generation of learners. Through these initiatives, we are not only improving educational outcomes but also strengthening our community as a whole.

As you read through this report, I hope you will feel the same sense of pride and hope that I do. Together, we are creating a brighter future for our children and building a more equitable Aurora. Thank you for your continued support and partnership as we ignite the spark of learning in every child.

Warm regards,



A large, elegant, handwritten signature of Rosaisela Sida in white ink, set against a solid blue background.

Rosaisela Sida
Director of Early Childhood Initiatives

ABOUT US

SPARK (Strong, Prepared, and Ready for Kindergarten), is a dedicated education initiative of Fox Valley United Way, focused on empowering underserved families in Aurora, Illinois, by providing access to high-quality early childhood education, childcare and early childhood resources. Our mission is to ensure that all children have the opportunity to start strong and be fully prepared for kindergarten, equipping them with the support they need to thrive academically and in life. Recognizing the critical nature of early childhood development, we offer a range of services, including engaging playgroups, parent cafés, and referrals to vital community resources, fostering strong partnerships between families and educators.



As a collaboration, we partner with local early childhood agencies and community organizations in efforts of closing the achievement gap in children ages birth to five, and promoting equity; ensuring that every child in our community has a strong start in their educational journey - shaping a brighter future for families.

Mission

SPARK (Strong, Prepared, and Ready for Kindergarten), a collaboration, aims to spark a love of learning in every child by providing access to comprehensive early childhood education and support to families in Aurora.

Vision

We envision a thriving Aurora where all families have access to high-quality early childhood education, and resources, leading to a brighter future for our community.

LEADERSHIP TEAM



Rosaisela Sida

Director
Early Childhood Initiatives



Ambre Rowland

Manager
Family Engagement



Yvette Ortiz

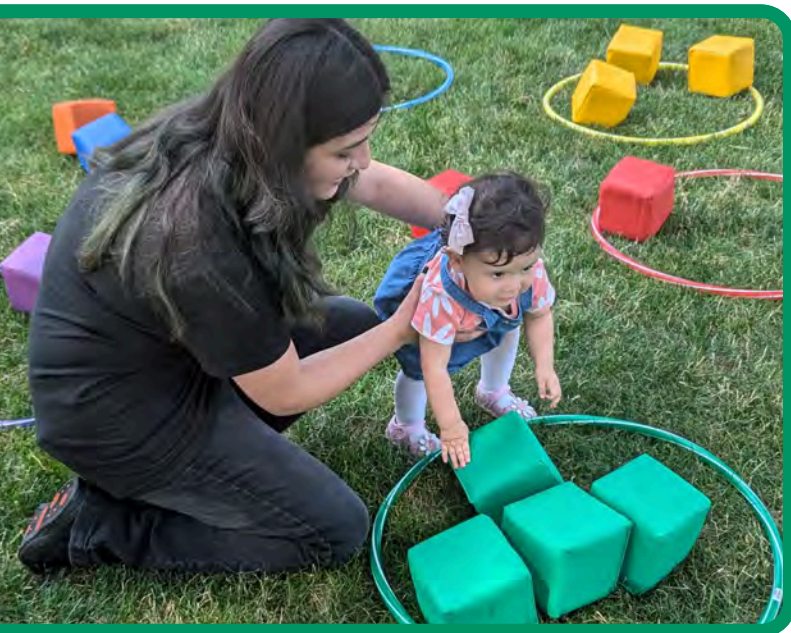
Family
Resource Specialist

KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Over the past three years, SPARK has made significant strides in improving kindergarten readiness for young children in our community. Early childhood is a critical period of development, and preparing children for kindergarten has a lasting impact on their academic success. Through SPARK's comprehensive support services—ranging from early childhood agency referrals, to engaging playgroups and parent cafés—families receive the guidance and tools they need to nurture their child's early development. Initiatives like Abriendo Puertas and Lantern have empowered parents to be their child's first teacher, fostering strong early literacy, social-emotional skills, and cognitive growth. As a result, children entering kindergarten are better equipped to thrive, laying a strong foundation for continued learning and success in their educational journey.

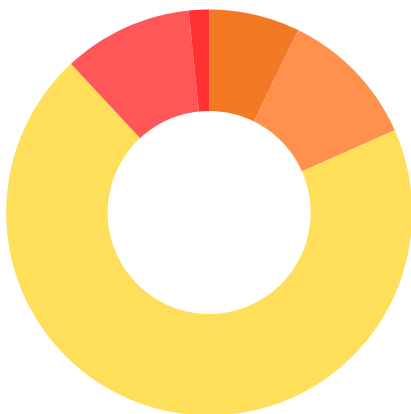


When children enter school ready to learn—equipped with strong early literacy, social-emotional, and cognitive skills—they are more likely to thrive in the classroom, reducing the need for remediation and increasing their chances of academic achievement. For Aurora, this means a future generation of students better prepared to succeed in school, graduate, and contribute positively to the local economy. Additionally, kindergarten readiness helps reduce educational disparities by ensuring that children from diverse backgrounds have access to the tools and support they need for a strong start, fostering a more equitable and vibrant community. Through programs like SPARK, the city of Aurora is investing in its youngest residents, creating a ripple effect that strengthens families and improves long-term outcomes for the entire community.



Promoting Equity

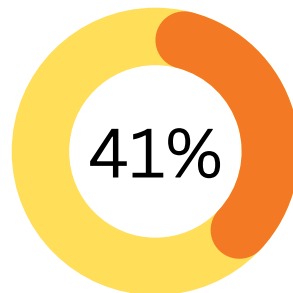
SPARK aims to close the education gap and promote equity by giving all children, regardless of their background, the skills they need to succeed from day one of school. Many children from low-income or underserved communities start school at a disadvantage due to limited access to early learning resources. SPARK levels the playing field, reducing the achievement gap. Early interventions in literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills set children up for long-term academic success, creating a more equitable and inclusive education system for all.



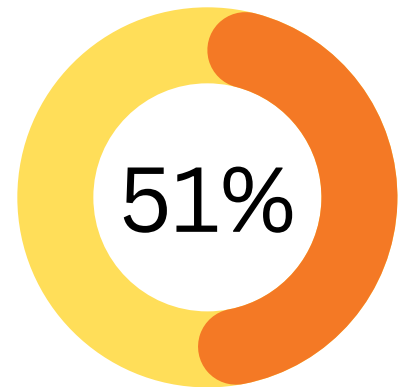
1.6% More than one race
7.2% Asian
10.3% White
11.1% Black or African American
69.7% Hispanic/Latinx

lantern
FORMERLY BRIGHT BY TEXT

350 Active Users
75% Retention
>28K Community Messages
30% Spanish Speaking Users

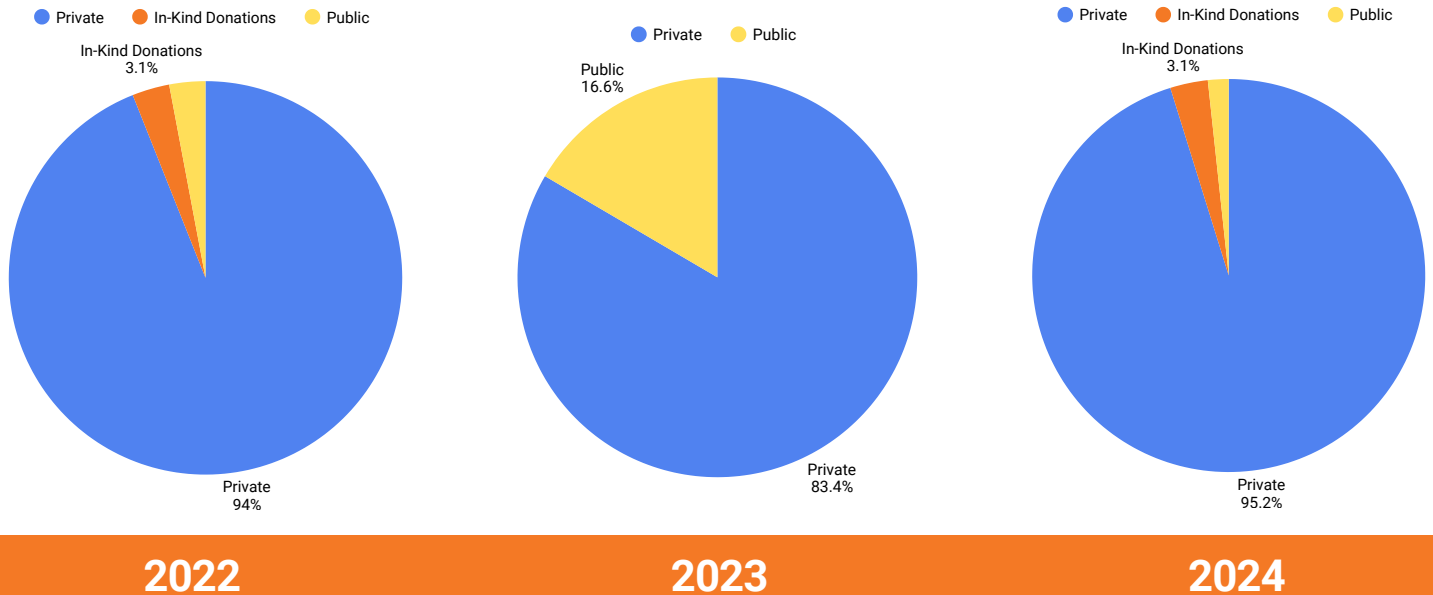


Reported Single-Parent Household



Identify Spanish as Primary Language

Financial Overview



A Heartfelt Thank You to Our Donors,

At SPARK, we believe early childhood collaboration fosters meaningful change in our community. This work would not be possible without the generous contributions from our donors, whose commitment and belief in our vision help make a lasting impact.

Our work in early childhood development is made possible through the support of foundations, grant issuers, community leaders, organizations, and citizens. As a self-sustaining initiative, we rely entirely on contributions from grants, funders, and donors. Your generosity not only fuels our efforts but also drives measurable change—empowering families, preparing children for kindergarten, and fostering brighter futures for all.

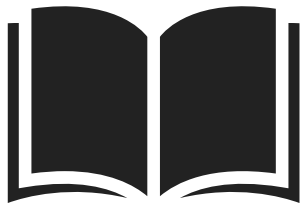
Together, we spark a love of learning. On behalf of everyone at SPARK and those we serve, we extend our deepest gratitude for your invaluable support. Your impact resonates far beyond today, creating lasting opportunities for our youngest learners and strengthening the foundation of our community.

Sincerely,

SPARK



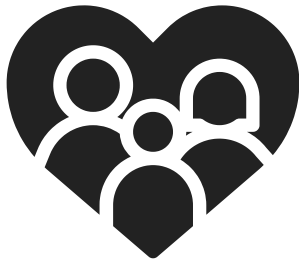
OUR IMPACT



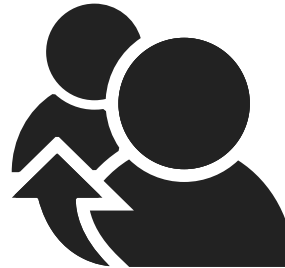
**Over 5,600
bilingual
books
distributed**



**140 free
Playgroups
provided in
Aurora**



**Over 100
parent
learning
workshops**



**260 referrals
made to
families**



**Over 300
partnerships
with other Early
Childhood
Agencies**



**Parents reported
being more
responsive to
their children**



**Parents reported an
increased amount and
length of time spent
reading to their children**



**217
Developmental
Screenings
completed**

IMPACT ANALYSIS



Early Detection

SPARK reported a significant increase in screenings. Notably, a higher number of developmental and social-emotional screenings were provided to families in the Aurora community, (131 more in FY 24 than when launching the initiative the year prior). Increased screenings lead to greater chances of early detection of delays and access to therapy and intervention. On average, the cost of special education services can range from \$10,000 to \$20,000 per child annually, while early intervention services typically cost less and are more effective at mitigating long-term challenges. If even a small percentage screened receive early intervention that prevents the need for special education, the potential savings could range from \$207,000 to over \$414,000 annually. Additionally, children who receive appropriate early support are more likely to stay on track academically, reducing dropout rates and future social costs associated with unemployment and poverty.

At a Glance

This report demonstrates how direct services with intention and in collaboration with other local agencies can impact kindergarten readiness, creating equity in the Aurora community.

SPARK uses a combination of both Aurora, IL data logged specifically by full-time staff members alongside published and current research.



2022–2024



Mental Health

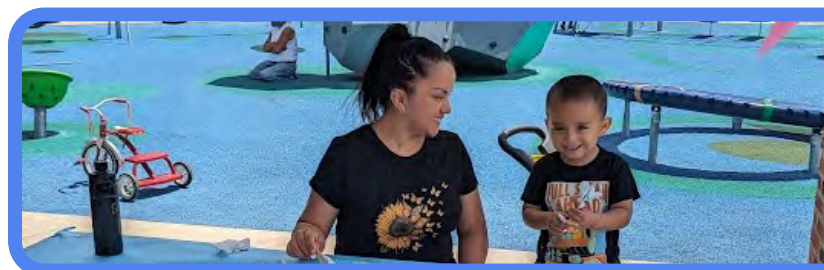
SPARK supported positive mental health and wellness by providing 140 free playgroups in Aurora – creating a safe and supportive environment for children and parents to practice social skills, and build confidence significantly improving readiness for kindergarten. Children learn to navigate routines similar to those in kindergarten, such as transitioning between activities and following a teacher’s guidance. This helps them adapt more smoothly to the expectations of a classroom setting, reducing the likelihood of behavior-related disruptions that could hinder learning. Additionally, engaging parents in these playgroups reinforces learning at home and empowers parents to be active participants in their child’s education, further strengthening the child’s developmental progress.

Academic Success

Increasing kindergarten readiness can lower the costs of educational interventions, which can average \$10,000 to \$20,000 per student per year for special education services. Additionally, preventing high school dropouts through early preparation can result in savings of around \$292,000 per individual over their lifetime, considering lower unemployment rates, decreased reliance on social programs, and reduced incarceration rates. For a city like Aurora, improving kindergarten readiness can save taxpayers millions over time while promoting economic growth and reducing social inequality.

Community Connection

SPARK became active members of the Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS). Utilizing IRIS has streamlined our referral process, ensuring families have constant contact which maintains a higher quality of service and level of communication between families and Early Childhood agencies. Referring families through IRIS for early childhood resources has a significant impact on improving kindergarten readiness and family well-being.



PARTNER AGENCIES



COLLABORATIVE IMPACT

SPARK was formed as a collaboration to address the diverse needs of families in Aurora and ensure that children are supported from birth through early childhood. By working together with over 40 local early childhood agencies, SPARK creates a robust, interconnected network that transforms the lives of countless families. and a brighter future for Aurora's youngest learners.



SPARK is built on the belief that collaboration is key to achieving long-term educational success and equity. By bringing together diverse partners—each contributing unique expertise, resources, and perspectives—SPARK is able to deliver comprehensive, coordinated support to families. This unified approach helps ensure that children receive consistent, high-quality services that address all aspects of their development, from health and early learning to social-emotional growth and family engagement.

The collaborative foundation of SPARK not only strengthens early childhood services but also builds trust within the community, fostering better long-term educational outcomes and a brighter future for Aurora's youngest learners.



One of SPARK's most valuable contributions is its ability to streamline referrals and coordinate access to services, making it easier for families to get the help they need when they need it. This means families experience fewer barriers and more timely support, allowing children to develop the foundational skills necessary for school readiness. Through intentional partnerships, shared best practices, and a deep commitment to community trust, SPARK strengthens the early childhood landscape in Aurora—ultimately building a brighter, more equitable future for the city's youngest learners.



SUMMARY

SPARK (Strong, Prepared, and Ready for Kindergarten), an education initiative of Fox Valley United Way, is dedicated to assisting underserved families in Aurora, Illinois, by providing access to high-quality early childhood education, childcare, and resources. We believe every child deserves a strong start, ready for kindergarten, and we work to equip families with the tools and support needed to ensure success both in school and life. Our mission is to ignite the spark of learning in every child, and our vision is a thriving Aurora where all families have access to quality early education.

Over the past three years, SPARK has significantly improved kindergarten readiness in the community, recognizing early childhood as a crucial developmental period. Our support services—including referrals, resource connections, engaging playgroups, and parent workshops—empower families to nurture early development. Initiatives like Abriendo Puertas and Lantern have strengthened parental involvement, enhancing early literacy, social-emotional skills, and cognitive growth.

The impact of kindergarten readiness extends beyond individual children; it strengthens the entire Aurora community by paving the way for academic success and lifelong learning. Prepared children are more likely to thrive in school, reducing the need for remediation and contributing to a stronger local economy. By ensuring equitable access to early learning resources, SPARK helps close the achievement gap and promotes a more inclusive education system.

Our achievements include distributing over 5,600 bilingual books, hosting 140 free playgroups, conducting over 100 parent workshops, and completing 217 developmental screenings—leading to early detection of delays and timely interventions. This proactive approach benefits children and results in significant taxpayer savings—potentially between \$207,000 and \$414,000 annually—by reducing future special education costs and boosting academic outcomes.

SPARK also supports mental health and wellness by creating safe, engaging environments through playgroups that help children develop essential social skills and classroom readiness. Participation in the Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS) has significantly increased streamlined referrals, helping families access critical early intervention, healthcare, and educational services more efficiently.

With a diverse demographic—69.7% Hispanic/Latinx and broad representation from other racial backgrounds—SPARK remains committed to equity and long-lasting community impact. Our work shows that collaboration with local agencies and direct family services can meaningfully improve kindergarten readiness and help build a brighter future for Aurora.



Fox Valley United Way

SPARK, the education initiative of Fox Valley United Way, thrives because of the unwavering support of the United Way donors and funders. Their generosity empowers us to deliver impactful programs, ensuring families in our community are prepared for kindergarten and beyond. Together, we are building a brighter future for our youngest learners.



Illinois Action for Children

SPARK extends our deepest gratitude to Illinois Action for Children, whose generous support through the CPPSS Grant has been instrumental in allowing us to continue providing vital resources, support, and educational opportunities to families in our community. We are immensely thankful for their commitment to our mission

Inc. Mental Health Alliance

For your dedication to mental health advocacy and support, helping us ensure that mental health care is accessible to those in need.



City of Aurora

For your continued partnership and unwavering support in fostering growth and innovation in our local community.



ComEd, an Exelon Company

For your generous support and partnership. Together, we are lighting the path to success for families and their youngest learners. Thank you for making a lasting impact!



comedSM

AN EXELON COMPANY

Illinois Children's Healthcare Foundation

For your commitment to improving the health and well-being of children, ensuring that every child has access to the care and resources they deserve.



**Illinois Children's
Healthcare Foundation**

Chicago Community Trust

For your ongoing support in building stronger, more resilient communities through philanthropy and community development.



**THE CHICAGO
COMMUNITY TRUST**

EQUITY • OPPORTUNITY • PROSPERITY

Northwestern Medicine

For your dedication to advancing health and wellness, and for supporting initiatives that promote holistic well-being in our community.





We value the experiences, cultures, voices, and intellect of our diverse stakeholders. We bring equity to the forefront of our work. We hold forth the core values of Collaboration, Integrity, Accountability, Compassion, and Innovation.

J.D. Ostergaard - Executive Director

Rosaisela Sida - Director of Early Childhood Initiatives

Henry Izaguirre - Director of Development & Communications

Tricia Hoover - Community Impact & Administration Manager

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