Summary Evaluation Findings of the Milwaukee Community Literacy Project
SPARK Early Literacy – an i3 Success Story

SPARK is an early grade (K to 3rd grade) literacy program developed by Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee. SPARK is currently active in 10 school districts across six states and serves approximately 800 students annually. SPARK combines one-on-one tutoring with parent engagement and after-school programming to engage the whole child and family in literacy activities. SPARK’s model is innovative in a number of ways.

• SPARK develops literacy skills through one-on-one tutoring using a framework that is similar to Reading Recovery. Instead of certified teachers though, SPARK tutors are trained and supervised by site managers who are certified teachers. By using tutors instead of teachers, SPARK is able to engage more students at a reduced cost. This also allows SPARK to meet the needs of urban and poorer schools that do not have the teaching capacity and resources needed to meet the literacy instructional needs of all students.

• SPARK addresses “why” students are behind in their literacy development by using parent liaisons to promote literacy in the home and community. Parent liaisons stay connected to parents through a variety of means, such as notes home, parent events, and home visits. Through these ongoing communications, SPARK is able to keep parents informed about their child’s literacy progress and address any issues, such as excessive school absences, that arise.

• Boys & Girls Clubs are able to leverage other after-school club activities to stay engaged with students and families. This ongoing family and student engagement allows students to continue to receive support if they need it and sustains the impact of SPARK after participation has ended.

In 2010, SPARK was awarded an Investing in Innovation (i3) Department of Education grant to further develop the program and test its impact, through a randomized control trial in seven Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). The i3-funded independent evaluation conducted by the Office of Socially Responsible Evaluation in Education (SREed) at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee found that:

• SPARK had statistically significant positive impacts on both overall reading achievement and literacy development.

• The impact of SPARK was greater for students who started the program with greater need for literacy instruction. The magnitude of the impact for these students was between .3 and .6 standard deviations, which is consistent with the impacts reported from the Reading Recovery i3 evaluation.

• The family engagement component of SPARK impacted students as well. Specifically, SPARK participants were absent from school 5.8 fewer times than control students and were 27% less likely to be chronically absent from school.

Given the large network of Boys & Girls Clubs (more than 4,000 clubs nationally) across the U.S., these results suggest SPARK has the potential to benefit a large number of students and families across the U.S. As SPARK continues to expand, it will be important to monitor the fidelity of implementation to the SPARK model and determine how much of the benefit documented in Milwaukee transfers to other locations.

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