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Evaluation of the Milwaukee Community Literacy Project/ SPARK Program: Interim Findings from the Second Cohort

The Milwaukee Community Literacy Project or SPARK program is a collaboration between Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), where participants receive two years of tutoring, after-school, and family engagement. The evaluation of SPARK utilizes a randomized-control selection framework to isolate the impact of the program on reading achievement (MAP for Primary Grades (MPG) published by NWEA). The results from the evaluation of the first cohort showed that after two years of participation, SPARK had a significant impact on reading achievement. This brief presents the interim results from the first year of the second cohort of students participating in SPARK during the 2013-2014 school year.

Participants and Attrition

A total of 576 students across seven schools consented to participate in the second SPARK cohort. 286 students were randomly selected as SPARK participants and 290 as control students. Of the 576 students, 205 are in kindergarten, 214 in first, and 157 in second. 549 (95%) are eligible for free or reduced lunch, 459 (80%) African American, 71 (12%) Hispanic, and 51 (9%) have an IEP for speech/language. During the year, 47 (8%) students dropped, all because they moved to another school. This included 20 (7%) participants and 27 (9%) control students. Thus, the results presented in this brief reflect the interim impact of SPARK on 266 participants compared to 263 control students.

Analysis

We built separate generalized linear statistical models with robust standard error estimators to compare the reading achievement growth of participants and controls for kindergarten, first, and second grade students. We then pooled the results of the three models to estimate the overall impact of SPARK. All three models controlled for baseline MPG reading results and school effects. The kindergarten and first grade models also controlled for the baseline results of the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screener (PALS), used for the first time by MPS with its kindergarten and first grade students. We also considered using MPG math baseline scores as a covariate to further reduce standard errors but its inclusion in the kindergarten and first grade models did not reduce standard errors nor improve model fit, so it was not included. However, MPG math baseline scores did improve model fit and reduce standard errors for second grade students, so was included in that model. Spring reading achievement scores were standardized to improve interpretability.

Results

Table 1 presents the results of the grade-specific statistical models and the pooled results testing the overall impact of SPARK. Our only planned comparison was for the overall impact of SPARK. Individual grade level results are presented for reference. Overall, SPARK was found to have a significant impact on reading achievement (0.12 standard deviations). This finding is significant at the 1% probability level.

![Table 1: SPARK 2ND Cohort Interim Results](image)

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