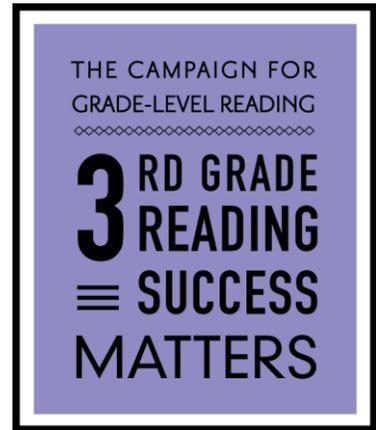


BRIGHT SPOTS

Quality Teaching



Milwaukee Community Literacy Project, Milwaukee, WI

At a handful of Milwaukee Public Schools, once-struggling readers now have a room to call their own. They can do so with pride. Each school's SPARK room, designed by the Milwaukee Community Literacy Project, is a place that unlocks students' passions for reading and learning. Stockpiled with books and cheerfully decorated with student art, the room provides the space for one-on-one sessions between trained tutors and K–3rd grade students two or three times each week. Book by book, page by page, shared motivation takes root in these students.

"Our tutors are mainly college students," says Pat Marcus, director of program development for early childhood programs at the Boys & Girls Clubs (BGC) of Greater Milwaukee, the project's lead organization. "Many are AmeriCorps members. The key is recruiting students from schools of education with coursework behind them."

The program design helps students escape the stigma of remedial reading programs. "The SPARK room is one of the coolest places in the building," says Marcus. "A college student is your buddy. What could be better?"

School, after-school and home

Urgency underlies the Milwaukee Community Literacy Project. When scores continued to flounder in schools where many BGC participants were enrolled, BGC approached Milwaukee Public Schools with a novel concept and an acronym that spells out Spheres of Proud Achievement in Reading for Kids. In 2010, the two organizations went on to form the Literacy Project. Now, a \$4.12-million Investing in Innovation (i3) grant from the U.S. Department of Education will support the Project in a rigorous evaluation of SPARK's impact in seven schools, an expansion to two new schools, and the implementation of a parent involvement component at these nine sites.

WHO THEY ARE

In 2010–2011, the SPARK program, including the seven schools in the Milwaukee Community Literacy Project, reached:

- 10 schools.
- 96 tutors.
- 425 students.

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

On 3rd-grade reading tests:

- 4 of 10 Milwaukee Public Schools with double-digit gains are SPARK schools.
- A fifth SPARK site showed a 5% to 10% increase in reading.

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“We knew we had to make a difference,” says Marcus. “Our schools are hugely challenged, and our Clubs have access to 4,000 kids each day. We’re uniquely positioned to make that difference.”

Relationships with schools are essential. In each building, a BGC staff person, who is a certified teacher, coordinates schedules, facilitates conferences with classroom teachers, and ensures that teachers understand how the program supports academic success and can dovetail with their lessons.

By focusing on elementary schools, the SPARK difference begins early and extends to two other BGC spheres of influence: after-school and home. After the final bell, each SPARK room becomes a Boys & Girls Club extension of the school day. Interactive games, a “Readers’ Theater” and other activities re-energize the space, while continuing to instill a love of books and reading.

Resources accrue through publishers’ discounts, literacy partnerships with organizations like First Book, and online resources. A home library component gives students one book a month to take home and opens a door for families to enter the picture. “Many parents just aren’t comfortable in an academic setting,” says Marcus. “They care, but aren’t sure how they can help their children.”

At the seven schools now under the i3 grant, a parent coordinator calls home with positive news, details about specific challenges, and suggestions for nurturing good reading habits. “Ultimately, our goal is home visits,” says Marcus. “We need to bring ideas and materials to parents and invest in them as partners.”

Every moment, a teachable moment

In addition to the current i3 evaluation, SPARK has always benefited from continuous assessment, including pre- and post-tests and a year-end teacher survey. Last year, four of 10 schools district-wide that showed double-digit improvement on third-grade standardized reading tests are SPARK schools. Anecdotal evidence indicates changes in student engagement as well, says Marcus. “One teacher told me a child who spent most days with his head on the desk raised his hand. The teacher almost didn’t call on him, thinking it was good enough he even raised his hand. Then he got the question right. She almost cried for joy.”

Training helps tutors make the most of their time with students. “A half-hour of tutoring, if you’re unprepared, can be a waste of time,” says Marcus. “If well designed, it can be jam-packed with content. We show how to tutor with a sense of urgency. Every moment is a teachable moment, even when you’re in the hall walking your student to the SPARK room.”

Lesson plans are tailored to students’ individual strengths and abilities, and overall approaches are refined over each summer, based on experiences at all 10 SPARK schools. But the connections that develop during the school year are the engine that drives achievement.

“We’re not just pairing a random kid and a random tutor,” says Marcus. “The tutors have *their* kids. When the schedules changed in January and we reassigned some pairings, the tutors rebelled. They said, ‘No way!’ to someone else taking their kids away. That is the brand of commitment that will change the future of education for the best.”

HIGHLIGHTS

The Milwaukee Community Literacy Project provides:

- One-on-one, relationship-driven tutoring sessions throughout the school year.
- Dedicated space for tutoring and after-school programs.
- Rigorous evaluation, including a comparison group, at seven current schools, expanding to two more by the end of the i3 grant.
- BGC staff who serve as teacher coordinators at each school.
- A parent coordinator to bolster parent involvement at the schools under the i3 grant.
- Three venues for engagement with students and families: school, after-school/community and home.
- A high level of interaction with parents.
- A home library component that gives students one book a month.
- Opportunities to reach other students during the school day.

The new i3 evaluation, conducted by University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers, will study 7 of the 9 SPARK schools, including a control group for comparison purposes.