

SPARK Early Literacy: Testing the Impact of a Family–School–Community Partnership Literacy Intervention

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Abstract

This report presents the SPARK literacy model, an innovative approach developed by Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee, for addressing the literacy needs of low-income and minority schools in Milwaukee. It also presents the results of a two-year randomized control trial evaluation of the SPARK literacy program's impact on reading achievement. Through a family–school–community partnership model, SPARK attempts to both build student literacy skills and develop natural supports in the student's family and community that promote a sustained programmatic impact. SPARK was awarded an Investing in Innovation (i3) Department of Education grant to develop the program and test its impact in six Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). While SPARK was still being developed, 251 students were randomly assigned to receive SPARK for two years and 245 were assigned to the “business as usual” control condition. The study found that SPARK had a small but statistically significant positive impact on student reading achievement, but no impact was found on regular school day attendance. Although the results of the study were somewhat mixed, the family–school–community partnership approach employed by SPARK holds great promise for having a sustained impact on student literacy.

Key Words: literacy intervention, RCT, urban education, one-on-one tutoring, impact evaluation, family–school–community partnerships, SPARK

Introduction

The ability to read fluently and for meaning is essential to functioning effectively in society. Third grade is a critical benchmark that marks the shift from students learning to read to students reading to learn. Students without a basic level of reading competency by third grade are more likely to struggle academically as well as to have social and behavioral issues in subsequent grades (Fiester, 2010). Research demonstrates that these students are four times as likely to drop out of high school as proficient readers, and dropouts are more likely to experience negative outcomes than their counterparts, including lower annual earnings and higher potential for mental and physical health problems (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2007; Fiester, 2013). Further, early intervention is key: the likelihood of student dropout can be predicted with up to 70% accuracy by third grade, based on reading ability and prior retention (Hernandez, 2012). Given the potential negative long-term consequences of low reading proficiency, the fact that only 36% of fourth graders across the country are proficient in reading underscores the magnitude of the problem on a national scale (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

While the low rates of literacy represent a national crisis, it is the literacy rates for low-income Americans that represent the biggest challenge. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test scores reflect persistent achievement gaps between students eligible for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and their non-NSLP counterparts. Of NSLP-eligible 4th and 8th graders, 80% are rated below proficient in reading, as compared to 50% of students not eligible for NSLP (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). With poverty rates rising among public school students, there is a clear and urgent need for research-based, effective literacy interventions that promote sustained literacy growth for all students.

Literacy in the Milwaukee Public Schools

As is true across the country, the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), a district serving nearly 80,000 mostly low-income and minority students, faces a significant challenge to teach its students how to read and write. Assessment results for MPS show that students across all demographic groups have even lower literacy rates than are seen nationally (MacIver Institute, 2013). According to the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination (WKCE), only 15% of MPS students were proficient in reading in 2011 compared to 35% statewide. The results of the WKCE are consistent with results of the NAEP and the ACT, which show that MPS students struggle with literacy throughout their education; only 15% of 4th grade MPS students are proficient in reading

(NAEP, 2013), and only 14% of MPS 11th graders scored at least 21 on the ACT Reading Test, the benchmark identified for college readiness. The results of the NAEP further show that there are significant achievement gaps for minority and low-income students; 38% of 4th grade White MPS students are proficient in reading compared to 9% of Black and 14% of Hispanic students, and 11% of 4th grade low-income (free/reduced lunch participants) MPS students are proficient in reading, compared to 39% of non-low-income students.

These statistics demonstrate that the need for increased literacy opportunities in Milwaukee is urgent and that this need is even more pronounced for low-income and minority students. SPARK was created in 2005 by Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee (BGCGM) to address this need through an innovative combination of in-school tutoring, parent engagement, and after-school programming. In 2010, SPARK received a Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3) grant award to further develop SPARK and expand it to six predominantly low-income and minority Milwaukee elementary schools, all designated as “persistently low achieving” by the state.

The SPARK Model

With the i3 grant, Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee committed to developing the SPARK program so that it could better leverage community, family, and school resources to address the literacy deficits observed in Milwaukee students. The SPARK model and approach to literacy development (see Figure 1) accounts for skill deficits while also addressing the reasons why students are unable to read by third grade. SPARK was developed in response to the mixed evidence about how well skill-based program impacts are sustained after students leave a program (D’Agostino, Lose, & Kelly, 2017; Hurry & Sylva, 2007). After an intervention helps a student get back on track in their literacy development, there is a risk that the same family, school, and community factors that led them to fall behind originally will again begin to interfere with the student’s education. SPARK accounts for this by not solely focusing on literacy skill development but also working to build an environment around students that is more conducive to students learning to read and to maintaining their literacy development beyond their participation in SPARK.

By using in-school tutoring, afterschool enrichment, and family engagement in concert, SPARK works both to develop the literacy skills of early-grade students and to engage families as they learn to support the literacy development of their children. It is through this family–school–community partnership strategy (Epstein et al., 2002) that SPARK seeks to have a lasting impact on students and set them on the course to long-term school and life success.

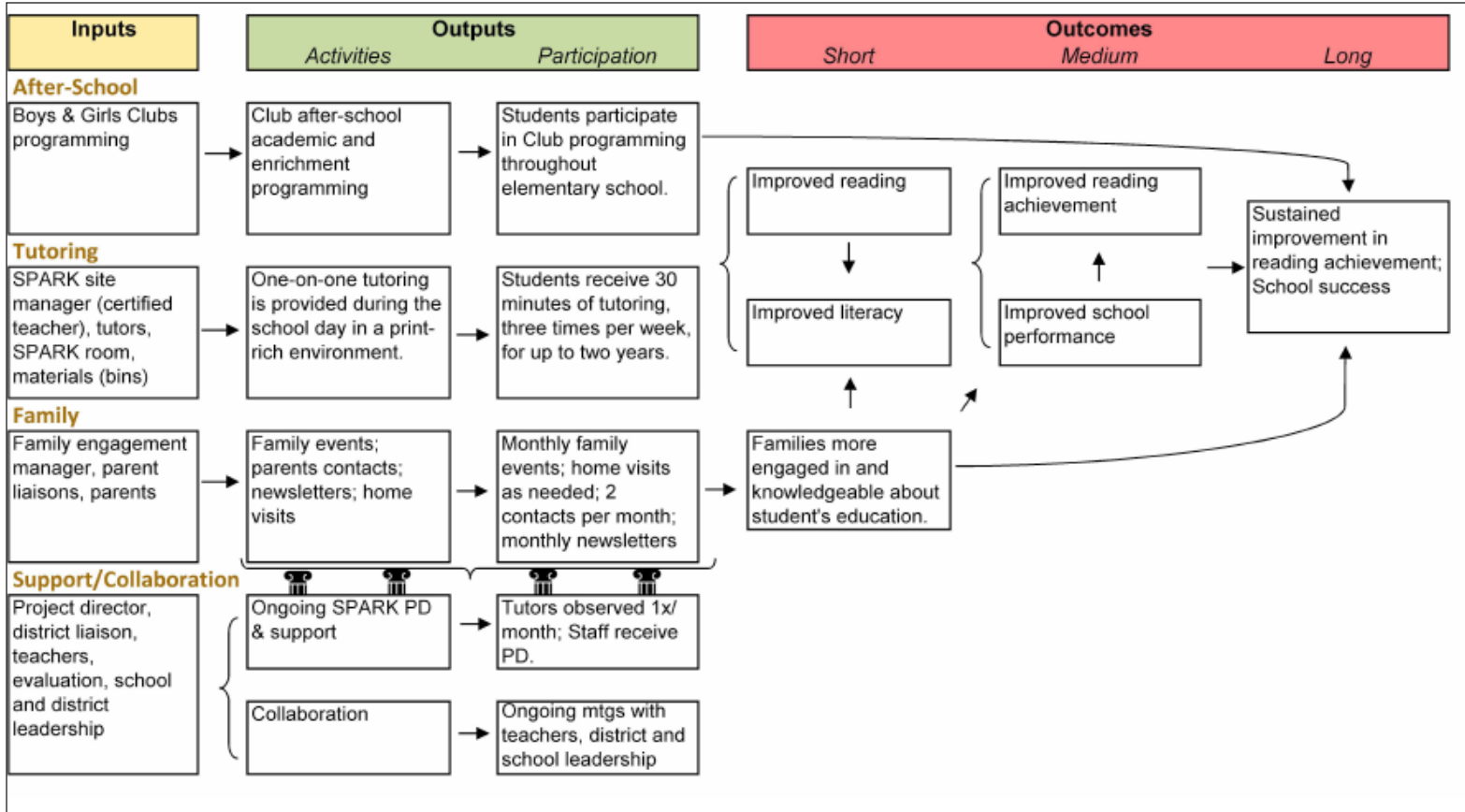


Figure 1. SPARK logic model

In-School Tutoring

In SPARK, one-on-one tutoring is typically planned and administered by college students and community members. Participating students are pulled out of non-core classes during the school day for 30 minutes up to three times per week. Each tutoring session includes five research-based literacy activities, comprising a standardized lesson plan template used with all SPARK students:

Familiar activity is a brief element that gets students ready for learning by reviewing a skill they have recently learned.

Word Play is a key element in the lesson where students receive targeted, differentiated instruction on foundational reading skills including phonics and phonemic awareness (Wasik & Jacobi-Vessels, 2016). Word play is individualized to focus on students' needs. It is centered on two main activities: Word Sorts and Making Words. These activities combine both constructivist learning and structured instruction. Each of these activities focus on specific skills, and tutors are explicit with students about the lesson's foci. Word Sorts involve students sorting words into various categories to increase their understanding of the structure of sounds and letters (Zutell, 1998). Making Words involves students using different letters to make words and provides a structured way for students to learn how the sounds of language are put together (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1998). Students also read phonics-based books during Word Play time and do enrichment activities to cement their understanding of the focus skills.

Reading at the instructional level involves tutor-assisted reading of a leveled book. For example, students do a "book walk" to familiarize themselves with the content and vocabulary of the book. The tutor asks the student questions about the story to activate prior knowledge and get the student thinking about the book before they begin reading it. As students read, tutors use a variety of strategies to help students decode and make meaning of the text.

Running Records (Fountas & Pinnell, 2010) are used every second or third lesson to track student progress throughout a student's participation in SPARK. Running records are done on the books the students have previously been reading during their lessons. These are assessments of student reading ability independent of tutor assistance.

Writing. During this activity, students spend time writing sentences connected to their Word Play skill or their instructional reading book. Tutors help students correctly spell the words in their sentence(s). Elkonin boxes are a central piece of SPARK writing and are used to help students

encode words (Keesey, Konrad, & Joseph, 2014). Elkonin boxes are an instructional method used in early elementary grades to build phonological awareness by segmenting words into individual sounds/boxes. Students may also use graphic organizers related to their book to build comprehension skills.

The lesson ends with a brief opportunity for students to hear their tutors *read aloud*. This allows students to listen to their tutor read fluently and with expression. An important part of learning how to read is listening to what good reading sounds like.

At each site, a program manager, who is also a certified teacher, oversees and supports the tutors and coordinates the collaboration between the SPARK team and school staff. Tutors participate in a series of all-program training at the beginning of the year, which includes the implementation of the lesson, how to develop a lesson plan, and how to administer and use literacy assessments. At the site level, other individualized training opportunities are developed throughout the year as needs arise. These are more specialized trainings that reflect the different components of the lesson plan. Tutors are informally observed and supported while they provide tutoring. They are also formally observed, using a structured observation instrument, at least once monthly by their program manager and receive feedback following these observations. All students are assessed with the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) at the beginning and end of the school year. The PALS is used to determine each student's needs and help create individual lesson plans.

Collaboration between SPARK and each school occurs in a variety of ways as teachers are encouraged to participate in SPARK activities, observe lessons, and leverage SPARK to meet the needs of students. A communication log is maintained for each teacher in which student progress, challenges, and questions are shared and documented. School ownership of SPARK is particularly important since students are pulled out of non-core classes to receive tutoring. The idea is to work to align SPARK with the approaches and literacy activities occurring within the school so that gains students make are consistent with what the school is attempting to accomplish. In fact, schools with SPARK generally view SPARK as an extension of the school rather than as a separate program.

Family Engagement¹

To execute the family engagement component, each site has a parent partner who works with participating students' families. Their work is designed to bridge the divide between school and home by translating literacy concepts, educating families about a variety of literacy activities, and validating the literacy practices already happening in the home. Involving families in tutoring

programs can improve children's academic knowledge, skills, and confidence (Bryan, 2005; Little, 2009). Encouraging family involvement in educational programs traditionally focuses on families attending events, receiving information from staff, volunteering (Epstein, 2001), and generally exhibiting "good parent" behaviors (Li, 2010). Getting to know families and the ways that their lives are structured outside of the educational setting may lead to a reciprocal relationship that can increase involvement (Graue & Hawkins, 2010).

While outcomes for all students improve with additional family engagement, a demonstrated positive working relationship between the home and school is shown to have an added literacy benefit for low-income children with less-educated parents (Carroll, 2013; Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Lin, 2003). Not only does increased family engagement lead to increased positive feelings about literacy—which in turn improves literacy performance (Dearing et al., 2006)—but family engagement is closely connected to student attendance, and research has shown school, family, and community partnership practices can decrease the likelihood that students are chronically absent from school (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). Fundamentally, for literacy instruction to work and for student literacy levels to improve, children first need to be in school to receive instruction.

SPARK parent partners help families understand how they are already incorporating literacy into their children's lives and support them as they learn to better promote literacy at home. Parent partners stay connected with families through a monthly newsletter, monthly family events at each site, phone calls, and emails. These communications are designed to keep families aware of student progress in SPARK, help families promote literacy at home, address any school attendance issues that arise during the program, and to communicate with parents the successes of students. Parent partners also conduct home visits for all students twice during the summer between their first and second year of participation and as needed during the school year. These visits are viewed as opportunities to connect with families in their own space and learn about the literacy activities already taking place in the home. Parent partners may also address other needs of families that may interfere with their ability to support the literacy development of the child. This could include connecting them to an energy assistance program or a tenant's rights center. Finally, SPARK also provides students with books to take home each month so that students begin to develop a home library.

Community Afterschool²

During the afterschool hours, SPARK leverages Boys & Girls Clubs programming to offer academic enrichment activities to strengthen social and

emotional learning and to make connections between literacy and everyday experiences. SPARK sites carefully select books and activities that directly balance teaching reading skills with character-driven stories to encourage empathy for and connection with characters. During the 2012–13 school year, SPARK created lesson plans around themes and selected books that the Clubs could use with SPARK participants after school. This ongoing student engagement and emotional support is intended to sustain SPARK's impact after the student's participation has ended and to promote family engagement in Club activities throughout elementary school.

Evaluation Methods

The study of SPARK utilized a randomized control trial selection framework at the student level. In September 2011, informed consent was obtained from 496 parents for their students to participate in the study. In October and November of 2011, a random sample of 251 kindergarten, first, and second grade students in six MPS schools were assigned to SPARK and 245 to the control group. Stratification was done by grade level within school. The specific number of students assigned to SPARK within each strata was determined both by the number of consented students and the capacity to serve students within each site. Students with a reading-related IEP or who were English Learners were not eligible to participate in the evaluation but were eligible to receive tutoring. All other students were eligible to participate in the evaluation.

Instruments

Reading Achievement—Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)

The MAP (Northwest Evaluation Association, 2009) is a norm-referenced, adaptive assessment of reading achievement. The technical reference manual reports an internal marginal reliability of .95. Test–retest reliabilities were reported as between .76 and .89. It also is reported to have high concurrent validity with a variety of other reading assessments including the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Stanford 9 achievement test. At the time of this study, MPS administered the MAP each fall, winter, and spring to all students.

Regular School Day Attendance

The number of days students attended school was obtained from MPS.

Modeling Strategy

The primary analytic strategy followed an Intent to Treat Model (Becker & Ichino, 2002), where students selected to participate in SPARK were included

in the analysis regardless of how much tutoring they received. This was done to maximize the internal validity of the study. However, due to missing data, both participant and control students who moved away or were identified as having a disability that prevented them from receiving literacy tutoring were excluded from the analysis. The evaluation used separate generalized linear statistical models with robust standard error estimators to compare the reading achievement growth and regular school days attendance of participants and controls for kindergarten, first, and second grade students. The results of the three models for each outcome were then pooled to estimate the overall impact of SPARK.

All three MAP models controlled for the separate interactions of school effects with both baseline Fall 2011 MAP/MPG reading and MAP/MPG math results. Gender, race, disability status, and free/reduced lunch eligibility were also tested in the model. Ultimately, of these, only the main effect of race was found to uniquely predict MAP/MPG reading results and was included in the model. The rest were excluded because they were not found to uniquely predict post-test reading achievement. Spring 2013 reading achievement scores were standardized to improve interpretability. The methods used to measure the impact of SPARK on school attendance mirrored those used to measure the impact on reading achievement.

Sample Characteristics

Initial Sample

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of both participant and control students. The vast majority of students were Black and eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Final Sample

Attrition was a problem during the two years that students participated in SPARK. Too much attrition can seriously affect the internal validity of a study (Jurs & Glass, 1971). In this study, 223 students were excluded from the final analysis, which represents a 45.0% overall attrition rate. However, it is important to note that students were excluded for exogenous reasons, like not taking the pre-test (5 students), moving away (186), being identified for a reading disability (30), and not taking the post-test (2). When the reasons are not related to the program, attrition does not pose as much of a threat to the internal validity of the evaluation (Dumville, Torgerson, & Hewitt, 2006).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Consented Students

	Control Group	SPARK Participants	Total
Black	200	204	404
Hispanic	30	27	57
White/Asian	21	14	35
Female	127	128	255
Male	124	117	241
Not eligible	10	6	16
F/R lunch	241	239	480
K5	85	80	165
1	85	92	177
2	81	73	154
Total	251	245	496

Differential attrition can also affect the validity of a study (Graham & Donaldson, 1993). This occurs when more of either the participant or control group dropout. In this study, 107 (43.7%) participants and 116 (46.2%) control students dropped out. The 2.5% differential attrition rate, along with the 45.0% overall attrition rate, and the exogenous nature of why students were dropped, suggests that the internal validity of the evaluation remains intact. Table 2 depicts the characteristics of the final sample.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Final Sample

	Control Group	SPARK Participants	Total
Black	102	112	214
Hispanic	25	18	43
White/Asian	8	8	16
Female	74	72	146
Male	61	66	127
Not eligible	10	5	15
F/R lunch	125	133	258
K5	60	47	107
1	41	49	90
2	34	42	76
Total	135	138	273

Participation

Implementation is measured according to the SPARK logic model (see Figure 1). Students are tutored 30 minutes at a time, three times per week for approximately 60 weeks across two school years. However, due to holidays, teacher planning days, field trips, and so on, 180 sessions were not possible. The most sessions a student could possibly receive was 155. Based on this, students tutored fewer than 90 times were considered to have received a low level of SPARK tutoring, students tutored 90 up to 120 times received a moderate level, and students tutored at least 120 times were considered to have received a high level of tutoring.

For the family engagement component, each family should receive two or more home visits, 12 additional contacts throughout their participation, have monthly newsletters sent home, and have monthly family events available at the school. Although each SPARK site did document that they sent home the required number of newsletters and held monthly family events, specific participation and communication data were not maintained and thus not available for this study. It is therefore unknown exactly how many families participated in family events and how many other contacts SPARK made to families. SPARK afterschool was also being developed during the course of this project, so specific participation numbers were not recorded.

Results

Implementation

In-school participation data were available for 130 students across the six SPARK sites. Data for eight students that moved away then returned to the school are included in the impact analysis but not in the implementation analysis. These 130 students averaged 120.7 tutoring sessions out of 155 possible sessions, with 64.5 in the first year and 56.3 in the second (see Table 3). Although kindergarten students received more tutoring on average than students in other grade levels, the difference was not statistically significant ($p = .223$).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Tutoring Sessions by Grade Level

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	<i>N</i>
K to 1st	124.2	14.7	87	155	45
1st to 2nd	119.7	20.6	61	151	44
2nd to 3rd	118.0	16.9	72	155	41
Total	120.7	17.6	61	155	130

Further, the distribution of total tutoring suggests that most participants received a high amount of tutoring (see Figure 2). Seventy-six (58%) participants received a high level (120 or more tutoring sessions) of tutoring, while 45 (34%) received a moderate level (90 to 119), and only nine (7%) received a low level (lower than 90).

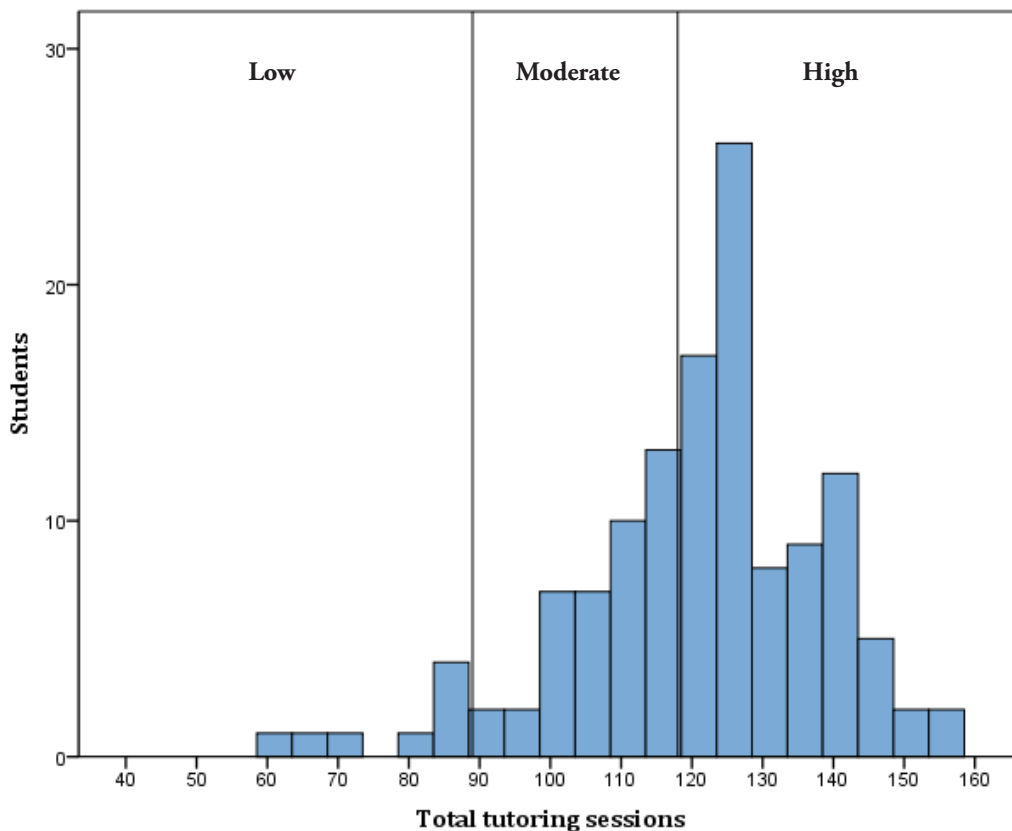


Figure 2. Distribution of total tutoring sessions received for each SPARK participant

Sites ranged from an average of 114 sessions per student to 129 sessions (see Table 4). These differences were statistically significant ($F = 2.29, p = .049$), suggesting that students in different schools received differing levels of tutoring.

Further, the breakdown of site-specific implementation (see Figure 3) suggests that two sites provided a high level of tutoring, with more than 70% of participating students receiving at least 120 tutoring sessions. The finding that all six sites provided at least a moderate level of tutoring to the great majority of students suggests that SPARK was successfully integrated into each school.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of Tutoring Sessions by School

	Mean	SD	Min	Max	<i>N</i>
School 1	125.1	15.1	88	146	19
School 2	129.3	15.1	102	155	24
School 3	118.6	20.4	65	140	18
School 4	114.3	15.7	83	147	18
School 5	116.7	19.2	61	144	22
School 6	119.2	17.0	84	151	29

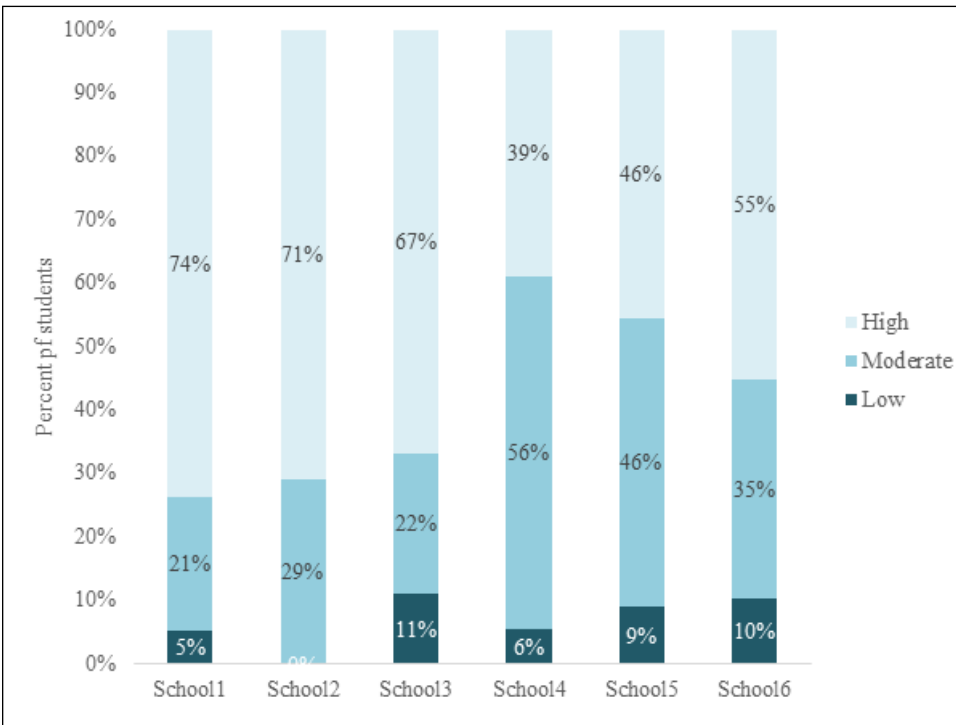


Figure 3. Tutoring implementation levels by site

Impact

Table 5 presents the results of the grade-specific statistical models and the pooled results testing the overall impact of SPARK on MAP reading achievement. Overall, SPARK was found to have a significant impact on reading achievement of 0.12 standard deviations. This finding is significant at the 5% probability level. If you adjust this observed impact using a treat-on-treated approach (Becker & Ichino, 2002) that assumes all students received the full program dosage of 155 tutoring sessions, considering the average student only

received 78% of the 155 planned tutoring sessions, the resulting estimated effect size of SPARK was .15 standard deviations.

Table 5. Adjusted Standardized MAP Results

	Standardized Effect	Robust Standard Errors	<i>p</i> - value
SPARK Kindergarten	0.012	0.123	
SPARK First	0.118	0.143	
SPARK Second	0.288	0.138	
Overall Impact (Weighted Pooled Results)	0.122	0.061	<.05

Table 6 presents the results of grade-specific statistical models and the pooled results testing the overall impact of SPARK on regular school day attendance (number of absences). Although SPARK participants were absent from school three fewer times, this difference was not statistically significant. The lack of a significant impact on attendance is not surprising since much of the family engagement component of SPARK was designed during the course of this study and was not fully or consistently implemented.

Table 6. Adjusted Attendance Results

	Effect	Robust Standard Errors	<i>p</i> - value
SPARK Kindergarten	3.239	4.5372	
SPARK First	-1.545	5.2818	
SPARK Second	9.786	6.0078	
Overall Impact (Weighted Pooled Results)	3.33	2.99	>.05

Summary Findings

The first purpose of this article was to present a new literacy intervention program model that leverages school, family, and community resources to have a sustained impact on students. The SPARK model was developed by Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee, with support from an i3 Department of Education grant, in response to research that shows that the impact of skill-based literacy interventions often diminishes as students leave a program. Once participation has ended, students are back in the same environment that may have contributed to them falling behind originally, and the progress students have made may degrade. In the Milwaukee Public Schools, this environment

has resulted in precious few students being able to read by third grade. SPARK attempts to change this by developing a student's out-of-school environment as well. This is done by creating a literacy support structure around students by also engaging families in literacy activities and involving students and families in Boys and Girls Clubs afterschool activities. In this model, literacy deficits are not viewed as an individual deficit but as a result of ecological processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Literacy development occurs as a result of variable social processes that either successfully or unsuccessfully result in the development of student literacy skills. The school, community, and family microsystems all have important parts to play in whether a student is able to read by third grade. As such, SPARK is designed to address all three systems, allowing students to benefit beyond their participation in the program.

The second purpose of this article was to present the results of a rigorous evaluation of SPARK testing its initial impact on reading achievement and school attendance. SPARK students who did not move away during the two years of the study received a high intensity of tutoring (mean = 120 sessions). This intensity of tutoring was seen in all six schools participating in the study. The results of the randomized control trial evaluation found that SPARK had a significant, positive impact on student reading achievement but not on regular school day attendance.

Discussion

Although the results of this study were somewhat mixed, considering that both the afterschool and parent engagement program components were being developed during the course of the study, the potential impact of the fully implemented program is not yet known. Even considering that SPARK was still in development during the course of this study, the results demonstrate the potential for pairing effective skill-based literacy instruction using volunteers with family engagement. While one-on-one tutoring with a certified teacher has been shown to be effective in programs like Reading Recovery (McGee, 2006) and Success for All (Borman & Hewes, 2003; Borman et al., 2007), the results of the current study show that positive program effects can still be achieved by using paraprofessionals and volunteers as tutors. Future research on SPARK will present a more complete picture of its implementation and impact when leveraging family and community literacy resources.

There are several limitations to the current study worth considering. First, it is important to consider that the results of this study are specific to the MPS context. It is not clear to what extent these results might generalize to other school districts. Further, the study was only conducted in six MPS schools, and

these schools were chosen through a convenience sampling method. Thus, it is not clear that the results would generalize to the whole of MPS. Also, the reduction of our sample by almost one-half through attrition both reduced our statistical power and may represent a threat to the internal validity of our study. However, the program effects were large enough to overcome the reduction in statistical power, and the reasons for student attrition were mostly exogenous to the program, that is, students moving away. Finally, although SPARK is designed to have a sustained impact on student reading achievement, the current study does not follow up with students after their participation in SPARK has ended. Thus, it is not clear to what extent this goal is being achieved. Future research will follow SPARK participants as they progress in elementary school to see if SPARK students continue to demonstrate improved reading achievement.

Endnotes

¹The SPARK family engagement approach described below was in development during the period of the current study. Thus, the impact of the approach described here was not testing in the current study.

²The specific after-school activities and approach developed by SPARK was offered to SPARK students after the completion of the current study. Future research on SPARK will focus on this aspect of the program.

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