

SPARK: *Strong, Prepared And Ready for Kindergarten*

Lighting the way so all of Aurora's children reach their full potential

Mission:

The mission of SPARK early childhood collaboration is to empower our diverse families and children to attain full success in learning and life by ensuring all Aurora's young children have equal access to exemplary Early Childhood Care and Education.

Goals:

- Ensure all families are aware of the importance of early learning and connecting them with programs and services.
- Coordinate efforts among the school districts' early childhood programs, Head Start, child care providers, and other early learning programs to maximize both impact and efficiency
- Support quality improvement in early childhood education and care programs in Aurora
- Support the expansion of formal and informal early learning opportunities in Aurora

The Partnership:

The SPARK Initiative is a collaboration among the City of Aurora, Fox Valley United Way, School Districts 129 (West Aurora), 131 (East Aurora), 204 (Indian Prairie) and 308 (Oswego), Aurora Public Library and Illinois Action for Children in partnership with local Aurora agencies who serve children and families

Start-up funding is being provided through a \$250,000 two-year challenge grant from the Dunham Fund.

Aurora's Challenge:

Decades of research have established that:

Children who enter kindergarten without key school readiness skills—including social skills, self-control, early literacy & math skills, and vocabulary skills—are likely to remain academically behind their peers throughout their school years and are at very high risk of not completing high school.

Children are most likely to lack school readiness skills if their parents have low education levels, low incomes, are very young themselves, are single parents, and/or have limited English skills.

Unfortunately, as many as half of all children under age five in Aurora have one or more of these risk factors.

One out of every six children lives in poverty (income of less than \$22,000 for a family of four), and nearly half have low enough family incomes to qualify for Medicaid and Free and Reduced Price Lunch.

Even more concerning, more than 12 percent of adults over age 25 in Aurora have less than a ninth grade education and an additional 10 percent have not completed high school, which means that a large number of young children in the city have parents who may lack the knowledge and skill to help their children prepare for success in school.

Aurora is one of the most underserved communities in Illinois with regard to early learning services. In Aurora there are only 49 "slots" of publicly funded preschool for every 100 three and four year olds who are at high risk of not being ready for kindergarten. Other comparable cities have much higher service levels.

There are only 2,000 days between the time a baby is born and when that child shows up for the first day of kindergarten.

When we invest in children's earliest years, we get a lifetime of results for our children, our community, our state and our economy.

-Smart Start & The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc.



SPARK is an Early Childhood Initiative of Fox Valley United Way

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