



Aurora Innovation Zone 2015

Building Access to Quality Programs

Aurora, the second most populous city in Illinois with 199,936 residents (2013, Quickfacts), is a very diverse community with a population that is 41 percent Hispanic/Latino, 40 percent White, 11 percent Black/African-American and seven percent Asian. Currently, 44 percent of children birth-to-five years of age – 8,354 children – are in families living at or below 185 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) and more than half of these children (4,554) are below the 100 percent FPL. Additionally 6,214 children under the age of five live in linguistically isolated households. As of 2015, of the 31 licensed childcare centers in the community two are accredited and eight have attained a Gold Circle of Quality in ExceleRate Illinois. The capacity of publicly funded programs is limited, and many children five and under do not have access to early education programs.

The Aurora community is one of eleven Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Innovation Zones in Illinois, selected based on the level of concentrated need, presence of providers with a demonstrated interest in quality improvement, a history of collaboration and strong local support to strengthen early childhood systems and kindergarten readiness.

SPARK AURORA EARLY CHILDHOOD COLLABORATION

The SPARK (Strong, Prepared and Ready for Kindergarten) Aurora Early Childhood Collaboration leads the Innovation Zone work and brings together community leaders, school districts, early childhood programs and community agencies to work collaboratively to build an early childhood system that will, ultimately, improve outcomes for Aurora's children.

SPARK's mission is to empower diverse families and children to attain full success in learning and life by ensuring all children in Aurora have equal access to exemplary Early Childhood Care and Education. SPARK improves and strengthens the early childhood system in Aurora through the following strategies:

- Educate and inform parents and the community about the importance and value of an early childhood education for all children, the impact it has on children's success in school and life, and connect them with programs and services.
- Ensure professional development of early childhood education teachers and learning center participation in the statewide Quality Rating Improvement System.
- Create a coordinated early childhood education system in which the school districts, community-based early childhood programs, and community agencies serving families and children work as one unit to ensure that Aurora's young children have the resources, knowledge and skills to be Strong, Prepared and Ready for Kindergarten.

BUILDING QUALITY PROGRAMS

The SPARK Aurora Early Childhood Collaboration aims to ensure target populations have a quality early learning experience. When SPARK initiated its efforts to support early childhood programs in improving their quality of programming, Aurora only had six programs that had participated in the former Illinois Quality Rating System. The community did not have a single nationally accredited program.

SPARK's strategies focus on developing leadership training and mentoring, a community of practice and creating ExceleRate cohorts to ensure more high-need children receive quality early childhood education and experiences. The purpose of developing leadership training and a community of practice is to support, develop, and strengthen the leadership skills of center directors and their leadership teams.

SPARK is encouraging programs to reflect on their current enrollment and capacity to find ways to increase enrollment for high needs children. Fox Valley Montessori, who is currently a part of the leadership cohort and pending their Gold Circle of Quality, achieved this goal. In the summer of 2015 they expanded enroll-



Strong, Prepared And Ready for Kindergarten

Contact Us: SPARK Aurora Early Childhood Collaboration
44 E Galena Blvd, Aurora, IL 60505
630.896.4636 • spark@uwfoxvalley.org
www.sparkaurora.org

ment capacity to serve 20 at-risk children through a private grant they received. They braided this grant funding with childcare subsidy funds to add 20 additional at-risk slots at no tuition cost for the families. Recruitment was a joint effort between SPARK, YWCA CCR&R and the program.

In July 2015, SPARK revived the Aurora Early Childhood Network (AECN) Community of Practice group for from Preschool for All (PFA), Head Start and Preschool Expansion subgrantees and child care centers. This year training and dialogue are focusing on the leadership book *Lead Simply* by Sam Parker. The leadership model focuses on three concepts: Model, Connect and Involve.

SPARK facilitated a formal partnership with the Ounce of Prevention Fund and Waubensee Community College to offer *Lead.Learn.Excel*, an instructional excellence program for early education leaders, locally at the Waubensee Aurora Downtown Campus. Center leaders joined the training sessions and workshops to increase quality of early learning at their facilities. SPARK also formalized a partnership with STARnet, the state's resource network for providers serving children with special needs age three and older and families, to increase professional development opportunities for early childhood professionals. STARnet conducted the first training in November. A second is planned for April 2016.

SHARED INTAKE TO INCREASE ENROLLMENT

SPARK's Shared Intake Initiative identifies and connects the highest need children to high quality early learning and development programs, services, and resources to provide families with a single point of entry in seeking and applying for various early childhood programs for their children. Working with three pilot agencies, SPARK's Shared Intake Specialist works with parents one-on-one to help them complete a one-page application form and to assist them in determining the best match for their child/children. The single, shared intake process helps families overcome obstacles they face in completing forms and identifying the types of services and programs most appropriate for their children. In July, SPARK renewed partnership agreements with Hased House, Aurora Interfaith Food Pantry and World Relief to pilot

the Shared Intake initiative within their current program framework.

Additionally, SPARK established a partnership agreement with DayOne PACT, the local Child and Family Connection, coordinating for children with disabilities, to outline the goals and objectives of the newly implemented community wide screening process. Three community wide screenings were held in 2015 and more than 50 children were screened and two referrals made for further evaluation. The shared intake specialist also completed intake for 136 families since the inception of the program.

COLLECTIVE IMPACT FOR AN EARLY CHILDHOOD COORDINATED SYSTEM OF SERVICES

SPARK aligned its strategic goals for an early childhood coordinated system by encompassing the following strategies into its action plans for the Innovation Zone initiative:

- SPARK has led quarterly Community Conversations and training to foster cross-referral and cross-sector education. Training topics include *Participatory Leadership* and *Thinking about Pipelines: Overview and Introduction About EC Pipelines*.
- A *High Needs Conference* is planned for May 2016 and will focus on the McKinney-Vento Act, work and efforts around poverty and homelessness, and further training on collective impact and cross-referral.

Additionally, SPARK is meeting with sub-grantees of PFA and Preschool Expansion to align and coordinate efforts for recruitment and enrollment.

ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD INNOVATION ZONES

Illinois Action for Children supports each Innovation Zone in planning and implementing activities, while the Illinois Education Research Council will evaluate the success of the strategies chosen by each Zone. The Innovation Zone model uses action learning cycles, an iterative process, to quickly learn and adapt strategies for immediate use in each community. The federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant and local philanthropies provide funding.

www.actforchildren.org/for-providers/innovation-zones/



The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge Innovation Zones initiative is a collaboration between the Governor's Office of Early Childhood Development and Illinois Action for Children.