Supporting Whole Families:
SparkPoint® Community Schools

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This report evaluates the SparkPoint Community Schools model and compiles the lessons that implementing the model taught us about successful two-generation programming at SparkPoint. We begin by detailing the evolution of SparkPoint Community Schools since 2011 before highlighting the impact of the SparkPoint Community Schools model in depth. The report concludes with the recommendations we have distilled for successful two-generational programming at SparkPoint in the future.

SPARKPOINT COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: A TWO-GENERATION APPROACH

SparkPoint® is United Way Bay Area's (UWBA) flagship impact program. SparkPoint centers serve as one-stop sites where low-income individuals and families can access a range of integrated services. Centers work with families to meet their basic needs, increase income, build credit, increase savings, and reduce debt. SparkPoint Community Schools are, as the name suggests, a collaboration between SparkPoint and community schools[1]. The SparkPoint Community Schools model was created in 2011, after UWBA completed a needs assessment of Bay Area community schools to identify if SparkPoint could be leveraged to improve educational outcomes for students at community schools. The assessment confirmed a gap in economic success services for parents of school-aged children. Additionally, a wide body of established research had already correlated a family's socioeconomic status with student achievement and identified parental income as a predictor of a child's academic success[2]. With this research and the results of the community schools needs assessment in mind, UWBA established the SparkPoint Community Schools (SPCS) model to provide economic success services to parents at community schools.

Program Vision and Goals

The SPCS vision was to build the financial capability of families in order to support the academic success of their children in communities throughout the Bay Area. The activities that were part of the SPCS program were intentionally made broad to allow each site to customize the program model according to the needs of their school communities. The baseline activities in the program model included:

- Integrating SparkPoint into the community school

- Recruiting parents

- Hosting a Parent University workshop series

- Providing one-on-one financial coaching

- Offering SparkPoint services (i.e., financial coaching, job search assistance, benefits screening and enrollment assistance, cash assistance, career development, etc.)

- Engaging families in their child's education

The desired impacts of SPCS were increases in participating families' financial stability and self-sufficiency, improved partnerships between low-income families and school staff, and improved academic achievement for low-income students. For parents, impact was measured by looking at the achievement of financial success metrics and increased confidence in their ability to engage in their child(ren)'s education. For students, impact was measured through improved attendance, a decrease in behavior referrals, and improvement in their academic scores.

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[1] According to the National Center for Community Schools, Community Schools are sites that use schools as hubs to bring together various partners to offer a range of supports and opportunities to children, youth, families, and communities.

[2] https://www.brookings.edu/research/income-and-education-as-predictors-of-childrens-school-readiness/

SPARKPOINT COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: BY THE NUMBERS

Participation

Participation in SPCS programs grew steadily since inception. The sites served 80 unique families in Fiscal Year 15 (FY15), 209 in FY16, 251 in FY17, 81[3] in FY18, 70 in FY19, and 196 in FY20. According to our data in ECM[4], 587 unique families were served in total. The average SPCS client was about 40 years old, identified as Female, was married or in a domestic partnership, identified as Latinx, primarily spoke Spanish at home, and had attained a High School Diploma/GED as their highest level of formal education.

CLIENT: RACE/ETHNICITY	NUMBER OF CLIENTS
Latino	430
African American	49
Decline to state	15
Caucasian	11
Multi-racial	9
Asian	6
Other	3
Native American	1
African	1
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1

[3] Note: This large drop in participation is at least in part due to a database migration that UWBA completed around this time. See the Appendix for more details
[4] See Appendix for details on data sources

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Client Baseline Economic Characteristics

When clients first came to the program, they had about 65% of what we would consider a self-sufficient income according to their geography and family characteristics. Looking at median[5] figures, clients typically had a baseline annual income of $33,600, debt of $400, savings of $400, and a credit score of 604. Roughly half of the participants were employed at the time of their baseline assessment.

Incoming Client Profile FY15-20

INDICATOR	VALUE (MEDIAN)
Baseline Total Debt	$400
Baseline Savings	$400
Baseline Credit Score	604[6]
Baseline Annual Income	$33,600

Impact on Parents

The SPCS program resulted in tangible economic improvements for many households. **At the median, clients increased their savings by 29%, reduced their debt by 19%, saw their incomes rise by 12%, and increased their credit scores by 3%.** Over the FY15-20 period, 47% of clients achieved at least 30% improvement in one or more of the four economic measures UWBA focuses on (income, debt, savings, credit).

Parent Financial Outcomes FY15-20

INDICATOR	VALUE (MEDIAN)
Percent Change in Total Debt	-19%
Percent Change in Savings	+29%
Percent Change in Credit Score	+3%
Percent Change in Annual Income	+12%

[5] Median was used instead of average to control for outliers
[6] Baseline Transunion was 600, baseline Equifax was 613, baseline Experian was 600. The average of those three figures, 604, will be used for convenience.

Impact on Students

It is possible to draw only limited conclusions from student data, as there are few assessment factors we can track over time. Across FY15-20, we gathered data on a total of 395 students. 314 of those students had more than one assessment collected for at least one indicator, allowing us to track their progress. 89% of students who had at least two attendance assessments (154 out of 174 students) maintained or achieved satisfactory attendance, as defined by missing less than three days of school. 95% of students were reported as having no suspensions (73 out of 77 students with sufficient data). Unfortunately, we were unable to use GPA as a measure of academic outcomes, as less than 5% of students (only 18 students) had any GPA data.

This presents a very limited picture of SPCS's effect on students. The program's independent external evaluator, Public Profit, likewise found it difficult to draw conclusions based on student data. In fact, the main lesson we learned from student data collected at SPCS is that gathering student data from institutions in the first place is a lengthy and challenging process, involving securing parental consent and navigating data protection laws.

The FY17 Public Profit report indicated that less than one-third of the student academic data was usable. The limited data available suggested correlations between SparkPoint participation and student attendance, as well as between making 5% financial progress and child GPA, but samples were too small to make broader conclusions.
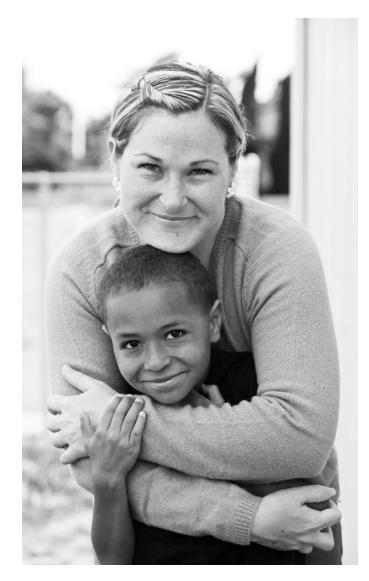
However, **parent survey data collected by Public Profit did show that through participating in SPCS, parents felt more equipped to support their children's academic success, with almost every client consistently feeling more actively involved in their child's schooling.** SparkPoint also clearly contributes to building a college-going culture within participant families, with the majority of parents stating that after attending SparkPoint they looked into investing in college savings accounts for their kids. As one client said of her children:

"THEY WANT TO GO TO COLLEGE, THEY WANT TO SEE MOMMY GO TO COLLEGE. OUR WHOLE FAMILY IS ABOUT TRYING TO SUCCEED. WE HAVE A BETTER OUTLOOK ON LIFE."

— SparkPoint client

Conclusions

SPCS resulted in positive impacts on families. The model improved their economic outcomes and made parents feel more engaged with their children's academic journeys. Our coaching model was praised by parent clients for centering their experiences and making them feel empowered. The largest challenges for SPCS were related to measuring the impact on children. Some academic achievement data was easier to collect, such as attendance and parent survey data, and some proved more difficult, including GPA and most behavioral assessment data. However, qualitative data collected through parent surveys and interviews indicated positive impact for participating families, including making them feel more equipped to support their children's academic success and creating a college-going culture.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

To help inform future two-generational programming at SparkPoint, UWBA has sought to distill the lessons we learned from the SPCS model. To that end, we reviewed all of our existing evaluations and assessments of the SPCS model and conducted a series of interviews between September 2020 and January 2021 with SparkPoint directors, coaches, and clients who experienced the model. The findings of these interviews and literature review inform the lessons learned that we outline below.

Build Institutional Connections

Past SPCS evaluations demonstrate the model's dependence on strong working relationships between SparkPoint centers and their partner schools. With an effective partnership in place, centers can better secure staffing and leverage the school site's established reputation in the community to attract participation in SparkPoint services. The quality of partnerships at SPCS sites varied. School principals at sites like Dover Elementary, Phillips Elementary, and Searles Elementary functioned as strong school-based champions, while many other sites struggled to build strong school partnerships due to factors like principal turnover and school instability (principal turnover, budget changes, etc.)

In interviews, SPCS program directors similarly expressed that having a strong relationship with a school's principal and district staff was essential to success, and, conversely, that lacking these connections contributed to difficulties for the program. In the words of one director, "Without buy-in you will get nowhere." However, in some cases, after establishing a strong connection with a principal, leadership changes left SparkPoint without other contacts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

· Partner with multiple individuals (principal, teachers, district administrative staff) and institutions (after-school groups, the PTA, other social service offices co-located at the school) across the school campus and district. Diverse partnerships allow centers to sustain themselves through the typical turnover and instability that a school may experience.

Welcome Families with Childcare and Other Relevant Amenities

In past assessments of the SPCS model, we have seen that adapting spaces and programs to parents makes them more likely to participate because they feel more welcome. Connecting to parents through their children and offering relevant services expressly for children, like childcare and snacks, made spaces more accessible to parents and allowed them to give their full attention at SPCS events. Public Profit observed this phenomenon in their 2014-15 report on SPCS. As one client put it "They gave babysitters. That's the really good thing about the program. They always have babysitters. We can come without having to think about what I am going to do with the baby."

Throughout our interview process, providing childcare for clients emerged as a major opportunity for making SparkPoint more family-friendly and accessible to parents. Several SparkPoint centers paired workshops like Parent University with childcare. In these settings, childcare was often provided by a school district, again highlighting the importance of cultivating strong relationships with the district. SparkPoint staff also suggested that it would be helpful for SparkPoint centers to build partnerships with childcare providers and preschools in order to expand capacity.

In cases where childcare was unavailable, clients appreciated when staff made them feel comfortable bringing children into the center. As one client put it, "I've been to places that you bring your child with you, you can tell that the intake person is annoyed. At SparkPoint I didn't feel that. [They] brought out coloring paper [for my son]. I felt really accommodated."

RECOMMENDATIONS

· Explicitly name that children are welcome at SparkPoint and provide snacks and activities for children.

· Provide parents with childcare opportunities that are co-located at the SparkPoint for logistical ease.

Offer Services at a Convenient Location

A lack of a convenient physical space hampered some clients from accessing services. For example, when a service site was located in a portable building at the edge of its partner school's campus, it was difficult to get school staff involved with SparkPoint. Clients also often found the center hard to find and were confused about the location. At other sites, having an easily accessible physical space was a boon to recruitment and service delivery.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Service centers should have clear signage that is visible from the street or else central part of campus.

- Make sure the location is easy to get to using public or other forms of transportation.

- When selecting a location, assess where the service location is within the community. Is it a place parents gather? Is it in a location/neighborhood that is easy to get to? Ideally the answers to both of these questions would be yes, but, if not, consider how you will mitigate any inconveniences your clients may experience due to the SparkPoint's location.

Create an Adequately Private Environment for Parents

In several our interviews, clients highlighted how having privacy during coaching sessions was important to them or to other clients they knew. Ideally centers should ensure that coaching spaces are in a sufficiently private location so that clients feel comfortable discussing their finances. When that is not possible, mitigating techniques, such as staggering services, was suggested by clients. Some clients also mentioned that they especially valued privacy while accessing some basic needs services, such as the food pantry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide private spaces for financial coaching whenever possible.

- Consider staggering (spacing out appointments) basic needs services or other services where clients state they value privacy.

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Provide Culturally Responsive Services

According to several SPCS center directors, being able to provide workshops and one-on-one services in multiple languages expanded program reach and effectiveness. Within the SPCS program, Spanish was the primary language spoken at home by clients (77.3% between FY15-20). Several sites relied heavily on one or several Spanish-speaking coaches to supply services to their clients.

Beyond language, cultural responsiveness should include racially and ethnically representative services. At one site where staff were predominantly Latinx, staff told us that while outreach to the Latinx population had been effective, they struggled to recruit Black clients (the SparkPoint was housed in an area with significant Black as well as Latinx populations) because of a perceived lack of focus on that community. Directors and staff stated that hiring coaches from within the communities the center seeks to serve is helpful for building trust in SparkPoint programs. One center director indicated that SparkPoint having predominantly coaches of color lent credibility to the larger school as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- SparkPoint centers must be aware of both community and staff demographics, including language spoken and race/ethnicity. This data can be used to create more effective program offerings and to try to align the demographics of the staff and leadership of the SparkPoint with the community it serves.

- Have staff and leadership that are racially representative of the community that SparkPoint serves.

Build Parents' Social Capital

Social capital broadly refers to the connections, networks, or relationships that can help individuals succeed in life[7]. Social capital yields benefits in the form of emotional support, information access, and various forms of economic support, particularly in seeking employment. Over 50% of jobs in the U.S. are found through social connections, and candidates who are directly referred by a social tie are more likely to be hired and remain in their position longer[8].

Under the SPCS model, all sites offered some form of group services that yielded social capital benefits. These benefits were typically in the form of "bonding" social capital, which is the product of peer networking, as opposed to "bridging" social capital, which refers to networking with higher status individuals and organizations[9]. Activities included networking activities among parents, group graduation ceremonies, group dinners, and offering leadership and/or employment opportunities to parents. Some sites also offered branded Parent University workshops, which included financial content and family engagement content developed by the California Parent Teacher Association and High Expectations, a family engagement consulting firm. Parent University offered a chance both to bring together a diverse group of parents to build community and to give them access to information from a variety of partner organizations.

In our interviews, SparkPoint directors didn't mention social capital as much as we would have expected, especially given that social capital and social connections were consistently mentioned by clients as something that they want to get more of from SparkPoint. As of now, the one-on-one coaching model is the default coaching model at SparkPoint centers, but perhaps we can consider offer a hybrid model that accommodates the preferences of each client. Clients offered several ideas for how SparkPoint could better create parent networks among clients, including organizing childcare groups and holding group parenting classes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Be intentional about building social capital and include it as a goal of the program.

- Incorporate more peer-learning opportunities, like group classes, workshops, parents groups, etc. into service offerings. This will build "bonding" social capital.

- Design programs that allow clients to network and develop connections with employers and individuals from prominent institutions in their communities, such as community services agencies, banking institutions, health centers, etc. This will build "bridging social capital."

[7] https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/aspe-files/261791/socialcapitalsupportingeconomicmobility.pdf
[8] https://dl.tufts.edu/concern/pdfs/zk51vt87x
[9] https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/aspe-files/261791/socialcapitalsupportingeconomicmobility.pdf

APPENDIX

Data Sources & Limitations

This section includes data and our findings from the following SparkPoint Community School sites:

- Dover Elementary School (San Pablo)

- Phillips Elementary School (Napa)

- Searles Elementary School/Union City Family Center (Union City)

- Solano Middle School (Vallejo)/Vallejo City Unified School District (Vallejo)

- Taft Elementary School/Redwood City School District (Redwood City)

- Westlake Middle School (Oakland)

- Cleo Gordon Elementary School/Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District

Data is drawn from three main sources:

- UWBA's Exponent Case Management (ECM) data from FY15-20

- Public Profit's three evaluations of the SPCS model, conducted in FY15, '16, and '17

- U.S. Census American Community Survey data from 2017 and 2018

The primary issues with the data sources are that there are a number of data entry errors present in the ECM data (including erroneously large client income and debt amounts) and that there is no data for one SPCS site, Westlake Middle School, which closed operations in 2017. To mitigate data quality issues, this report will often use the median value of a group rather than the average, and to deal with the lack of data from Westlake Middle, the report will use Westlake data from Public Profit reports where available. Any figure representing the period "FY15-20" from ECM does not include data from Westlake Middle School.

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