

## Finding the Student Spark: *Missed Opportunities in School Engagement*

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT is not just about young people doing “okay” or well enough; it is fundamentally about making sure young people have the experiences they need to develop to their fullest and become positive contributors to society. That is, it is about helping them *thrive*. Over the past eight years, thanks to the support of the Thrive Foundation for Youth, Search Institute has spearheaded a major initiative to introduce, study, and apply the concepts of thriving to the Positive Youth Development field.

The major component of thriving is the concept of “sparks”—the interests and passions young people have that light a fire in their lives and express the essence of who they are and what they offer to the world. Identifying those sparks, and pursuing them with the help of deep, supportive relationships, are critical components in the work of helping a young person thrive.

**Helping young people identify their sparks, and providing them the opportunity to develop those interests, appear to be important additions to academic educational methods and help students achieve school success.**

Our research results strongly suggest that having at least one spark, plus the support to develop it, is significantly and consistently related to having better outcomes, both in behavior and academics. Students with sparks tend to

be, and to feel, healthier. They tend to be less depressed, less worried, and more satisfied overall. They place greater importance on being connected to school and making contributions to society, which are factors strongly related to school success indicators such as academic confidence and grades. Helping young people identify their sparks, and providing them the opportunity to develop those interests, appear to be important additions to academic educational methods and help students achieve school success. However, our surveys indicate that only about one-third of young people say that three or more adults at school know what their sparks are, and that another one-third of young people say they get no help at all.

In addition, two of the most commonly identified sparks for students are sports and arts, and schools are in perhaps the best position, among all other community facilities, to provide students with connections to these activities—yet these programs are usually among the most vulnerable when school districts must reduce costs. Search Institute research indicates that bolstering these programs would improve students’ connections to their sparks, and in turn lead to greater school success.

### How Research Has Emerged about Sparks and Thriving

In a series of publications, Search Institute researchers gradually elaborated on the concept of thriving as an expression of young people’s development. In the 1990s, we described “thriving” as how well young people were doing on a series of

positive indicators: good grades (as a measure of school success), how much they help others, whether they value diversity, how much they can overcome adversity, whether they exhibit leadership, how they maintain physical health, and how well they can delay gratification.<sup>1</sup> Despite our use of the term “thriving,” this early exploration of the concept, though emphasizing positive outcomes, still was about competency or *adequate* development more than *optimal* development. And although our definition of thriving included clearly prosocial indicators, such as helping others and valuing diversity, it was not until 1998 that we drew an explicit connection between individual and societal well-being<sup>2</sup>—a connection that Lerner and colleagues would later stress even more centrally in their discussion of thriving as the basis for personhood and civil society.<sup>3</sup>

Our early studies using these indicators showed that there was a strong connection between the accumulation of Developmental Assets and these thriving outcomes: the more assets young people reported, the more likely they also were to report thriving.<sup>4</sup>

In 2002, Search Institute became part of the Thriving Indicators Partnership (TIP)—a collaboration among Tufts University’s Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development, Fuller Theological Seminary, Stanford University’s Center for Adolescence, and the Thrive Foundation for Youth.

The TIP researchers named several indicators of thriving, including

- personal growth;
- fulfillment of one’s potential;
- orientation toward the future;
- meaning and purpose;
- emotional well-being;
- psychological well-being;
- social well-being; and
- individual characteristics such as initiative or caring.<sup>5</sup>

As part of the TIP, the researchers conducted studies with youth, parents, and youth development professionals, asking them to define “thriving” in adolescents. As a result of these collaborations, by 2005, in a paper for the *Encyclopedia of Applied Developmental Science*, we began describing thriving not simply as an outcome but as a developmental *process*: “thriving may also be

understood as a developmental process of recursive cause-and-effect engagement with one’s ecology *over time* that repeatedly results in optimal outcomes as viewed at any *one point* in time.”<sup>6</sup>

## The Concept of Sparks

All of these efforts from the TIP collaboration contributed significantly to the theory and measurement of thriving most recently advanced by Benson and Scales, including the central role of young people pursuing their deep passions and interests—their “sparks.”<sup>7</sup> “Spark” is the metaphor we use to describe the internal animating force that propels development forward. This broader and deeper theory, grounded in developmental systems theory, defines thriving as having three interconnected parts:

1. Thriving is the interplay over time of a young person’s sparks and support from her contexts to develop and nurture those sparks.
2. Thriving is a balance between continuity and discontinuity of development over time that is optimal for the individual-context system.
3. Thriving reflects both where a young person is at the moment and whether he is on a path toward creating a person-context system in which he as an individual and the contexts he is in (e.g., families, schools, communities) are mutually benefiting.<sup>8</sup>

This conceptualization of thriving describes both a complex balance and a potential for change—among person and context, progressive or discontinuous development, and outcome and process. Therefore, we describe young people as more or less “thriving oriented” rather than as “thriving” or “not thriving.”

Using this elaborated theory from 2004 onward, we developed and pilot-tested a set of markers for a thriving orientation, and created the *Thriving Orientation Survey* to comprehensively measure those markers in adolescents. Exploratory factor analysis with a field test sample of more than 2,600 middle and high school youth in a suburban Ohio school district empirically supported 86 percent of the original theoretical constructs.<sup>9</sup> Display 1 shows the final empirically supported markers of thriving orientation.

## Search Institute’s Measurement Markers of Adolescent Thriving Orientation

Elements of Thriving	Measurement Markers of Thriving Orientation
<b>Young Person</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Spark identification and motivation.</b> Young person can name and describe interests and sparks that give her or him energy and purpose, and is motivated to develop her or his sparks.</li> <li>2. <b>Positive emotionality.</b> Young person is positive and optimistic.</li> <li>3. <b>Openness to challenge and discovery.</b> Young person has an intrinsic desire to explore new things and enjoys challenges.</li> <li>4. <b>Hopeful purpose.</b> Young person has a sense of purpose and sees self as on the way to a happy and successful future.</li> <li>5. <b>Moral and prosocial orientation.</b> Young person sees helping others as a personal responsibility, and lives up to values of respect, responsibility, honesty, and caring.</li> <li>6. <b>Spiritual development.</b> Young person affirms importance of a sacred or transcendent force and the role of her or his faith or spirituality in shaping everyday thoughts and actions.</li> </ol>
<b>The Young Person’s Developmental Contexts</b>	<p><b>Opportunities and supports.</b> Young person experiences chances to grow and develop her or his sparks, as well as encouragement and support in pursuing her or his sparks, from multiple life contexts.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. <b>Family opportunities and supports</b></li> <li>8. <b>Friend opportunities and supports</b></li> <li>9. <b>School opportunities</b></li> <li>10. <b>School supports</b></li> <li>11. <b>Neighborhood opportunities and supports</b></li> <li>12. <b>Youth organizations opportunities and supports</b></li> <li>13. <b>Religious congregations opportunities and supports</b></li> </ol>
<b>Young Person’s Active Role in Shaping Contexts</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>14. <b>Youth action to develop and pursue sparks.</b> Young person seeks and acts on adult guidance, studies, or practices, and takes other actions to develop her or his sparks and fulfill her or his potential.</li> </ol>
<b>Developmental Contexts Act on the Young Person</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15. <b>Frequency of specific adult actions.</b> How often adults do concrete things to motivate, enable, and push young people to develop their sparks and connect them to others who can help.</li> </ol>
<b>Additional Constructs Measured in Thriving Orientation Survey</b>	
<b>Positive Developmental Outcomes</b>	<p><b>Life satisfaction.</b> Young person feels good about her or his life.</p> <p><b>Positive health perceptions.</b> Young person feels strong and healthy.</p> <p><b>Contribution to social good.</b> Young person volunteers or does things to make her or his world a better place.</p> <p><b>School success.</b> Young person earns a B or higher average in school.</p> <p><b>High value placed on diversity.</b> Young person considers it important to know people of different races.</p> <p><b>Leadership.</b> Young person has been a leader in a group or organization in the past 12 months.</p>

In the past decade, we have conducted seven studies—some nationally representative, some local—that give insight into the concept of sparks and the support young people experience to develop their sparks. We intentionally have experimented with multiple ways of asking about sparks and support, and the samples have varied

in age and other demographics, so the results of the studies do vary somewhat. Display 2 shows the studies and results.

We have found that 51 to 80 percent of young people have at least one spark. This wide range is due to differences in sample size and questions asked: some students were able to answer simply

## Of the young people surveyed who reported having a spark, only about 55 percent said they received support for their spark.

yes or no when asked whether they had a spark, while other students surveyed had to meet more specific criteria related to the amount of time spent on the spark, the emotions experienced while doing it, and whether a youth took the initiative to develop it in order to count as “having a spark.” The more criteria youth have to meet to be considered as having a spark, the lower the percentage of youth who are found to experience

sparks. Given that different samples, question wordings, and scoring criteria produce differing estimates, we consider a figure of about 66 percent of young people having sparks as being the fairest representation of this range of results.

In the same way, the studies give us a range of estimates of *thriving* by combining the percentage who say they have a spark and the percentage of those youth who say they have what we consider enough *support* to develop their sparks. Depending on the sample and variations in scoring criteria (three or more adults provide support often, some or many adults support them, two of three adults give support at least sometimes, etc.), we have found that 41 to 65 percent

**DISPLAY 2**

**Summary of Search Institute Findings on Sparks and Thriving: 2005–2010 Studies<sup>10</sup>**

Percentage of Students Who Report Having Sparks	Survey	Number and Ages Surveyed	Definitions Used
51%	Teen Voice 2010	An online survey with Harris Interactive of 1,860 15-year-olds	spark index of 3 criteria
54%	West St. Paul, MN 2009	A quiz of 1,677 students in grades 5 through 12	“have spark plus it is important”
54%	National Promises Study 2005	A national telephone poll with Gallup of 1,200 12- to 17-year-olds	“mostly-completely describes them”
66%	Teen Voice 2009	An online survey with Harris Interactive of 1,817 15-year-olds	just yes or no to spark
66%	Just Kid 2005	An online bulletin board conversation with 405 15- to 17-year-olds	just yes or no to spark
69%	Harris 2005	An online survey with Harris Interactive of 1,702 8- to 18-year-olds (data based on subset of 1,304 11- to 18-year-olds)	just yes or no to spark
73%	High School Thriving Orientation Survey field test 2007	A survey of 1,200 students in grades 10 to 12	“feel sense of spark most days”
80%	Teen Voice 2010	An online survey with Harris Interactive of 1,860 15-year-olds	“have spark”
80%	Middle School Thriving Orientation Survey field test 2007	A survey of 1,415 students in grades 6 to 8	“feel sense of spark most days”

Percentage of Students Who Report Having Sparks and Receiving Support (short form of thriving)	Survey	Definition Used	Spark x Support
41%	Harris 2005	"some adults"	69% spark x 59% support
43%	West St. Paul, MN 2009	"medium support from parents, teachers, friends"	54% spark x 80% support
47%	National Promises Study 2005	3 or more adults	54% spark x 80% support
53%	High School Thriving Orientation Survey field test 2007	some adult support	73% spark x 71% support
53%	Teen Voice 2009	2 of 3 support actions being done sometimes or often by any 2 of 7 sources of support such as parents, teachers, youth organizations, religious organizations, neighbors, etc.	66% spark x 81% support
58%	Teen Voice 2010	2 of 3 support actions being done sometimes or often by any 2 of 7 sources of support such as parents, teachers, youth organizations, religious organizations, neighbors, mentors, etc.	80% spark x 72% support
65%	Middle School Thriving Orientation Survey field test 2007	some adult support	80% spark x 81% support

of young people are thriving. Given that different samples, question wordings, and scoring criteria produce differing estimates, we consider a figure of about 55 percent of young people having a spark plus support (the short form of thriving) as being the fairest representation of this range of results.

When these indicators of thriving are linked to academic and behavioral outcomes, the correlations are clear: in every one of the studies in which we have also asked about developmental outcomes—from school success to volunteering, from substance use to feeling hopeful about the future—young people who have sparks and the support to develop those sparks do far better than those who don't have sparks at all, or who have sparks but not the support to develop them. The consistency of the results across years, study samples, and different ways of measuring these outcomes is impressive. Five different studies of

youth found that students who had sparks *and* support did better in areas such as attendance, grades, avoidance of violence, and adaptability.

Having at least one spark, or having a spark and the support to develop it, is significantly and consistently related to having better outcomes. The only outcome across all these studies for which we did *not* find a significant association with sparks is vandalism, and the association with school attendance is also relatively weak, though significant. Those weaker results are due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of young people, about 90 percent, neither engage in vandalism nor skip school much.

### Type and Number of Sparks: More Is Better

Across these different studies, we have consistently found that although the order might change with different question wording or

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response options, involvement with sports and the creative arts are the top two types of sparks young people name, with technology/computers a common third. About half of young people name arts and sports as their main sparks. But this also means that about half of the students we have surveyed name something else. Indeed, we've cataloged more than 200 different types of sparks, and doubtless the number of different sparks young people can pursue is limited only by their imaginations and the opportunities they are lucky enough to have.<sup>11</sup>

Another important finding from one of our more recent studies, *Teen Voice 2009*, is that although having one spark is better than having none, having multiple passionate interests is better still. Young people who had two or more sparks had significantly higher levels of every one of the outcomes included in the *Teen Voice 2009* study, even when compared to those with one spark.

### Sparks and School Success

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's "Whole Child" initiative summarizes succinctly that "school" success is about more than "academic" success. School success is about ensuring that all children are "healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged" and therefore involves all the other goals in Display 3, not only the more obviously "academic" goals.<sup>12</sup>

Our research results strongly suggest that helping young people identify their sparks, and providing them opportunities to pursue and develop those sparks, may be important additions to the more overtly "academic" steps schools take to promote students' success (such as strengthening curriculum content, invigorating instructional methods with newer technologies, and adopting diverse methods of assessing and testing what students know).

Display 3 provides an empirical and conceptual road map to how we think sparks, and the nurturing of sparks, may promote school success

through their effects on students' physical, psychological, and social well-being. First, students with sparks tend to be, and feel, healthier. They engage in fewer risk-taking behaviors, such as substance use or violence or unsafe sexual behaviors, than other students. These and other risk-taking behaviors can negatively affect the academic readiness of young people themselves, as well as the overall school climate. Clearly, a school with a high incidence of substance use or serious problems with violence is a more disorganized and unsafe setting for both students and staff, and the overall teaching and learning environment is thereby undermined. It is not hard to imagine the difference between a school where most students are deeply engaged in pursuing a passionate interest and a school where that is rare.

The second way in which sparks help build a foundation for school success is their contribution to psychological well-being and resilience. Students with sparks also *feel* healthier and stronger than students who aren't pursuing deep interests. They are happy and energized more of the time. They are less depressed, less worried, and more satisfied with their lives overall. They have a better sense of their identity and purpose, and are more optimistic about their futures. When facing the ups and downs of life, they are more adaptable and flexible. These research results describe an association between having sparks and being more alert, positive, energetic, confident, and creative. These characteristics portray students who are *ready and willing* to be engaged and challenged, needing only for their school to actively engage and challenge them. Isn't it reasonable, too, to think that teachers and other school staff who work with such ready and willing students will find their jobs more enjoyable and satisfying, and will as a staff exhibit higher morale and greater retention?<sup>13</sup>

The third sparks contribution to school success is through the link between sparks and positive relationships and social well-being. Young

### Search Institute Studies That Link Sparks and Support to Better Outcomes

	Harris 2005	National Promises Study 2005	Middle and High School Thriving Orientation Survey field test 2007	Teen Voice 2009	Teen Voice 2010
<b>Better Academic Outcomes?</b> Attendance Engagement and Effort Mastery Goals Grades/GPA	Yes	Yes Yes Yes	Yes	Yes Yes Yes Yes	Yes Yes Yes Yes
<b>Better Psychological Outcomes?</b> Adaptable and Flexible Sense of Purpose Hopeful Future/Optimism Worries and Concerns Ethnic Identity Life Satisfaction Absence of Depression Feelings of Overall Health Feeling Happy and Energized	Yes Yes     Yes	Yes   Yes Yes Yes Yes	Yes   Yes Yes Yes	Yes Yes Yes Yes Yes	Yes Yes Yes Yes Yes
<b>Better Social Outcomes?</b> Social Competence Workplace Skills Connectedness Volunteering Prosocial Values Civic Engagement Values Environmental Stewardship Racial Respect	Yes Yes Yes Yes  Yes	Yes	Yes Yes Yes Yes		
<b>Fewer Risk-Taking Behaviors?</b> Vandalism Avoidance of Substance Use Avoidance of Violence Safe Sexual Behavior	Yes Yes Yes			No	Yes

people who have deep interests and are supported by family, friends, school, and community in the development of those passions have more interpersonal communication and friend-making skills, more empathy and understanding of others' feelings, and a better ability to work in teams. They place greater importance on making contributions to society, working to correct

social inequalities, and helping people who are poor. They back up those values by volunteering more in their schools and communities than students without sparks or support. They even take care of the environment more, by more often doing such things as recycling or conserving water or electricity. Not surprisingly, then, these socially sensitive and involved students also

report feeling more emotionally connected to their schools. These research results describe students who are embedded in webs of caring relationships, who themselves are socially skilled and caring, and who see a role for themselves beyond self-interest in helping to make their schools, communities, and world better places. They are deeply connected to people and institutions, and feel they *belong as valued members* of their schools and the other places where they live, play, and work. Importantly, we and others have found that such senses of connectedness and belonging, social and emotional skills, and feelings of well-being are strongly related both to the elements of school climate that contribute to them and to the resulting school success indicators such as academic confidence and grades.<sup>14</sup>

## **Only about one-third of young people say teachers, counselors, or “other adults” at their schools often help them develop their sparks.**

Is it any wonder, then, with the ways sparks link to all these physical, psychological, and social outcomes, that we have repeatedly found that students with sparks and the support for developing them also have better results on more overtly academic outcomes? They skip school less: they *like* it there, so why would they miss it on purpose? They care as much or more about understanding and mastering their subjects and learning new things as they do about getting good grades (but they get those too). They more often work up to their ability instead of just doing enough work to “get by.” And ultimately, they get better grades (mostly As or a B+ or better GPA) than students who don’t have sparks or the support to develop them. Given that having sparks is so solidly associated with physical, psychological, and social well-being, it would be a surprise if sparks were not also strongly related to these more academic indicators of school success.

In our study of elementary, middle, and high school students in West St. Paul, Minnesota, two-thirds or more of students said that when they are involved with their spark, they are not bored at all, feel a lot of joy and energy, feel

focused a lot, feel a sense of purpose, and are so engaged that they lose track of time at least sometimes or even a lot. Even 6 in 10 elementary students feel “a lot” of purpose and focus when involved with their sparks. *This* is “student engagement”! The challenge for families, schools, and communities is to leverage the impact sparks have on other school experiences. Where and how are students getting the chance to identify and nurture these interests in their classes, in cocurricular programs, in school-based counseling, in the relationships the school has with parents, and the partnerships it has with community organizations?

## **Implications for Families, Schools, and Communities**

Helping students pursue their sparks would seem to be a “no brainer” strategy schools could add to their arsenals, but our data show a depressing gap between what could be and what is, in most schools. Across our various surveys, only about one-third of young people say teachers, counselors, or “other adults” at their schools often help them develop their sparks (in ways such as giving general encouragement, teaching them about their spark, pushing them to get better at their spark, connecting them with others who can help them, providing transportation to lessons or events, or helping out with expenses related to pursuing their sparks). In fairness to school adults, they do better than most other adults outside young people’s families: adults in youth organizations do no better than educators, and those in religious organizations do even less, with neighbors helping out hardly at all.

In our West St. Paul study, for example, we found that differences in school support for sparks created clearly delineated groups of students. Some students really do get quite a lot of school-based support, but an equally large chunk of others get virtually none. While 31 percent of those students said three or more adults know their spark, nearly 3 in 10 (28 percent) said no school adult knows their spark. Elementary students were more likely to say no one at school knows their spark: 37 percent, versus 26 percent for middle and high school. Furthermore, although a little more than 1 in 10 (13 percent) have talked five or more times with a school

adult about their sparks, 61 percent have not talked with a school adult about their sparks in the past three months. This figure does improve somewhat over grade levels: 67 percent of elementary students say they did not talk in the past three months with a school adult about their sparks, versus 63 percent for middle school and 56 percent for high school students. So even though a slight majority of these students said someone at school knows about their spark, about 3 in 10 say *no one* at school knows, and the majority of those who say someone at school does know about their spark haven't *talked* with anyone at school about their spark in the past three months. All our studies show that parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles, along with friends, are the primary sources of spark support for the great majority of young people. Adults outside the family tend not to contribute much to the nurturing of young people's sparks. This may be because, as found in various other national studies Search Institute has conducted, adults' relationships with young people outside their families tend to be pretty superficial.<sup>15</sup>

Given these figures, there clearly is a great deal of room for increasing school-based awareness of sparks and having discussions and activities around nurturing sparks. If adults in schools can add their voices to the spark conversation, then as sparks and support increase, so will school success.

## The Scarcity of Adult-Youth Relationships

A small majority of the adults that youth know outside the family seem to take the trouble to know their names, encourage them to respect cultural differences, and encourage them to be honest and responsible. A more substantial majority offer a general message about the importance of doing one's best at school. But actions that imply having a deeper relationship are scarce: in our national *Teen Voice 2010* study, for example, only a third of 15-year-olds say that most of the adults they know ask for their opinions, only 3 in 10 say they have meaningful conversations with adults where they can get to know each other better, and only a quarter or less of youth say adults give them chances to help out or spend time doing sports or artistic

activities with them. These actions also were among the least common in our other earlier national studies of youth and adults.

The scarcity of adults involved with sports and arts alongside young people is especially disquieting, since arts and sports are the top two kinds of passionate interests or sparks that young people have! This is a particularly key finding given that schools are a principal provider of such connections to creative arts and sports, and yet those activities are among the most vulnerable when schools and districts are faced with budget-tightening choices.<sup>16</sup> For many youth, those sparks, supported through cocurricular after-school programs, not only are valuable in their own right through their linkage with positive developmental outcomes such as those listed in Display 3, but also are for many students a pivotal way to connect to the academic offerings and mission of school. The challenges wrought by the economic downturn beginning in 2008 are not imaginary: school programs are being cut and community services are being scaled back. And yet, it is entirely imaginable that such offerings could be saved and even expanded if families demanded it, and if schools and community organizations and volunteers collaborated to achieve that goal. For example, the United States Tennis Association ([www.usta.org](http://www.usta.org)) urges schools to adopt a "no cut" policy and employ certified volunteer coaches to make tennis participation available to the broadest range of students, and the USTA and the United States Professional Tennis Association ([www.uspta.org](http://www.uspta.org)),

**Even though sports and the arts are the most common sparks for young people, only a quarter or less of youth say adults give them chances to help out or spend time doing sports or artistic activities with them.**

the sport's teaching and coaching certification body, both provide resources to help schools establish such no-cut programs.

We also need to think broadly when considering the implications of "sports" and "arts" as the most common sparks. "Doing" these sparks is not always about playing the sport, or the instru-

## The best supportive role that most adults can play is simply as a source of encouragement.

ment, or performing or painting or writing. It often involves watching others—sometimes experts and sometimes “weekend warriors” or amateurs—do these activities, reading and talking about these pastimes, and integrating them into day-to-day experiences so that they appear repeatedly in the “nooks and crannies” of one’s life. Sports and arts activities, when thought of more expansively than merely playing them, may thus be tapping broader processes in youth development that help with self-awareness, skill development, career exploration, and social maturation. Thought about in this more comprehensive manner, even more possibilities spring to mind about how school communities can help students develop their sparks.

It is good to remember, too, that since sparks are intrinsic interests that come from inside a young person, the best supportive role that most adults can play is simply as a source of encouragement. We have found that the primary way adults help is not through transportation, money, volunteering, or even attending events, although all those are in play; the main thing adults can do, whether they are school staff members, community adults, adult neighbors or friends, or family, is provide encouragement and support. In West St. Paul, for example, 57 percent of students had at least some adults in their lives who provided encouragement, versus 11 percent or less who provided those other things (and this pattern was basically the same for all grade levels). Encouragement includes teaching them, helping them learn, helping them practice, playing with them, giving them ideas, and connecting them with other spark mentors. These kinds of informal supports don’t require programs and budgets, but they can be a tremendous supplement to the formal and well-resourced programs and activities for developing sparks that all kids deserve.

We found in the West St. Paul research that there is an opportunity for school faculty and staff to use sparks to promote more parent involvement (especially among elementary students), and a more positive climate among students through learning more about each other’s

deep interests (especially among middle and high school students). For example, overall, students’ preferred way to explore sparks is talking with friends (28 percent) and with family (24 percent), trying by doing (21 percent), and going on field trips (10 percent). Across grade levels, the preference for talking about sparks with friends goes up from elementary to high school (from 22 percent in elementary school to 27 percent in middle school, and up to 31 percent in high school), and the preference for talking with parents about their sparks goes down (from 40 percent for elementary students to 29 percent for middle-level students, and just 12 percent for high school students). In contrast, the preference for exploring a spark area by actually trying it out goes up across grade levels, from 15 percent among elementary students to 19 percent among middle-level students and up to 25 percent among high school students. So intentional, *parent*-focused spark-nurturing activities may be especially useful and welcomed by students at the elementary level, whereas intentional, *peer*-focused spark-nurturing activities, and chances to “test-drive” a variety of interests, may be a developmentally more sensitive method for middle and high school students.

Based on all this research, Search Institute spent two years developing, and is now pilot-testing, a variety of spark-building curricula and activity ideas to help schools integrate spark building as a school success strategy.

### Pilot Projects

Two Minnesota sites—School District 197 in West Saint Paul, and the community of Northfield—agreed to participate in an effort to bring about better outcomes for kids through discovering and nurturing sparks. They also agreed to allow data collection to gauge the effectiveness of these resources.

At each site, Search Institute provided prototype versions of resources, curricula, activities, and technical assistance to help ensure that all children at the pilot sites were encouraged and supported to explore, identify, and develop at least one spark.

The goal of this pilot study was to discover effective means of increasing multiple positive outcomes for students, teachers, and parents. To meet this goal, we determined which activities and materials showed promise and worked to refine those tools and explore different delivery methods. We also conducted surveys and interviews to get feedback from the pilot sites. In the second phase of the pilot, we determined which outcomes—such as dropout rates, parent involvement, teacher job satisfaction, and youth-adult relationships—were most likely to show change.

#### SCHOOL DISTRICT 197, WEST ST. PAUL

Led by Superintendent Jay Haugen, the faculty and staff of District 197's eight schools have begun integrating sparks into every facet of the school environment. In addition to using the prototype sparks curricula, the district has supported the sparks model with many of its own innovative activities and events, some of which are listed below:

- Making the annual back-to-school kickoff for staff a spark-filled event by including a speech from Search Institute president Peter Benson and demonstrations of students' sparks.
- Getting more than 2,000 students to respond to a sparks questionnaire and sharing the results with students, parents, and teachers.
- Training elementary school counselors to deliver sparks lessons as part of an ongoing grant-funded program.
- Having more than 300 school faculty and staff take the sparks questionnaire to discover their own sparks, as well as those of their colleagues.
- Engaging parent groups with the concept of sparks and developing a prototype set of parent spark activities.

#### THE COMMUNITY OF NORTHFIELD

Northfield, a city of 20,000 people in southern Minnesota, has taken the sparks concept beyond the school and into the community. Caring adults in Northfield focus on helping elementary school students explore many potential sparks rather than focusing on just one or two. Here are three ways they are encouraging spark exploration:

- A local asset-building initiative, the Northfield Healthy Community Initiative, provided financial and administrative support for several spark-exploration activities, both during and after school. In March, all the second graders at Greenvale Elementary School went on an ice-skating field trip, and members of the high school girls' hockey team helped them lace up skates and practice skating skills. In April, the second graders took a trip to St. Olaf College to watch the college orchestra's dress rehearsal and talk with student musicians. All activities are being framed as opportunities for kids to explore places in their community that may help them find their sparks.
- A recent parent-child event called "Evening of the Arts" at Greenvale Elementary School invited parents and children to explore a variety of hands-on art activities and featured displays and "spark" performances (including music and readings) by students. More than 600 people attended the event.
- Northfield Middle School's after-school program invited all program students to take the sparks questionnaire and formed "sparks clubs" for groups of students with similar interests. One of these is the Electronics Sparks Club, which often gathers to deconstruct discarded computers and other electronics. To the amazement of program staff, a young man in the club was able to combine speaker parts, copper wire, and duct tape to create a working pair of earphones for his iPod. The club will also be learning how to properly recycle e-waste when members finish their work with the donated equipment.

#### The Sparks Curricula

The prototype sparks curricula were created in 2009 to be piloted in the 2009–2010 school year in grades 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, and 11. The objectives for the lesson plans were

- to help students understand the concept of sparks;
- to encourage students to explore and discover their own sparks;
- to guide students in identifying at least one spark and beginning to develop it;

- to convey to the students the importance of adult support of their sparks; and
- to encourage students to seek out the support of adult “spark champions.”

Each set of three to four lesson plans provided teachers and other school staff, such as counselors, with multiple age-appropriate activities and handouts for conveying the concept of sparks and engaging students in exploring and identifying their sparks.

A majority of teachers and counselors who used the sparks curriculum were positive about it. In-depth interviews with 10 of those who used all or part of the curriculum for grades 3/4, 5, 7, and 9 revealed that the majority (8 of 10) would use the curriculum again.

Those who liked the curriculum cited its ability to engage the students, its usefulness in the classroom (especially for differentiating instruction), and its easy understandability for the full range of students. Those who expressed concerns considered the concept either too simple or too advanced for younger grades, although other teachers noted that students as young as kindergarten seemed to really “get it.” One also noted that disadvantaged students understandably had a harder time naming spark supporters or community resources that could help them with their sparks.

Introduction and use of the concept of sparks were credited by several teachers and counselors with advances for students in their classes. An art teacher for grade 7 reported that sparks activities gave students “another way to connect as well as a way to reflect upon themselves” and noted that the sparks language was used throughout the rest of the semester.

Another teacher of grade 8 social studies shared an example of how sparks helped a child with special needs complete an assignment. The assignment, called “The American Dream and Me,” asked students to complete a multitude of career and aptitude tests and then complete a presentation on a potential future career. One of the students had a number of disabilities and struggled with this assignment, so the teacher asked him to remember what he was passionate about. Recalling how his passion was for trains, he did research on careers in railroad work and

training and education for working on trains. He then did a PowerPoint presentation for the class and the title page was “My Sparks: Trains.” As the teacher said, “It gave him a way to complete the assignment similar to the rest of the class.”

This same teacher found other ways to infuse her regular lessons with sparks, including in the unit on Personal Identity, in lessons on goal setting, and in discussions of important historical figures.

Other teachers reported instances in which knowledge of their sparks helped students grow in understanding the importance of adult support. One grade 9 student identified his spark as bike racing but also realized he had viewed the achieving of any dreams about bike racing as totally his own responsibility. “It was good for him to learn that he could and should seek spark supporters to help him with that dream,” his teacher noted.

As a result of feedback from the teachers and counselors, the curricula for all five grades have been revised for use in the 2010–2011 school year, with additional activities, some simplified language, and more variety in ways to use sparks in the subject areas.

## Thriving and Beyond

After conducting multiple studies over the past eight years, Search Institute has developed a measurement of thriving centered on identifying and nurturing young people’s sparks. We have found that young people with sparks and the support to develop them do better on a wide variety of developmental outcomes, including school success. Sparks curricula have been developed and pilot-tested for elementary, middle, and high school use, with final refinement and testing occurring during the 2010–2011 school year. These curricula and measurement resources will help young people across the country not merely be “okay,” but be the best they can be: confident, capable, caring young people who contribute even more to helping their families, schools, and communities thrive.

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*by Peter C. Scales, Ph.D., with contributions from Kathryn L. Hong*

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## Notes

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