

CASE STUDY

Foundation/District Partnerships: Having a Positive Impact on Communities

Focus Area

The Mary Black Foundation in Spartanburg, SC is a private health legacy foundation. Formed from a hospital conversion in 1996, its mission is to *“invest in people and communities for improved health, wellness, and success in Spartanburg County.”*

To more specifically effectively achieve this mission, the foundation’s board commissioned several research papers to help it determine areas of grantmaking focus. Dr. James Sallis, a distinguished professor at the University of California San Diego and principal researcher for SPARK, was one of several researchers who help the foundation through its process of eventually selecting two priority areas: Early Childhood Development and Healthy Eating and Active Living.

After determining these areas of interest, the following question presented itself: How can the foundation support these initiatives, particularly physical activity, in the community?

Finding and Choosing SPARK

“We knew that schools were one place where we could do this work,” said Molly Talbot-Metz, Vice President of Programs at The Mary Black Foundation. “Over the years, we have done a number of different things with schools, but we wanted to do something at a district level. We were seeing good results with the projects we were doing at individual schools, but we felt like we were only having a small impact. We wanted to affect all children in Spartanburg County.”

Dr. Sallis’ past experience with grants and physical activity in schools led the Mary Black Foundation to consider using SPARK as the center of its physical activity initiative in Spartanburg County schools. The robust and inclusive curriculum, partnered with content-specific professional development, makes district-wide implementation a relatively easy process thus appealed to the foundation.

The Implementation

“Many times, foundations sit and wait for an organization to create a grant idea for the foundation to simply fund,” said Talbot-Metz. “After some reflection, we decided we wanted to be more proactive and pitch our idea to fund the SPARK implementation directly to the districts. We asked the seven Spartanburg County districts if this was something they would be supportive of and they were on-board.”

The foundation had great buy-in from the districts’ leaders, as well as the districts’ PE teachers. A chronic complaint from both parties was that PE teachers lacked a sense of professionalism and cohesion with the rest of the stakeholders in the school because schools are so focused on standardized testing.

“For example, there are several first-grade teachers who can work together in a school, but there are usually only one or two PE teachers,” said Talbot-Metz. “Many times these PE teachers feel left out of professional development and the overall teaching community. Our foundation knows the importance they play in the health of our community and children, so we wanted to show them that we care.”

To ensure complete attendance from all of the county’s PE teachers, the first teacher training sessions took place just before the start of the 2010-2011 school year. This round of training introduced all K-2 and 3-6 PE teachers to their respective SPARK curriculum.

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Sarah Justice, Spartanburg County School District #3

Foundation/District Partnerships: Having a Positive Impact on Communities (cont.)

After such great success with the first round of training, the next year, the foundation helped these same PE teachers develop their own professional development day based on SPARK activities and what they learned after a year of using the curriculum. Using their own training program, the SPARK-experienced teachers trained their peers on how they incorporated SPARK activities into their lessons.

In 2012, the foundation and the districts began discussing SPARK's Train the Trainer (TT) model. The program is designed to prepare teachers who are effectively using SPARK's curriculum to conduct quality SPARK workshops with educators new to SPARK. The foundation wanted to have at least one local trainer to address new hires and annual refresher courses. After holding an application process for all of the district PE teachers, the foundation chose four elementary school PE teachers and sent them to SPARK's TT program in San Diego.

Sarah Justice, Spartanburg County School District #3 and TT, said "Since using the SPARK Curriculum, I feel like I have more focus and direction during my classes. The curriculum teaches students in a fun and creative way which has changed the way I teach. Before using SPARK, I felt like I was just focused on teaching sports skills and although that is important, SPARK reaches beyond just sports skills and incorporates fitness and lifetime physical activities which I think are important to teach all students. The way the lesson is broken down into a Warm Up, Focus on Fitness, Spotlight on Skills and Closure also has helped me develop better direction in my classes. The students are engaged for their entire allotted PE time."

This year, the foundation further expanded its impact by training the districts' middle school PE teachers to use SPARK's Middle School PE Program.

For the Future

The foundation wants to ensure its investment in SPARK and professional development for PE teachers in Spartanburg is successful. Therefore, it is looking for ways to assess both teachers and students, including the FitnessGram Assessment. The assessment, similar to the President's Challenge, rates students' physical fitness starting in fifth grade and provides feedback on how to improve. SPARK supports both FitnessGram and the Presidential Youth Fitness Program, and provides resources to align with the assessments in the SPARK PE curriculum.

"We know every elementary and middle school PE teacher is trained," said Talbot-Metz. "Now we are trying to better understand which PE teachers are excelling with the SPARK program so we can use their success to train other educators who may not be fully embracing the implementation. We not only want to ensure that the teachers are effectively using the curriculum- we want to ensure accountability and student success, as well."

