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SPARK prepares kids for kindergarten

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Beaming as she clutched her certificate to her chest, 5-year-old Hope Bender returned to her seat as the names of her fellow graduates were called out at Akron's Mason Elementary School on Thursday afternoon.

The recognition ceremony for the 2009 Class of Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) also acknowledged the graduates' parents, grandparents and guardians.

Hope's aunt, Beverly Parks, who has adopted her, appeared on the program twice as the "learning advocate" for both Hope and Parks' 5-year-old adopted grandson, Jasper Lanning.

Both Hope and Jasper will attend Leggett Elementary. Other SPARK graduates will attend kindergarten at Mason Elementary School.

At the ceremony, they were introduced to their new school principals and received red book bags provided by Honeywell and stocked with school supplies and two new books provided by the FirstBook-Greater Akron organization.

SPARK is a national program funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to improve kindergarten readiness by building reading, language and social skills.

The parent mentoring program in Akron started in 2008 in the Leggett and Mason elementary school neighborhoods with 19 children who received a compressed version of the full program.

Those kids entered kindergarten last fall at Leggett and Mason and will be first-graders this year.

This fall, 41 SPARK graduates will attend kindergarten, mostly at those two schools.

"I have said repeatedly that I would love to have this program in every neighborhood in the city," Akron Public Schools Assistant Superintendent Ellen McWilliams told the audience.

"You all are very lucky to live in the neighborhoods that you do to be first to launch this, but our hope is to be able to expand this to other parts because it is such a quality program."

The program sends trained "parent partners" to visit families in their homes about once a month for eight to 12 visits.

They show parents effective ways to build basic literacy skills. Kids get free books and other learning materials, as well as their school supplies for kindergarten.

The parent partners also meet routinely with experts who can screen children for developmental and physical problems and provide early intervention that otherwise children wouldn't receive until they were in kindergarten.

Stark County was one of eight sites in the country initially selected for the initiative. Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton operates the program in Canton, Minerva and more recently, Alliance, for children ages 3 to 6.

The first kids in that program are entering fourth grade this fall. It has proved so successful in improving kindergarten readiness that Kellogg has approved money to replicate it in other cities.

Akron, which is adding 3-year-olds to the program this fall, was the first replication site. Warren City Schools was the second replication site and is sending its first graduates to kindergarten this fall.

The third replication site will be in Medina County under the leadership of the United Way of Medina County.

"They've just signed an agreement with us and they hope to roll it out in the fall," said Joni Close, senior program director at Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton.

A University of Akron researcher has compiled rigorous data for SPARK programs in Ohio, comparing kids who get SPARK home visits with kids from the same socioeconomic backgrounds who do not. So far, the research is showing that SPARK kids

do better on various kindergarten readiness tests.

Preliminary data comparing the third-grade reading scores of the first SPARK class to non-SPARK students is showing remarkable gains, especially in Minerva.

"What we're seeing at this point is that these effects are holding," Close said.

The Akron program has several partners, including the Summit Education Initiative and Greenleaf Family Center, a nonprofit family counseling agency that trains the parent partners who go into the homes.

Summit County executive Russ Pry, who attended the ceremony Thursday, said that early education is the county's top priority for improving the educational advancement of children.

"All of the experts in this subject have indicated that when children are prepared and ready to go to school when they enter kindergarten, they have a much greater rate of success and they perform much better," Pry said. "So I am thrilled with what Greenleaf and what Summit Education Initiative has done with the partners in promoting the SPARK program."

Parent Amber Hardman didn't need to be convinced; she's been involved with SPARK for two years.

Her son, Jayden Wallace, was in the first SPARK class, and he's going into first grade this fall.

Her daughter, Kiyleigh Wallace, graduated from SPARK on Thursday and will attend Mason.

"I think she's ready for kindergarten," Hardman said.

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