

SPARK School: COVID addendum

December 2020

Find out how the team at SPARK School has adapted their instructional model as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic while still prioritizing deeper and personalized learning for the students they serve.

Time operating in a Next Education Workforce model prior to COVID-19: Seven months

Path through COVID:

- **Spring 2020:** Remote
- **Summer 2020:** Remote
- **Fall 2020:** Remote, then concurrent (teaching remote and in-person students simultaneously)

Educator team: One full-time teacher executive designer, one part-time teacher executive designer, two certified teachers, and one MLFTC resident

Students: 115 3rd, 4th and 5th graders

▶ Providing continuity over summer

Concerned that the abrupt transition to remote learning during the 2019–20 school year might result in increased summer learning loss and that students would lack opportunities to interact socially, SPARK School educators opted to continue working with students over the summer. The team offered remote read-alouds, tutoring sessions and social events in an effort to maintain close relationships with students (recall that SPARK is a multi-age school serving students in grades 3–5), keep students engaged and support student learning.

▶ Personalization without leaving assigned desks

Previously, SPARK School students moved fluidly throughout the learning environment, and educators regularly reconfigured learning spaces according to task and need. This flexibility supported SPARK educators in regrouping students for collaborative work, providing small-group instruction, and implementing targeted interventions and extensions.

Now, in an effort to reduce transmission risk, in-person learners remain at their assigned desks within their assigned learning spaces for the duration of the day. All students engage in small-group work through Zoom break-out groups, and educators, rather than students, rotate between learning spaces.

“ We've only known SPARK [during the period of] COVID. ... But the kids are engaged and on board. And that was a big change for us. They're engaged and not bored. That's huge.
— SPARK School family member

▶ Supporting deeper and personalized learning in remote and concurrent contexts

Midway through the 2019–20 school year and several months before the pandemic impacted schools in the U.S., SPARK School educators began borrowing techniques from flipped classroom models in an effort to better personalize student learning. Specifically, they experimented with prerecording direct instruction for students' playlists of instructional activities — playlists students took an active role in developing. This adjustment, in combination with the team's and learners' familiarity with Google Classroom, made the team's March 2020 transition to remote learning less of a stretch for students and educators alike. Students adapted quickly to the remote environment by leveraging their newly developed technology skills.

While the year began in August 2020 with a 100% remote start across Arizona, the school soon adopted a concurrent model: Students attending in-person instruction come to school five days a week, and remote students live-stream the in-person instruction in real time. Educators use motion-activated cameras to ensure remote learners can track their instruction, and remote learners' video feeds are projected on large monitors in the learning space so that educators (and in-person learners) can better interact with those learning from home. When students work in small groups, both in-person and remote students join Zoom breakout rooms from their laptops. Student groups remain stable over time to build peer relationships, and a student leader helps guide the group, thereby developing leadership skills.

▶ Ensuring continuity of experience

Because all students experience the same curriculum regardless of their context, and because instruction is concurrent, students can switch tracks (i.e., remote or in-person) as needed. Students who need to quarantine due to COVID exposure can continue their learning experience from home and return when it is safe to do so. They remain with their instructor and same cohort of students and don't miss a beat instructionally.

“ Thank you so much for making it possible for [my child] to maintain a sense of continuity in this whole thing. The discussion with her [about choosing a remote or in-person context] was a lot easier knowing she wouldn't have to change classes or teacher.
— SPARK School family member

“ I'm especially thrilled about the way that they've handled COVID. ... They're consistent. The schedule at home was pretty much exactly the same as how they did at school. ... I was very impressed with the structure.
— SPARK School family member

▶ Prioritizing student-educator relationships

SPARK School educators felt increased urgency around ensuring students established strong relationships with at least one educator on the team, so they added a homeroom structure for the 2020–21 school year. Now, all students work closely with a homeroom educator who checks in with them each day. Educators use this time for social-emotional check-ins, relationship-building and to discuss what additional support students may need for their work.