

SPARK School: School profile

February 2020

At SPARK School at Kyrene de las Manitas, 120 students in multi-aged grade bands work with a core team of six educators: one teacher executive designer, two certified teachers and three teacher candidates.

Introduction

SPARK School at Kyrene de las Manitas opened in fall 2019. The prototype school-within-a-school was developed during a year-long design process collaboratively led by the Kyrene School District and ASU's MLFTC Design Initiatives. The project focused on developing a design for a new school model, with two central goals: 1. To engage students in a dynamic learning environment that promotes academic excellence and prepares them to be innovators and leaders of tomorrow; and 2. To deploy educators in non-traditional ways by creating new roles and staffing structures which would attract and retain high-quality staff and reinvigorate the teaching profession. During the 2019-20 school year, the SPARK School enrolls approximately 80 students in 3rd and 4th grades. In the 2020-21 school year, the program will expand to include 3rd, 4th and 5th grades and enroll up to 120 students.

The SPARK School's name is an acronym for the design principles it embodies: Student-led, Project-based, Achieving, Real-world, Knowledge.

Teams of educators with distributed expertise

Rather than having one assigned teacher for the year, students in the SPARK School benefit from a team of educators. The educator team is led by the teacher executive designer, a certified teacher leader. The core educator team includes two additional certified teachers and three MLFTC resident teacher candidates. The core team's composition may vary from year to year depending on student and educator needs, interests and strengths. The educator team collaboratively designs curriculum and multidisciplinary projects, acting as guides who empower students as active learners and problem-solvers.

Community educators with content area expertise act as additional educator team members who contribute their expertise to SPARK students. For example, a mindfulness coach visits the learning environment three times weekly to work with students on yoga and cognitive strategies. Other experts visit the school as volunteer guest speakers either in person or via technology to support students during project-based learning units. Guest speakers during the 2019-20 school year have included a trial lawyer, when students were holding a *Sea World vs. The State* classroom trial; Arizona Senator Sean Bowie, when writing bills to support endangered animal species; and Pakistani community members giving presentations about their culture when students were reading *I Am Malala*.

Deeper and personalized learning

The instructional model of SPARK is built on experiential learning, with an emphasis on Project-Based Learning (PBL) and inquiry. Students explore interdisciplinary themes across content areas, and their PBL units cross curricular areas. Projects emerge from student interests and are aligned with Arizona state standards. The educator team has the autonomy to leverage district-adopted curricular resources selectively, choosing the resources that best align with their PBL units and the standards being addressed.

SPARK students learn at a pace that fits their individual needs and have opportunities to explore their interests during Genius Hour and core instructional time. Educators recognize the value of having students from different backgrounds and with varied academic strengths, working together. The program is not tracked and includes students with a range of academic and socio-emotional needs. Educators employ various approaches to accommodate the students.

The district undertook minor construction to create the SPARK learning space on the Kyrene de las Manitas campus. The learning environment was established in a six-classroom pod with a smaller meeting room in the middle, two storage rooms and direct access to the parking lot. After reconfiguration, a makerspace with 3D printers and other maker equipment sits at the center of the learning space with added windows to improve visibility. The main learning space is composed of two large, open areas with operable walls. All spaces and furniture are flexible, allowing for varied uses during the school day. The large assembly area, where the entire learning community of students and educators meets in the morning each day, later becomes a small-group breakout area for math lessons. The small offices adjacent to the space have been converted to a small podcasting studio and group breakout room.

The SPARK schedule is flexible. Lunch, recess and specials (e.g. music, physical education), which involve other school staff, are held at set times each day. The remainder of the SPARK schedule can be adjusted according to the needs of the learning community in order to accommodate activities or visiting experts.

Specializations and advancement pathways

The SPARK School team is led by a teacher executive designer. The district created this position, which includes an additional stipend, with the goal of retaining highly effective educators and building advancement pathways that keep educators working directly with students. The teacher executive designer is a highly experienced certified teacher who models instructional practices, coaches fellow educators and oversees curriculum design. Importantly, the teacher executive designer is a full-time member of the classroom community rather than an instructional coach whose time is shared between multiple classrooms.

Demographic comparison

	SPARK School	Kyrene Elementary School District
Percentage of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs)	4%	9.4%
Percentage of families with income below poverty level	29%	7.9%

All data on Kyrene Elementary School District is drawn from the National Center for Education Statistics district demographic dashboard and district directory information. All data on SPARK School was shared by the district and communicated via personal communication (J. Powers, personal communication, Feb 25, 2020).

References

National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). ACS-ED District Demographic Dashboard 2012-17. National Center for Education Statistics: Kyrene Elementary District, AZ. <https://nces.ed.gov/Programs/Edge/ACSDashboard/0404230>

National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). District directory information (2018-2019 school year) Kyrene Elementary District (4246). National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?Search=2&ID2=0404230&details=1