

AKRON BEACON JOURNAL

O U R O P I N I O N

SPARK of learning

*The governor wants to make a difference in early education?
He should pursue sufficient resources for this program that works*

One item in Ted Strickland's package of school reforms that should raise a cheer is the proposal for universal all-day kindergarten. It offers all of Ohio's 5-year-olds an early start in formal schooling. A growing volume of research in brain development shows that long before a child sets foot in a kindergarten class, the capacity to learn, to make associations and to build relationships are shaped by the quality of his or her experiences and environment. The first four years of life are thus especially crucial in preparing children for school.

When it comes to early childhood education, it has been too tempting in the past to insist that parents are the first teachers of their children, a fact often used to justify leaving parents to their own initiatives. The problem is that many parents lack the resources and know-how to provide the appropriate stimulation for their toddlers' developing brains.

The sad consequence is that a great number of children start kindergarten already well behind their peers, lacking basic behavioral and learning skills. It is inexcusable, when students need to master more sophisticated material than ever to succeed in today's economy, that a significant percentage of children start off having to make up lost ground. A mere 37 percent (16 percent in Mason Elementary School) of this year's kindergartners attending the Akron Public Schools started school ready to learn, as measured by the state's kindergarten readiness assessments.

All of which makes the SPARK program (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) especially relevant. The national program prepares toddlers for kindergarten by helping improve their social, language and reading skills. More important, it seeks to mentor parents as partners in the learning process, teaching them approaches they can use to enrich the day-to-day experiences of their preschoolers.

In Stark County, where the Sisters of Charity Foundation has operated SPARK since 2005, the results have been measurable. Children who participated in the program have scored consistently higher each year on the kindergarten readiness test than those who did not.

All too often, lack of funds and expertise make it difficult to replicate effective programs on a scale that would make a difference across a school system. With \$1.08 million from the GAR Foundation, a SPARK program and a preschool at Mason opened last year to improve school-readiness in the University Park Alliance, a 50-block area around the University of Akron that feeds into Mason and Leggett Elementary School.

If the goal of universal kindergarten is to raise the chances of all children to succeed in school, then the demonstrable effectiveness of SPARK presents the governor with a challenge: To provide the resources to scale up the intervention program for preschoolers and parents across Ohio.