

Sparks



Ideas for Sparks in Middle School and High School

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Based on the ideas and research in Peter L. Benson's new book *Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008)

Every person, young and old, has a spark—a passionate talent or interest that is good, beautiful, and useful to the world. Sparks come in many forms: writing poetry, making music, helping people, leading, being a peacemaker among friends and peers at school, making one's community better, and taking care of the earth. Whatever form they take, sparks illuminate a person's life and give it energy and purpose.

Schools are one of the few institutions that can help ensure that all students have the opportunity to identify and nurture their spark. Focusing on spark can also help schools engage all students, reducing the dropout rate. When students have support in pursuing their sparks, both grades and school attendance increase. School achievement will increase in schools where spark-nurturing relationships occur in the classroom, the hallways, and in the locker rooms. Knowing and nourishing sparks can be a powerful academic achievement strategy. Take a look at the ideas below and see whether one or two might work for you!

Educators as Spark Champions

Teachers, advisors, support staff, counselors, and administrators can help promote the idea of spark by sharing about their own spark and how it has helped add aliveness to their lives. Explain how your spark has helped you sculpt a rewarding career or enriches your personal life. Sharing enthusiastically about your life's journey also helps make adulthood attractive.

The relationships forged at school can help mobilize peer and adult support for students.

Building Sparks into School Systems and Structures

Beginning to explore the idea of sparks can help frame young people's journeys of personal identity. Schools can infuse awareness of sparks into the following common school structures:

1. Make Spark a Central Theme for Advisories

Middle and high schools often have student advisories where students are supported by a teacher and a small group of students throughout their years at the school. Many of these programs have a curriculum and encourage conversations about relationships, study skills, career interests, and making positive choices. This is an ideal place to use the concept of spark to help students clarify how they can use spark to enhance their education, career, and co-curricular experiences.

2. Enrich Health Classes with the Idea of Personal Spark

As students study the elements of a healthy lifestyle, it is very appropriate for them to discuss how sparks can contribute to their personal wellness and to begin to explore ways to identify and develop their spark. They can

even develop and implement a plan to build their own spark team and/or to help younger students by being a coach to them. The health class could require or encourage students to delve more deeply into school and community programs that relate to their interest or volunteer in the community with an organization that might share their spark.

3. Co-Curricular Programs —Clubs and Other After-school Programs

Schools could intentionally include **club offerings** that correspond to each of the following focus areas (some of the top ten sparks for young people): Literary arts, composing and performing music, dance, athletics, service, social justice, and environmental and animal welfare.

One school we know of is using sparks as the basis for a **new discipline plan**, where students who would have been sent to detention are now sent to “sparks club,” and others are incorporating sparks into their mentoring programs.

4. Student Records

Include students’ sparks in their school record so teachers, advisors, and counselors can keep the young people mindful of this lens as they work on personalized learning plans or projects.

5. Celebration and recognition

Letters. Most schools have athletic letters. It would be powerful if students **could earn letters in all spark categories** and community members could verify the quality and quantity of their involvement.

Assemblies. Publicly highlight the work of students who are pursuing different sparks.

6. Building Spark into Curriculum and Instruction

One-third of all high school students—nearly 50 per-center of minorities —fail to graduate with their class. According to *The Silent Epidemic*, a 2006 report from Civic Enterprises, academic failure was not the principal cause: **70 percent of the students reported they did not see real-world applications of their schoolwork**, and nearly half felt bored by their classes. The most common explanation, which 47 percent of dropouts offered, was that classes were not interesting.

To address this issue, spark can serve as **an entry point that helps students connect classroom learning to their personal interests** and draw natural connections to their futures as learners, employees and citizens. If students can see how what they are learning can contribute to their personal goals, they are more likely to find interest in the content that is being taught. And this interest may lead them to become invested in future career paths.

Teachers can also encourage students to share their sparks by teaching what they are learning to others through service-learning.

7. Senior Projects or Post–High School Plan

Many schools require high school seniors to complete a Senior or Culminating Project before they graduate. This is a perfect opportunity to encourage students to develop **a project that is closely tied to their spark**. As students prepare to graduate, they are often asked to develop a post–high school plan for career and education. Consider using sparks as a central lens for planning.

8. Parent Engagement

Schools can use the Sparks book as the basis for a **parent discussion group** (you may order the book or get a free downloadable discussion guide at www.ignitesparks.org).