

# Bright SPARK

In the four years since its introduction, the SPARK fraternity has grown to include 409 pre-schools.

**T**HE SINGAPORE PRE-SCHOOL Accreditation Framework (SPARK) was introduced in 2011 to encourage pre-schools to improve the quality of their programmes, processes and practices. "It is a way of supporting centres in their quality improvement journey by providing benchmarks that they can make reference to," says Mr Koh Kok Khai, Director of Regulations and Standards 2 at the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA).

Since then, one in four centres island-wide have been SPARK-certified. Mr Koh is encouraged by the growth, but hopes that more centres will work towards attaining the certification. He believes that centres and parents both benefit from the objective assessment SPARK offers and that, ultimately, certification is in the best interest of young children.

Mdm Lim Wen Li, whose two children, aged five and three, are enrolled in Just Kids @ Yishun, a SPARK-certified centre, agrees. "The centre's SPARK certification assured my husband and I that it has achieved certain standards. We are confident to have both our children embark on their early childhood journey there," she says.



## Engaging with parents and the community

Besides being a mark of quality, the SPARK certification is also an indication of effective parent involvement. Mr Koh reflects ECDA's belief that a child's development is not the sole responsibility of centres. "Parents and the community also have an important part to play. SPARK assesses how centres involve parents and the community to strengthen their programmes," he says.

Parent involvement plays a big role at The Little Skool-House At-Tampines-Junction.

At The Little Skool-House At-Tampines-Junction, which received SPARK (Commendation) in 2015, parents are kept informed of their child's learning and development through a mobile application. Ms Kunjammai d/o Sockalingam, who enrolled her four-year-old son in the school in 2013, is a fan of the app. "I find it very useful as it comes with timely updates, announcements and reminders. It's great for working parents like myself," she says.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE LITTLE SKOOL-HOUSE AT-TAMPINES-JUNCTION AND ECDA

for children. "This can be done through partnerships with primary schools, which help ease the transition for children. Collaborations with community partners such as the Health Promotion Board and National Heritage Board are also useful in extending learning beyond the classroom," he says.

## The future of SPARK



Mr Koh emphasises that SPARK cannot be static and must adapt to an evolving early childhood landscape. "It should remain relevant to centres, teachers and parents. To do this, we carry out centre visits and conduct focus group discussions. With the feedback we gather, we can determine which aspects are more



Mr Koh with the SPARK team.

Mr Koh applauds efforts to involve parents in their child's learning journey. Besides regular interaction with parents, he also encourages centres to engage with external agencies to enhance learning opportunities

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//Mr Koh Kok Khai

useful and which are less useful." The Commendation category for SPARK-certified centres, introduced in 2014, distinguishes centres with strong teaching and learning practices, such as a well-designed and integrated curriculum. Currently, 56 centres have attained SPARK (Commendation).

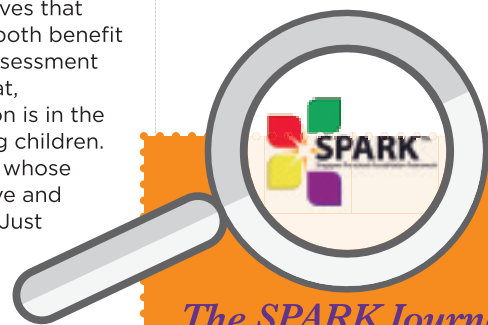
"This year, we will also review the Quality Rating Scale (QRS) used in evaluating the centres to place greater focus on teaching and learning practices. We will offer training sessions for early childhood professionals so that they can better understand what the revised QRS will entail," says Mr Koh. Details of this review will be announced in 2016.

For more information on SPARK, visit [ecda.gov.sg/SPARKinfo](http://ecda.gov.sg/SPARKinfo)



## WHEN CHOOSING A PRE-SCHOOL CENTRE...

It is important to consider the centre's teaching and learning practices. "Higher school fees do not always equate to better quality. Parents should visit the centres, talk to educators and try to get a sense of the centre's physical and emotional environment," says Mr Koh. "Ultimately, your child should be happy [at the centre] and he should be supported throughout his growth and development."



## The SPARK Journey

All pre-schools in Singapore have to meet minimum standards of operation vis-à-vis the child care licensing or kindergarten registration requirements. A centre's quality improvement journey begins when it strives to improve beyond these minimum standards.

### STAGE 1

#### Self-appraisal

ECDA encourages centres to conduct self-appraisal exercises annually.



★ THESE ALLOW CENTRES TO GET AN IDEA OF THEIR:

STRENGTHS

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

They can then develop suitable action plans to improve and address the gaps.

### STAGE 2

#### External Assessment

During the external assessment, a pair of assessors visits the centre over two days. These assessors are familiar with the early childhood sector and have experience in educational leadership and management. The assessors determine if the centre has processes and practices to achieve the following outcomes for its children:



HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

EAGERNESS TO LEARN

CHILD'S WELL-BEING

### STAGE 3

#### Certification

Centres that pass the external assessment will be certified. The SPARK certification is valid for three years. Before their expiry, pre-schools will undergo a SPARK re-certification.



★ THOSE THAT MAINTAIN THEIR STANDARDS



Will be re-certified

★ THOSE WHO MAKE FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS IN THEIR PROCESSES



Will be recognised with a Progress in Teaching and Learning Award — a move that encourages continual quality improvement.