



## Spark Diligence Trip Report - Santa Monica February 22, 2018

### Spark Program Visited

- Mentor – Mentee Match Day at Cornerstone

### Spark Staff

- Beth Tigay, Executive Director Los Angeles
- Gilma Guerra, Program Manager

### Focusing Philanthropy Staff

- Beatriz Moreno

### Background

Spark prepares middle school students to succeed in high school and beyond by offering special programs and mentorships for 7<sup>th</sup> graders. They will launch a new initiative to help 8<sup>th</sup> graders navigate the high school application process in 2018. Since 2012, Focusing Philanthropy has conducted seven Spark program site visits to three of its four regions to observe: work-place mentoring sessions, in-school leadership classes, and Discovery Night graduation celebrations. This was the first site visit to a mentor-mentee match day at a Spark corporate partner's site. The corporate partner visited was Cornerstone on Demand in Santa Monica. Cornerstone has been a Spark partner for six years and is providing 26 mentorships in the spring 2018 semester. Spark's largest corporate partner is City National Bank, which has adopted an entire school and is hosting 44 mentorships during this spring semester. Spark LA will have 25 active Corporate Partners over the course of the 2017-2018 school year, providing mentorships in the fall and spring semesters. This semester (spring), they have 21 active Corporate Partners.

### Observations

- The students being mentored were from Bethune Middle School. Spark has had a partnership with Bethune for four years. The lead teacher from Bethune was also present on site and has been the liaison for the Spark program for all four years. At each school with which Spark partners, a lead teacher is designated to manage interactions related to the Spark program and interface with Spark staff. Spark's program managers visit each partner school site 2-3 times per week, depending on programming needs. When at the school site, program managers perform the following functions:
  - Meet with school staff/administration on program updates and discuss student issues
  - Meet with students and parents to discuss program updates and experience; Spark staff get to know students being served in order to make meaningful mentorship pairings
  - Meet with students to coach them on any issues they are experiencing in the program
  - Conduct High School Pathways workshops for 8<sup>th</sup> graders
  - Distribute and gather survey data
  - Implement strategies to build Spark culture at the school, such as participating in school events
- Also present at the site visit was the designated staff person, Paige Lipman, for Cornerstone that interfaces with Spark on all aspects related to the program. Paige has managed interactions with Spark

for the past six years, serves as a mentor herself, and is also part of Spark LA's advisory board. Spark's Director of Corporate Partnerships works closely with Paige, and her equivalents at other Spark corporate partners, to manage all program logistics and tailor elements to suit each partner's needs. The mentor-mentee match day is a great example of how customizable these elements are. Cornerstone, with the help of Spark, developed a series of ice-breakers that incorporated fun aspects of their office space.

- After ice-breakers and a presentation by Spark staff, the mentors and mentees engaged in a series of activities to get better acquainted. Spark handed out two copies of activity instructions to each pair. Upon finishing their activities, mentors and mentees were free to walk around the corporate office and brainstorm ideas about the student's mentorship project for the spring semester. The FP staff member observed that not all mentor-mentee pairings were 1:1; in some instances, a mentor was paired with 2-3 students. There was also a mentor-mentee pairing that had worked together during the fall semester and both had requested to be paired again.
- The process by which Spark matches students and mentors is robust. It begins with both mentors and students completing a survey of their personal and career-related interests. Spark program managers evaluate this information and proceed to interview each student at the school site that they are responsible for in order to gain further insight into students' survey responses. Spark staff also interact with mentors to ensure that any of their preferences are accommodated. For example: the mentors that were paired with multiple students had been asked if they would be interested in having multiple students or if they would prefer one student. It was evident from the site visit that the mentor-student pairings are meaningful and a powerful experience to both parties involved due to the thoroughness of the matching process undertaken by Spark.
- In Fall 2018, Spark LA will roll out the new iteration of the Spark program model. The biggest change will be the shift away from two 10-week mentorships, one each semester, to just one 13-week mentorship in the spring. With this new model, 7<sup>th</sup> grade students will use their fall semester to engage in a 7-week career exploration program called Spark Labs. Through a series of workshops, Spark Labs will expose students to a variety of different careers and cover foundational topics relevant to their spring mentorship. Cornerstone is partnering with Spark on both the Spark Labs component and the 13-week mentorship in the spring semester in the 2018-2019 school year. Spark's decision to make these program changes is two-fold and has to do with student preparedness and corporate partner recruitment:
  - **Preparing Spark students for mentorships:** One reason for making the move to a single, longer mentorship in the spring, and using the fall semester for Spark Labs, is to dedicate time to preparing students for their mentorships. Spark was receiving feedback that mentors often spent the first few weeks of the fall mentorship teaching mentees foundational workplace skills. Subsequently, students and mentors weren't reaping the full benefits of the 10-week mentorship. The implementation of Spark Labs in the fall will address this issue, and ensure students are adequately prepared for their spring mentorship.
  - **Increasing corporate partner recruitment:** Spark is focusing on growing its number of corporate relationships in order to serve more students. Up until now, the only option for new corporate partners was to commit to at least one of the two 10-week mentorships, with at least 3-4 mentors at the corporate site. The rollout of Spark Labs will serve as a recruitment tool for new corporate partners, enabling them to commit to providing as little as one workshop during the



seven-week Spark Labs program as a way to “test” the Spark experience without committing to a mentorship.

### Key Takeaways

- The main reason that Focusing Philanthropy conducted this site visit was to assess the quality of Spark mentorships. The organization has shifted away from recruiting individual working professionals (e.g. a pilot, a firefighter, etc.) to recruiting large corporations. Spark made this transition to ease the transportation burden of having to move students to multiple locations vs. one site. A secondary reason for the change was to enable rapid growth of the Spark program. Under this new recruitment strategy, one corporation could provide mentors for ~30-50 students; a smaller company wouldn't be able to do so. Focusing Philanthropy staff were concerned as to whether Spark could pursue this new path without compromising mentorship quality, impact, and diversity. The program site visit to Cornerstone was effective in eliminating this concern. From the projects being discussed between mentor-mentee pairings, it was clear that Cornerstone could deliver a range of experiences relevant to student interests. Subsequent program site visits to Spark should be conducted to observe the rollout of the Spark Labs and High School Pathways programs during fall 2018.

