



Spark Online Academy: Designing a Learner-Centered Online Public School

By Julie Johnson, Principal, Spark Online Academy, in collaboration with Learner-Centered Collaborative

Overview:

Location: Colorado Springs School District 11

Profile: Public multi-district online/blended-learning school

Grades: K - 8th; high school expansion starting in fall of 2022



Impact: 300+ students, 50-100 more projected with 9th & 10th grade expansion
54% of K-8 students qualify for free or reduced lunch
46.7% of K-8 students identify as students other than white

Spark Online Academy opened its doors in fall 2021 as a public, multi-district online and blended learning school with a vision to empower learners through connected, rigorous, and relevant learning experiences that combine caring, skilled educators with the power of technology to connect with the local and global community. Serving kindergarten through 8th grade students, with high school expansion starting in the fall of 2022, the absence of a rigid bell schedule allows for inquiry driven, cross-curricular learning that empowers students to use skills acquired through direct instruction in real-world application.

Decisions and design around learning experiences and systems are guided by 4 foundational principles:



Agency

Learners are given the ability to act and make decisions.



Relevance

Learning is rooted in the context of the application of knowledge and authentic experiences.



Access

Learners have the flexibility and resources to learn in ways that meet his or her unique needs and goals.



Connection

Learners have access to peers, educators, and local and global community partners.

Goals

Online School—Rethinking What’s Possible

Building upon community input and bright spots that some families and learners experienced with online learning, Spark Online Academy set out to create a school where all children would be safe, happy, and in love with learning.

While there were wildly inconsistent experiences and expectations during the pandemic’s “emergency” remote learning time, many families found they preferred the flexibility and window into their students’ learning. In response to the community’s growing interest in online/blended learning models, coupled with their desire for personal connection and engaging learning experiences, Spark Online Academy designed an online and blended, learner-centered program that was set apart from the module-based programming more typically seen in online schools.

Spark Online Academy was built from the ground up with the following goals:

- Learners are given the opportunity to act and make decisions in access and demonstration of learning in authentic, meaningful ways toward rigorous, attainable learning goals.
- Learning is rooted in the context of the application of knowledge and authentic experiences including sharing learning with audiences in and outside of the school learning community.
- Learners have the flexibility and resources to learn in ways that meet their unique needs and goals.
- Learners have access to peers, educators, and local and global community partners to learn from diverse and expert individuals, businesses, and organizations.



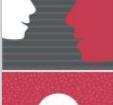
Approach

Designing an online, blended, learner-centered school

When the decision was made to launch the school, a robust planning process kicked-off that included engaging parent, student, school, and district stakeholders. The scope of planning work included:

- the design of a learner-centered instructional model,
- a marketing plan,
- resource allocation,
- recruitment, hiring and onboarding of a school staff for K-10,
- ongoing professional learning for staff in innovative learning practices, and
- a planning process for the project- and experience-based high school which will have performance based assessments for a portfolio defense pathway to graduation.

While the school model was different from any school that existed in the district, and possibly the region and state, it was aligned to a district effort that had been underway for four years to shift toward a more learner-centered, personalized, and deeper learning experience. Spark Online Academy school design was able to build upon district progress in the following areas: the [DII Graduate Profile](#), skill progressions, and the Personalized Learning and Curriculum and Instruction departments restructuring support, resources, and professional learning to make shifts from planning for *teaching* to planning for *learning*. Subsequently, now that Spark Online Academy has launched and put many of the DII Graduate Profile goals into practice, the team is now able to inform, support, and lead some of the district-level work such as developing performance-based learning assessments and a portfolio defense pathway to graduation.

	ACADEMICALLY READY LEARNER	Academically Ready Learners possess multiliterate skills across academic disciplines to achieve their personal best now and into the future.
	CONTINUOUS LEARNER	Continuous Learners demonstrate adaptability, resilience, reflection, goal setting, and a growth mindset.
	EMPOWERED CITIZEN	Empowered Citizens take action to make the world a better place by being informed, responsible, principled, service-minded, and engaged advocates to profoundly impact our world.
	SKILLED COMMUNICATOR	Skilled Communicators listen and use multiple methods, media, and context to share ideas and information clearly.
	INNOVATIVE PROBLEM SOLVER	Innovative Problem Solvers embrace curiosity, creativity, informed risk taking, novel approaches, and cycles of inquiry.
	HEALTHY AND BALANCED LEARNER	Healthy and Balanced Learners pursue physical and mental wellness as they attend to responsible decision making, healthy relationships, mindsets and behaviors for success, self-awareness, and self-regulation.
	CRITICAL THINKER	Critical Thinkers seek to understand and analyze information, evaluate sources, make connections, and apply their learning to make meaning of the world.
	EMPATHETIC COLLABORATOR	Empathetic Collaborators seek to see the world as others see it by listening, networking, and contributing productively.

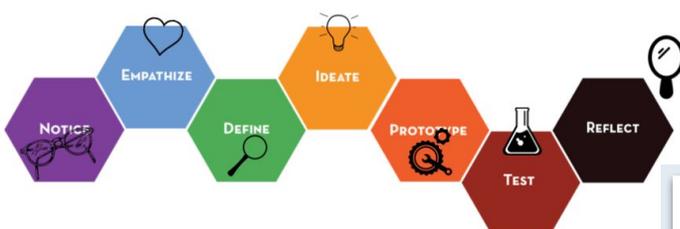
Learner-Centered Professional Learning

The Learner-Centered Collaborative contributed to the successful launch of Spark Online Academy by providing leadership consulting, coaching, and professional learning for a new staff to align learner-centered practices. With an approach that modeled the learner-centered learning experiences we want for learners, we hosted professional learning sessions for staff to increase capacity in designing and implementing learner-centered practices. It brought teachers from various places on the continuum of understanding learner-centered practices together to experience a learner-centered model while building on their own practices. These sessions will continue to support educators as they grow their practice and will help bring new educators on board. Through the collaborative work, the team was connected with other educators and leaders who played pivotal roles in the Spark Online Academy design and launch.

A few of these other workstreams have included conducting interviews with other online school leaders locally, across the state, and nationally; support with competency-based grading structures from Getting Smart; and working through our new high school performance-based assessment and portfolio defense models with the Colorado Education Initiative. Throughout the process Learner-Centered Collaborative shared successful practices, research, and resources to support the development of the innovative school model.

The Challenge:

Design a learning model that supports students furthest from opportunity.



Charette Protocol

10 minutes: The Charrette Protocol*

Purpose: The Charrette is a term and process borrowed from the architectural community. Its purpose is to improve a piece of work. Groups bring their current ideas, or the actual work in progress, to the Charrette, and then ask the group to "work on the work" for them.

Norms:

- Be Kind, specific, and helpful
- Hard on the content, soft on the person
- Have a focus question for feedback (E.g. *How can I make this better? How can I help students assess their own understanding? OR How can I incorporate authentic math concepts?*)

Process:

Group A: Presents their "work in progress" while Peer B listens. (3 minutes)



Group B: Shares kind, specific and helpful feedback. (7 minutes)

*Adapted from the SRL The School Reform Initiative - A Community of Learners

Shifting Assessment Practices and Mindsets

Another significant area of learner-centered change was shifting to a true standards-based reporting system, which had never been done in the district. Removing letter grades and practices such as averaging scores, changing grading criteria based on a teacher's perception of a student's ability, or including habits of work as part of a student's academic proficiency was not only a shift in teaching practice, but a mindset shift for parents. A great deal of parent and teacher education took place to increase stakeholder understanding of what reporting progress looks like in a mastery-based learning model. A shift in assessment also led to developing new IT solutions, such as delivering a new report card structure.

Fostering Personal Connections at an Online School

One of the biggest concerns we hear from parents and students considering online learning is the fear of lack of connection between teachers, peers, and community partners. Our society saw the negative impacts of isolation during the pandemic. Spark Online Academy addresses this in a vastly different fundamental design from module-based models. We keep our class sizes small and make space and time each day for direct instruction in small groups, collaborating with peers daily, and in-person experiences for learning and social connections are regularly offered. We regularly hear from students and parents that they feel more connected than in-person class because they feel safer to get their voice into discussions and have a variety of ways to contribute and collaborate when leveraging the technology to meet the individual strengths and needs of each student.

“

Peer to peer learning has been really powerful. They really do get a lot of opportunities to work together, learning teamwork and connecting with other kids.

Parent, Spark Online Academy

Collaborative, Authentic, Cross-Curricular Learning that Builds Relationships

Prior to the COVID 19 pandemic, we experienced an acceleration of technological advances and access to information like never before. During the pandemic, technology became a critical component for connecting with others in a safe manner. This experience surfaced not only our collective flexibility and compassion, but also disparities among populations of communities and among those clinging to past practices that no longer hold relevance in today's world. Here is where our greatest opportunity lies.

In many ways it is easier to build relationships with students online because they are often more willing to share because they feel safer in an online environment. Our teachers have done a phenomenal job in creating a safe culture in our classrooms. Once kids feel safe, they get more involved in their learning and open up more when collaborating with their peers. A key design structure of Spark Online Academy is the cross-curricular and inquiry driven learning that is part of every student's learning day from kindergarten to high school. When we help students build foundational "access" skills and also have them apply those skills in cross-content ways, this helps students stay interested and make meaning of the world around them in ways that reflect how those skills are used in life.

“

I love that my son gets to learn about what he is interested in and it puts the learning in his hands with the power to direct it.

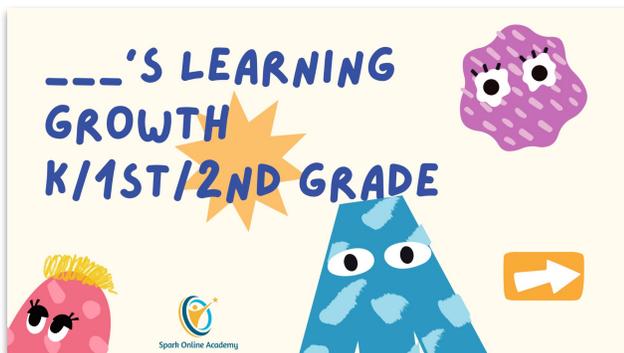
I see joy in his learning I haven't seen before.

Parent, Spark Online Academy

Portfolio Defense and Senior Capstone Pathway

Our high school is the only school in the district that offers a portfolio defense/senior capstone pathway to graduation exclusively. This allows us to direct all of our energy and design into a model that intentionally develops the skills most sought by colleges and employers. We are currently in the process of becoming part of the Mastery Transcript Consortium and our transcripts will reflect a body of evidence that not only shows academic achievement, but also how a student knows how to use that knowledge in realistic ways. We feel our students will have a distinct advantage no matter what path they take post K-12. Since all students at Spark Online Academy, from kindergarten up, maintain and share their portfolios regularly in student-led conferences, they will be very accustomed to presenting their learning and portfolio to others as they progress through the grades at Spark.

[Link to Sample K-2 Portfolio](#)



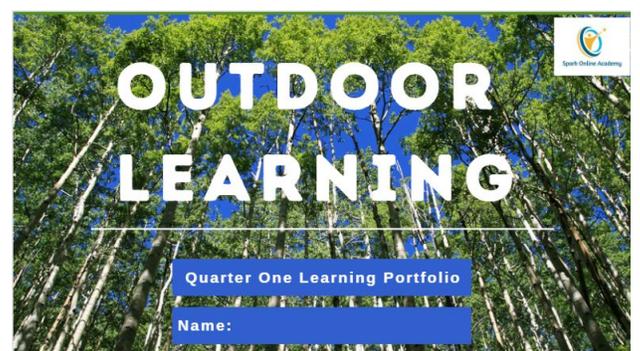
[Link to Sample 3-5 Portfolio](#)



[Link to Sample 6-8 Portfolio](#)



[Link to Sample 9-10 Portfolio Qtr. 1](#)



Impact

Year One Successes and Lessons Learned

With the first school year complete, there is much to celebrate as well as learnings from the year to build upon. Launching a new school is a ton of work and even harder when pushing on traditional systems and organizational practices. Nevertheless, enrollment at the start of the year was 150 students and by the end of the year it crested over 300, many of whom returned to the district after previously unenrolling. An additional 50-100 students are expected in the 2022-23 school year with the expansion to grades 9 and 10.

Much of the parent and teacher feedback from the school year speaks to the success of the year:

Parents

*"The student led learning has really helped our daughter **find her voice and become more confident** in her abilities."*

*"My child has **less stress and distraction and can really focus on learning**. Spark has more structure and support than we have experienced before."*

*"We love that this school is **relevant and teaching skills our kids need for the future**."*

Teachers

*"At Spark, I can genuinely say that **I can focus on the rewarding aspects of teaching**. As a Spark teacher, I have the permission to position students at the center of my teaching. I am encouraged to embrace my creativity, which makes me feel energized and fulfilled by my work. We teach students to become active, engaged, resourceful, and self-motivated learners rather than passive observers. At Spark, we develop strong relationships with students to truly design learning that meets the needs of our students. My students do the thinking and questioning in my classroom, and they carry the cognitive load. My role as an educator is more as a facilitator rather than the 'giver of knowledge.' " - Dani Soto*

*"I had a student who was extremely uncomfortable with math- when given the opportunity to **apply to real life situations and explore in a more open-ended format** they exceeded grade level proficiency levels this year!" - Spark Online Academy Teacher*

*"Our students have found a place where they are comfortable and can explore. They **dig into real work and share their progress**. Recently, our students presented their work to an audience of peers, other grades, and adult visitors. Afterward, a student said, 'This is the first place I've been part of where I don't feel judged.'" - Rheannon McDonald, Spark Online Academy Teacher*

*"My favorite part of working here is the **Creative Active Beginnings program (CAB)** that we start every day with. CAB is half an hour long and allows students to select how to start their day of learning. Learners can choose between physical education, art, music, and computer classes to start the day. Studies show that providing students enough time to sleep and allowing for a soft start to the day is extremely beneficial to academic success. Many schools want to adopt this model but are limited because of bus access and transportation to brick and mortar schools. Not only does CAB provide a better start for students but I believe it gives me a better start to my day as well." - Tanner Lacy*

Lessons learned

We continue to lean into both what is working and our own learning as a team of educators and leaders.

- We will continue to be explicit about who and what we are. We are not a Covid response school. We are a permanent online and blended learning school that is meeting a demand in our community. This is something we communicate in all meetings and settings in which we are presenting information.
- We are a real school that provides a full day of learning planned and facilitated by certified local teachers. Our learners engage in learning with peers and teachers both on and off screen. There are so many online schools that have large student to teacher ratios with little interaction and students mostly go through content modules independently. Our design is vastly different, but some still believe we are one of the module completion models. Again, we make sure we clearly

communicate that in all opportunities we have including student application calls. The principal at Spark Online Academy makes a personal phone call to all families who submit an application to explain our program and make sure we are what they are looking for, can meet their student's needs, and that they are willing and able to partner with us in their child's learning.

- Being the parent/guardian of an online student is a big responsibility. While the change of learning environment is a game-changer for many students, the school no longer controls the learning environment. This falls on the parent/guardian to supervise, monitor, support, and provide accountability systems for their child. Given this shift, lot's of communication is needed beginning with the application phone call. We have a parent and student contract, and will be tightening that up for next year and having an expanded parent and student onboarding process including parent university.
- We will offer more hybrid learning days in which we will invite students in for labs, studio days, and project work. Part of this workstream includes working with our transportation department to offer solutions that increase accessibility to these hands-on, in-person learning experiences.
- We are continuing to improve our recruitment efforts to find educators with an innovative mindset and ready to make the shift from adult centered to learner centered practices.

To connect and learn more about innovative school models such as Spark Online Academy's, email Collaborate@LearnerCentered.org