

IN BRIEF

**Finding the Student Spark:
*Missed Opportunities in School Engagement***

The Question

Search Institute has developed a concept called “sparks”: the interests and passions young people have within them that light a fire in their lives and express the essence of who they are and what they offer to the world. Our questions: How many students report having a spark, and how many get support for it? How does having a spark influence developmental and academic success?

The Bottom Line

Search Institute has repeatedly found that students with sparks and the support for developing them have better results on both developmental and academic outcomes.

Two of the most commonly identified sparks for students are sports and arts, yet these programs are usually among the most vulnerable when school districts must reduce costs. Search Institute research indicates that bolstering these programs would improve students’ connections to their sparks, and in turn lead to greater school success.

The Evidence

The following themes emerged from several studies conducted by Search Institute and its partners of over 13,000 students in grades 5 through 12:

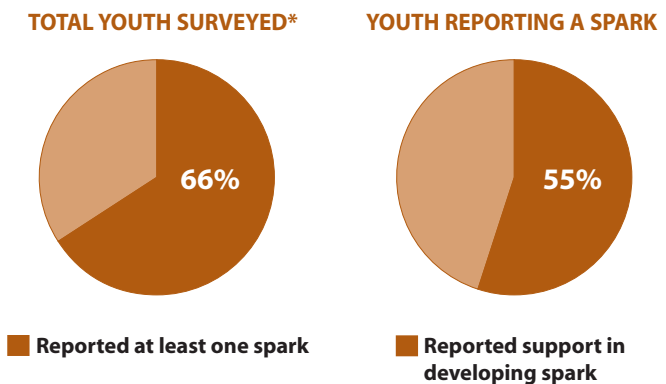
- Helping young people identify their sparks, and providing them opportunities to pursue and develop those sparks, are important additions to the more overtly “academic” steps schools take to promote students’ success.

- Sparks promote healthy, positive development and contribute to psychological well-being and resilience. Students with sparks engage in fewer risk-taking behaviors, such as substance use or violence or unsafe sexual behaviors, than other students. They are less depressed, less worried, and more satisfied with their lives overall.
- Young people who have deep interests and are supported by family, friends, school, and community in the development of those passions have more interpersonal communication and friend-making skills, more empathy and understanding of others’ feelings, and a better ability to work in teams.

FIGURE 1

Youth, Sparks, and Thriving

In a series of surveys of youth in middle and high school, 66 percent of students reported having at least one spark. When those youth were asked whether they had adult relationships that supported those sparks, approximately 55 percent reported having at least some support in developing their sparks.



*12,738 students in grades 5 through 12

This page is condensed from Scales, P. C. (2010, December). Finding the Student Spark: Missed Opportunities in School Engagement. *Search Institute Insights & Evidence* 5 (1), which is available for free downloading at www.search-institute.org/research/insights-evidence.

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