



NEWS RELEASE

SPARK Joins Forces with KIDS in the GAME, ICAN Foundation and Supporting Organizations to Combat Rising Issues of Childhood Obesity

Latest collaboration supports Mississippi school with curriculum development, teacher training and equipment aimed at promoting high-quality physical education and nutrition programs that address student health needs

GREENVILLE, Wis., August 18, 2015 – SPARK™ is pleased to announce its exciting collaboration with [KIDS in the GAME](#), [ICAN Foundation](#) and other supporting organizations including [GoNoodle](#), [Play Like A Girl](#) and [Hip Hop Public Health](#) to counter childhood obesity through the promotion of active and healthy living. Inspired by a school counselor's passion to implement change in the classroom and community, SPARK recently teamed-up with KIDS in the GAME and ICAN Foundation to provide the Oakhurst Intermediate School in Clarksdale, Mississippi with much-needed resources to develop a comprehensive physical education and health program.

According to [U.S News & World Report](#), Mississippi leads the country in obesity rates, with about 35.1 percent of its adult residents considered obese – based on a body mass index (BMI) of more than 30, which translates to more than 197 pounds on a 5'8" person. Further, in “[The State of Obesity](#)” report issued by the [Trust for America's Health](#) and the [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), the state ranks #3 in the U.S. for type 2 diabetes.

This past spring, SPARK's Executive Director Dr. Kymm Ballard, learned about a school counselor named Lisa Ross who singlehandedly started a fitness program for girls in the Mississippi Delta. Fondly known as 'Pizzazz Ross', Lisa created Si Se Puede at Oakhurst Intermediate School to encourage her female students to increase their physical activity and develop new, healthy eating habits. Her enthusiasm and willpower to effect change despite the lack of financial resources, inspired Dr. Ballard to reach out and encourage Lisa to apply for a PHIT America GO! Grant administered by KIDS in the GAME. The grant would be instrumental in expanding Lisa's vision for the entire school by incorporating the SPARK program into Oakhurst's school day. With the support of Principal Frederick Ford, Lisa applied for the grant, which was given significant consideration as part of a collaborative approach by KIDS in the GAME and SPARK. Together, Executive Director Suzie Nixon of KIDS in the GAME and Dr. Ballard helped Oakhurst with utilizing a \$5,000 GO! Grant to catalyze interest from supporting organizations, including:

- **ICAN Foundation**, which covered the cost of training and transportation for Lisa and her colleague, Gisha Stewart, to participate in the SPARK 3-6 PE Institute summer workshop in San Diego. The Foundation is also assisting Oakhurst with the purchase of Sportime fitness equipment.
- **GoNoodle**, which has Oakhurst Intermediate School students moving throughout the day with its interactive physical activity breaks — running, jumping, dancing, stretching and deep-breathing — is helping to improve student behavior, focus and academic performance.
- **Play Like A Girl**, which is supporting the Si Se Puede program with consultation and programming, including their model Pop-Up Play Day slated for the spring of 2016.
- **Hip Hop Public Health**, which is dedicated to promoting healthier food choices and smart exercise through online cartoons, video games, comic books, and music by popular hip hop artists.

KIDS in the GAME's Suzie Nixon remarked, "The intention of our growing collaboration with SPARK and other partners such as ICAN Foundation, GoNoodle, Play Like A Girl, and Hip Hop Public Health is to raise awareness of the excellent resources available to increase minutes of daily physical activity among youth, particularly in the south. The need to counter obesity and inactivity is propelling local agencies, schools, nonprofit organizations and others across the country to combine forces to support all children in increasing their physical literacy and minutes of movement – in other words, their desire, confidence and ability to be physically active every day."

"We're honored to be joining forces with KIDS in the GAME and ICAN Foundation to help reverse the childhood obesity trend and promote lifelong wellness among our youth," said Dr. Kymm Ballard for School Specialty's SPARK. "We're especially excited to work with the Oakhurst Intermediate School in Mississippi to integrate a proven, highly effective physical education program like SPARK into their curriculum. Additionally, the school will be implementing the SPARK ABC's classroom activity and SPARK After School. The school's efforts to make a positive impact on the health of their student body and by extension, the surrounding community, through meaningful activity, fitness and nutrition, are admirable! With the generous sponsorship of ICAN Foundation, it was wonderful to host Ms. Ross and Ms. Stewart at this summer's SPARK 3-6 PE workshop in San Diego, and we trust that the experience and insights gained will prove valuable to the Oakhurst program."

SPARK provides evidence-based physical education, after school, early childhood, and coordinated school health programs to teachers and recreation leaders serving Pre-K through 12th grade students. Each SPARK program is a coordinated package of curriculum, teacher training and content-matched equipment. The SPARK pedagogy is focused on highly active games, dances and sports that maximize physical activity, while also incorporating nutrition and health instruction. The SPARK 3-6 PE Institute, which was developed through San Diego State University and originally funded by the Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), is designed to be more inclusive, active, and fun than traditional PE classes. Aligned with the SHAPE America Physical Education National Standards, SPARK PE lessons are easy to learn and easy to teach. They have been proven to work with both elementary physical education specialists and classroom teachers.

The alliance between ICAN Foundation and SPARK has been invaluable with regards to providing options to schools to make classes, PE and after-school programs more active. Together, the organizations work to raise funds and support the implementation of the SPARK physical education curriculum in local schools. The most recent assistance received from ICAN to enable Ms. Ross' and Ms. Stewart's travel to San Diego this summer to participate in training at the SPARK 3-6 PE Institute was very instrumental. ICAN's Founder and NFL running back, Pierre Thomas, saw the need and stepped up to help the two teachers from Oakhurst Intermediate School. In addition, Mr. Thomas and the Foundation are donating content-matched equipment from School Specialty's Sportime line to help Oakhurst increase students' activity time.

Mr. Thomas underscored, "ICAN Foundation was created to build a healthier generation of young people by encouraging them to become more active and educating them on proper nutrition. We have assembled a strong team at ICAN and we work well together to have an impact in states such as Mississippi, Louisiana and Illinois. Our partnership with SPARK has been a tremendous help and we are excited to implement the SPARK programs. We look forward to growing and making a difference together."



Lisa Ross, school counselor for Oakhurst Intermediate School in Mississippi.

“We’re committed at Oakhurst Intermediate to building a culture of activity and fitness which we believe are critical to tackling the obesity issue and increasing our students’ ability to succeed not just academically but socio-economically, by preparing them to be healthy, productive members of their communities in Mississippi,” said School Counselor, Lisa Ross. “Physical education has a significant place in a school’s curriculum, which is why our team is so thrilled to integrate the SPARK PE program. My colleague Gisha Stewart and I are grateful for the opportunity given to us to attend the summer training sessions at the SPARK 3-6 PE Institute in San Diego. It was a wonderful experience and we learned so much in terms of techniques and best practices which will be instrumental for developing the SPARK syllabus at Oakhurst.”

About KIDS in the GAME

KIDS in the GAME is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization focused on inspiring kids to thrive in life through sports. The organization provides financial assistance to help youth from low-income families of all abilities gain access to after school sports programs and physical education programs in schools. KIDS in the GAME raises awareness of the importance of athletics in developing future leaders, with skills and values that transfer from the sports field into the classroom, workplace, family and community. For more information on KIDS in the GAME, visit www.kidsinthegame.org.

About the SPARK Programs

SPARK is a research-based organization that creates, implements, and evaluates programs that promote lifelong wellness. The SPARK Programs consist of Early Childhood, K-12 Physical Education, After School, and Coordinated School Health. Each SPARK program provides curriculum, teacher training, follow up support and consultation, and content-matched equipment sets through GOPHER. For more information on SPARK, visit www.sparkpe.org.

