



SPARKS Program

In 2005, the Tauck Family Foundation collaborated with a range of independent youth agencies to develop and launch Sparks, a unique, summer travel education program for middle school students from low-income families. The program is described in detail below. In 2012, the Foundation adopted a new mission and approach to invest in building the capacity of organizations that develop social and emotional skills in Bridgeport's children. Beginning in 2013, the Foundation discontinued its previous grantmaking programs, including Sparks, and focused exclusively on their new strategy.

Program Goals

Sparks is a structured, educational, and highly experiential program for young people designed to be implemented by a diverse range of youth organizations as either an after-school and/or summer camp program. Sparks is designed to help middle school students gain an interest in travel, an appreciation for new experiences, and a love of learning; develop a greater understanding and appreciation for diversity and difference; increase their self-awareness, confidence, and sense of independence; and learn both individual and group responsibility and how to work collaboratively with others.

Program Overview

Sparks integrates creative, thematic after-school or day camp programming with a 6-day summer travel experience. The program is comprised of three different curricular units, each of which is paired with a trip itinerary that offers a broad array of learning opportunities, from history and culture, to world-renowned institutions, rural and urban landscapes, ecology, etc. The youth agencies implement a different curricular unit each year, allowing students to participate for up to three consecutive years.

Approximately twenty-four students from each youth agency participate each year. For the first portion of the program, participants meet regularly to learn about the places they will visit, to help plan the trip and to practice travel and life skills, and to build a sense of mutual respect and responsibility among the students and adults who will be traveling together. This portion of the program may be completed over several months as an after-school program or over 4-6 weeks as a summer camp program.

During the next to last week of the program, the students, along with 4 chaperones and a professional tour director, embark on a 6-day tour that includes sightseeing, experiential learning, college and career exploration, and a good dose of fun. Participants travel by motor coach, stay at hotels and on college campuses, dine in local restaurants, and are provided with expert guides throughout.

The final week of the program is dedicated to group and personal reflection. Each group prepares and delivers a unique presentation to share their Sparks experience with family, friends, and the community.