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**42**

# Spark Change

Investing in performing  
arts education for all

# INTRODUCTION



## Our Mission

We believe access to the performing arts is a right from birth. It's the right for even the youngest among us to wonder "what if?" and challenge "why not?" Because the earlier the performing arts are part of our lives, the sooner we can achieve the extraordinary.

But for many students, access isn't guaranteed. With the arts in schools in sharp decline, it's often seen as an enrichment activity versus an essential part of learning and development. Working together, we have the collective power to reverse this concerning trend.

To help expand access and ensure more students experience the benefits of performing arts education, we created the New Victory SPARK (Schools with the Performing Arts Reach Kids) program. Over the course of three years, we were able to study the impact of live performances and robust arts programming on SPARK participants.

Throughout the study, we worked with a team that included researchers and teaching artists to investigate SPARK's impact. Our teaching artists helped translate performing arts skills like improvisation, storytelling and teambuilding into tools that greatly enhanced our inquiries.

Today, we can show that access to and engagement with the performing arts...



**Cultivates an enduring love of the performing arts**

**20%**

greater interest in performing arts among SPARK participants versus control group after two years



**Expands perspectives and interpersonal skills that strengthen teamwork**

**55%**

larger student-selected teams among SPARK participants versus control group after two years



**Inspires creative thinking, which encourages innovation and problem solving**

**50%**

increase in improvisation skills linked to creative thinking among SPARK participants after three years



**Nurtures hope and improves self-confidence, which fosters optimism and resilience**

**10%**

increase in hope for the future after one year among SPARK participants

## Our Moment

Although the resources and opportunities for the arts in schools have continued to decline year-over-year, the COVID-19 pandemic has injected new urgency into the need for arts programming. Students of all ages have missed key socialization experiences, lost the ability to connect in deep and meaningful ways with a wide variety of peers, and dealt with a range of powerful emotions, both directly and indirectly.

As we come to understand the full scope and implications of COVID-19-related challenges, it is essential to prioritize young people's social and emotional well-being. To make sense of their COVID-19 experience and continue their healthy development, they must be equipped to not only emotionally process the pandemic, but also move beyond it. As our research shows, the performing arts are uniquely situated to fill that need. This is at the core of our conviction that performing arts are a fundamental right for all children — it is how they make sense of themselves, each other and the world.

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As leaders in arts programming and advocacy, the New Victory — along with its parent organization New 42 — are ready to work with our partners to address the needs of our youngest audiences and close the gaps in access until all children can experience the power of live performances and programming.

## Our Methods

For the SPARK study, we partnered with nine schools from 2015 to 2019. Unlike other arts impact studies, we had a key criterion for selecting our schools: in every instance, our partner schools did not have a formal arts education program prior to our partnership. The selected schools also receive high levels of Title I funding (75%+) and serve economically disadvantaged populations.



To ensure every student had access throughout our partnership, we worked sequentially with the entire 3rd or 6th grade. That meant, by the time we were done, we were working in all three grades in middle school (6-8) and the top three grades in elementary school (3-5).

We embedded the performing arts in each of our partner schools through professional development, classroom workshops and resources. Each student saw nine live performances at the New Victory Theater and engaged in 45 classroom workshops over the course of the three-year period. We compared results for full SPARK participants against a control group of students who saw three performances and did not participate in related programming in the same three-year period.

To help us monitor and parse our data, we partnered with WolfBrown, which provides research services to major nonprofit organizations around the world. You can learn more about our research methodologies in our appendix.

The SPARK program and research was made possible through a generous Arts Education Impact Grant from The Pierre and Tana Matisse Foundation.

## Our Findings

Access to and engagement with the performing arts impacts young audiences in four measurable ways.

### 1. Cultivates an enduring love of the performing arts

One of the longstanding barriers to deeper engagement with performing arts has simply been one of exposure. Kids can't learn to love a wide range of arts if they are unable to access them, which is often the case in under-resourced schools like the ones we partnered with. Our research shows that the more opportunities young people have to interact with and experience the performing arts, the more their interest increases.

Not only do they begin to enjoy performing arts more, but their relationship to the entire field changes. Our SPARK participants were more likely to say that theater was for someone like them. This small shift in perspective — changing the performing arts from a closed-off world of elites to a welcoming space for all — is a key to the New Victory's approach to arts education, and to the audiences of the future.



## 2. Expands perspectives and interpersonal skills that strengthen teamwork

At its core, live performance is uniquely human, connecting artists and audience members alike and allowing us all to see each other in a fuller way. By involving SPARK students in stories from different perspectives and from all over the world, we saw a measurable change in the way students thought about and related to those around them.

Several times throughout our study, students were shown a short video clip with no dialogue and then asked to narrate the story of what was happening. Over the course of the study, students greatly expanded their understanding of the character's internal state and their vocabulary to describe emotions. Ultimately, many students were able to produce nuanced descriptions of the character's state of mind, with clear links between observed actions and emotions.

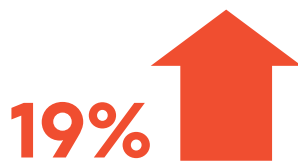
This increased focus on and understanding of people's internal states may have also contributed to another finding. When we asked students which of their classmates they would include in their own theater company, SPARK participants showed a 19% increase in team size over the first year. Control group students, however, showed a 25% decrease over that same period. Performing arts programming may buffer the declines in collaboration skills that are common among upper elementary school aged students.

### Evolution of Socio-Emotional Language

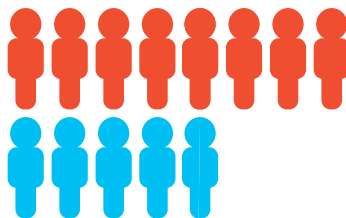


Fall 2015	Fall 2016	Spring 2018
"Confused."	"He's feeling mad because he can't go to the side that he wants."	"He's feeling really sad, frustrated and mad. Sad because he's there and he has to go somewhere, frustrated because he can't go through the wall, and mad because he's tired of doing it too much."

### Who's in Your Theater Company?



19%  
increase in team size  
for SPARK group  
after one year



55%

larger team size for SPARK  
group vs. control group after  
three years



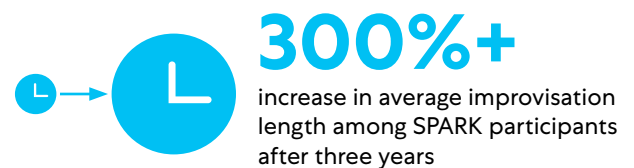
8%

increase in SPARK participants'  
curiosity and understanding of  
other times, cultures and lives  
after one year



### 3. Inspires creative thinking, which encourages innovation and problem solving

As SPARK students engaged with the performances and workshops, we saw growth in their ability to think creatively. As part of our programming, we engaged in improvisation exercises with SPARK participants, where students were challenged to develop and sustain their own creative scenarios without scripts. Over time, scenarios got more complex and more detailed as kids got more comfortable with thinking and expressing themselves creatively. The ability to think creatively and solve problems in new ways is a key part of the skill set students will need to succeed across fields of work — and there's no better way to practice these skills than the performing arts.



### 4. Nurtures hope and improves self-confidence, which fosters optimism and resilience

Perhaps most importantly, our study also uncovered another benefit, one that is especially relevant and timely in light of the events of 2020: the performing arts give students hope.

As a standard practice, we included a range of “future orientation” questions in our surveys, such as asking students how likely they were to graduate high school or get a good report card. We found that SPARK participants not only developed an interest in the performing arts and deepened their empathy and creative thinking — they also built a sense of optimism about what the future holds. Even though our programming was not specifically designed for these outcomes, we found after just one year in SPARK, student’s future orientation scores increased over 10%. In contrast, during that same period the control group saw a 5% decrease in their future orientation scores. Such a definitive result issues a clear mandate for educators and parents alike: when you fund and create opportunities for robust, in-depth performing arts programming, you will also create hope.



# IMPLICATIONS

## Ensure more vibrant and diverse performing arts by encouraging engagement from the earliest years on

In order for arts institutions to build more inclusive spaces and diverse audiences, they must prioritize expanding access and deepening involvement. And while these efforts can take many forms, working directly with school-aged kids from all backgrounds must be a central pillar of any strategy. As our research shows, a strong affinity can be built through early and consistent exposure and reinforced through subsequent programming. Right now, there are future directors, producers, patrons and stars in classrooms across the country. It's up to us to engage and empower them.



## Prioritize the integration of performing arts in schools to restore connection and community

Students develop their interpersonal skills best in group settings, like classrooms. But due to COVID-19 and the disruption of in-person learning, there is an even more acute need for activities and programming that build empathy and understanding. Performing arts stand ready to fill that gap.

Exercises and experiences where students are invited to consider the inner lives of other people — whether characters on stage or classmates in the seat next to them — will be crucial to help mitigate and move beyond the social effects of COVID-19. Now is the time for robust coalitions of educators, arts organizations and mental health professionals to come together for amplified impact.



## Invest in performing arts engagement to cultivate the next generation of creators and problem-solvers

The ability to innovate and imagine new solutions will be key to student success, whichever path they may choose to pursue in the future. Creative thinking is a key twenty-first century skill that is relevant across sectors and crucial to working in a fast-changing global economy and a world in search of just and creative solutions. In understanding and practicing the skills at the heart of the performing arts, students can harness their imaginations to realize the impossible, whether it's a never-before-seen acrobatic feat or a groundbreaking solution to a pressing global issue.

## Promote arts education as an essential need of every young person, so they can dream without limits

There are plenty of reasons to advocate for and fund the performing arts in schools, but most importantly, they encourage kids to exercise another universal right: the ability to hope for and imagine the future they want to see, regardless of age, background or lifestyle. As adults and arts advocates, we know that the performing arts give us permission to do just that, whether we're in the audience, behind the scenes or on the stage. All kids deserve to dream. And that's why they deserve the performing arts.





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## Technical Details of Methodology

The Impact Research on the SPARK program was a mixed-methods longitudinal study. New Victory and WolfBrown designed the research protocol in 2013 and piloted the program in 2014, officially launching the first full research season in 2015.

Key Data Gathering Opportunities	
 <p><b>Classroom Observations</b></p>	<p><b>3x</b> annually, entire classes</p>
 <p><b>Survey booklets of self-report measures on SEL skills</b></p>	<p><b>2x</b> annually (fall and spring), treatment and control students</p>
 <p><b>Performance Tasks</b> (e.g., acting, storytelling, perspective-taking)</p>	<p><b>2x</b> annually (fall and spring), subsample of 15 treatment and control students</p>
 <p><b>Post-show impact surveys</b></p>	<p>SPARK and control students</p>

To learn more, visit [www.newvictory.org/research](http://www.newvictory.org/research)

### Thanks to...

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#### Photo credits:

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Audience and classroom photos by Alexis Buatti Ramos, courtesy of New 42



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