

CHILDCARE SPARK: THE PLAYBOOK



Close critical gaps in your community childcare services with proven lessons & methods.

2025 EDITION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Core partner providers for the Child Care Accelerator pilot include:



Childcare SPARK is made possible through initial support from the Statewide Equity Fund and an ARPA allocation from the Marquette County Commission.



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Linda Fowler was hired by the Council of Michigan Foundations as a Technical Assistance Provider for their State-wide Equity Fund Strategic Support Pilot in 2021. In 2022, she partnered with the Community Foundation of Marquette County to access funding to support a new childcare initiative.

Linda is an effective connector and hands-on executive committed to solving systemic issues through innovative program design, investment strategy, and cross-sector collaboration. With thirty years of deep experience in guiding and facilitating local prosperity and revitalization efforts, Linda Fowler's work is a testament to what is possible when public, private, and philanthropic partners recognize the potential for collective impact.

Her expertise includes organizational development, operational management, and creating strategies to prepare communities and organizations for the future. A career hallmark is building enduring stakeholder relationships and strategic alliances and fostering collaborative working environments. She has a successful track record in creating jobs, facilitating business investment, and economic growth.



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HOW TO USE THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT IS IN THIS PLAYBOOK?

This guide offers a roadmap for developing and launching your own accelerator for Home Based and Family Child Care Entrepreneurs.

WHO IS THIS PLAYBOOK FOR?

Other communities in Michigan and across the United States, whether rural or urban, will have the foundation to localize and customize the program for their needs. By offering a blueprint for starting home-based childcare businesses, lessons learned, promising practices, strategies to eliminate barriers, etc., we hope to significantly accelerate learning curves for other communities and reduce their startup costs.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS PLAYBOOK?

As a step-by-step guide or single single-step resource to address a specific need or issue. As you use this guide, we encourage you to share what you are learning so that we can continue to update and improve the "original." In this playbook, you will learn how the SPARK Childcare Accelerator program was launched to help close a major gap in childcare providers for Marquette County.

WHAT CAN YOU ACCOMPLISH?

From the design process to delivering the program and recommendations for improvement, we have provided you with a roadmap with tools, resources, and templates to guide your learning journey. We have the playbook divided into phases of our collaborative efforts. We also included resources and recommendations in the Appendices that may be helpful to your work.

CHILDCARE CHALLENGES FACING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Rural Communities and Tribal Nations Experience Greatest Childcare Gaps

Childcare programs are an essential component of strong communities throughout the United States. They support young children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical well-being and are a vital cog in the economy, creating jobs in the childcare sector and allowing parents to work. In rural America, families experience challenges accessing and affording childcare that exceeds those of urban areas. Gaps in childcare supply and the economic impact of those gaps are larger in rural America than in urban areas. In 2020, using childcare supply data from 35 states, the Bipartisan Policy Center calculated that the childcare gap in urban areas was 28.9%, versus 35.1% in rural areas.

Family childcare programs can be the only option in some rural areas. These home-based programs provide great support for children and families because they feature small group sizes and hours that are usually more aligned with work schedules. However, the number of licensed family childcare programs across the country fell by 52% from 2005 to 2017. The loss of family childcare programs is attributed to many problems, including low pay, long hours, lack of benefits, isolating work conditions, and an aging workforce.

"86% OF RURAL PARENTS WHO EXPRESSED THAT NEITHER THEY NOR THEIR PARTNER WERE CURRENTLY WORKING SAID THAT CHILDCARE RESPONSIBILITIES INFLUENCED THEIR DECISION NOT TO WORK."

Rural Childcare Policy Framework, *Bipartisan Policy Center*, October 2023

Tribal Communities

Typically, reservations are geographically isolated with limited access to resources and capital. American Indian and Alaska Native people have the highest poverty rate (1 in 4) of any major racial group in the country. Creating inclusive early childhood opportunities in the United States means ensuring that Native children have access to high-quality, culturally appropriate childcare and early learning programs. The Upper Peninsula of Michigan is home to five federally recognized tribes.

CHILDCARE CHALLENGES FACING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Realities of Child Care in Rural America

The unique characteristics of rural communities may contribute to some of the childcare and early learning challenges faced by rural families and service providers.

Here are some examples:

Fewer Choices

- Because childcare and early learning options can be limited in rural areas, parents and caregivers often rely on extended family to provide informal care, which may not be ideal for comprehensive early childhood development.



Limited Transportation Options

- Rural communities often lack access to reliable public transportation. In addition, travel times between home and childcare settings can be lengthy, particularly for those seeking center-based options.



Lower Population Density

- Rural areas tend to be more sparsely populated and, as such, generally offer fewer childcare centers and providers. Lower population density can also impede attracting qualified care providers to an area.



Fewer Skilled Service Providers

- As with many professional services, skilled childcare and early learning providers may be sparse in rural communities.



Lower Incomes

- The high cost of childcare places many options out of reach for lower-income rural families.



BACKGROUND

Marquette County Faces Childcare Challenges

Local data shows about 8,360 children currently in need of care, but there are only 1,914 childcare slots available. The situation has been made increasingly more difficult due to several factors including staffing shortages, transportation difficulties, and rising inflation. These challenges impact families across all income brackets, particularly those with lower incomes. This leads some parents to adjust their employment to care for their children, especially when specialized childcare is needed for children with neurodiverse needs or physical disabilities. Families facing homelessness also encounter unique obstacles in accessing childcare. Improving childcare availability and affordability was identified as an essential need to support a more inclusive community for all families.

The childcare issue has been framed as a low-income and women's issue. However, we know that it impacts all social and economic levels, including educated professionals. We also know that many childcare workers, especially entry-level, do not earn family-sustaining wages and cannot afford to stay in the profession. Other focus areas for the County included building out the talent pipeline for childcare and early childhood education professionals, strong employer engagement, and profitable home-based childcare.

CFMC Convenes Childcare Coalition

With the support of the Michigan Council of Foundations StateWide Equity Fund (SEF), the Community Foundation of Marquette County (CFMC) began working directly with technical assistance providers Grow & Lead and Regionerate LLC and community partners to identify specific barriers to accessing quality and affordable childcare for Marquette County families. CFMC convened the Child Care Coalition (CCC) consisting of child development professionals, education providers, local government, philanthropy, economic development, workforce development, and parent representatives. After meeting weekly, the partners participated in a strategic retreat, creating a shared success vision and pathway projects to enhance the childcare ecosystem. The coalition pledged to collaborate across organizations and recognized the need to research affordable childcare supply and demand data. They also crafted an action plan to secure ARPA funding from the county.

BACKGROUND

Childcare remains one of the highest Survival Budget costs for households with children, and the childcare system is still feeling the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Provider shortages and lack of affordable care present fewer options for parents.

According to the October 2023 Household Pulse Survey, when families in Michigan were asked what they did when childcare was closed, unavailable, or unaffordable, the most common responses for respondents below the ALICE Threshold were to cut work hours (37%) and to take unpaid leave (28%).

MICHIGAN | MAY 2024

ALICE IN THE CROSSCURRENTS: UPDATE



Unique Partnership Launches Childcare SPARK Accelerator

With background data in hand, partnerships built, and access to high-quality technical assistance providers, CFMC was able to convene the partners to explore the opportunities and pathways available to close the childcare gap in the County. **SPARK** – a partnership between Lake Superior Community Partnership Foundation, Great Start to Quality Upper Peninsula (UP) Resource Center, Marquette-Alger Regional Educational Service Agency, CFMC, Marquette County, and Regionerate LLC – was **launched as an ambitious initiative to create a pipeline of childcare providers who can offer economically viable and financially sustainable high-quality care services for all families in the region.**

This work is a testament to what is possible when public, private, and philanthropic organizations recognize the potential for collective impact. The SPARK pilot was well-informed by the needs of parents, children, providers, and employers. Community and diverse stakeholder voices were required to promote transparency, equity, and collaboration and to create better and more informed outcomes.

Cross-Sector Collaboration

The Childcare SPARK Program represents an unprecedented collaboration between the region's county government, entrepreneurship support organizations, social services, early childcare, and higher education institutions. These partnerships give us a strong starting point for recruiting additional support. This unique effort links and leverages resource providers in the early childhood education and small business development sectors—two sectors that were not linked before. Several additional sectors supported the design and pilot, including workforce development, small business development, economic development, early childhood education, higher education, and childcare services.

In September 2023, the first cohort of three childcare providers graduated from the Childcare SPARK program, supporting up to 18 families in Marquette County. Childcare SPARK is currently enrolling members for the second cohort, and the program already has four new participants enrolled.



Cohort One & Mentors

Theresa Higdon (cohort graduate), Emily Kaare (mentor), Ashley Jarvi (cohort graduate), Christy Aho (mentor), Lysa Stockwell (cohort graduate), Keri Magadanz (mentor)

Cohort One graduated in June 2024.

HISTORY OF CHILDCARE SPARK

Philanthropy Invests in Statewide Equity

Combined with widespread economic hardship throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and an unprecedented influx of federal and local recovery dollars, The Council of Michigan Foundations (CMF) created the Statewide Equity Fund (SEF). In January 2022, CMF invested in Marquette County to convene stakeholders and develop local approaches to equitable planning and distribution of incoming American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) resources. Community Foundation of Marquette County (CFMC) was selected as one of five SEF pilot sites and worked with the technical assistance providers and community partners to advance equitable distribution of ARPA funding.

Leveraging ARPA Dollars

Marquette County ARPA's allocation of nearly \$13M included a significant investment in community projects, including \$100,000 for childcare. It is important to note that Childcare SPARK is a grassroots effort without significant seed funding. Despite receiving less than 1% of ARPA dollars, the Community Foundation was able to leverage donations from individuals, and other core partners leveraged their existing staff and resources to design and launch this program. As an example of follow-up funding, The Community Foundation has established a new Marquette County Child Care Endowment Fund to support childcare needs in Marquette County. The purpose of the Marquette County Child Care Endowment Fund is to provide long-term support for sustainable, quality childcare programs in Marquette County, such as the Childcare SPARK.

Providing Business Education to Providers

The Community Foundation of Marquette County (CFMC) first convened the Marquette County Child Care Task Force in 2022. The network of cross-sector partners in Marquette County shared a unified vision to see more family-owned licensed childcare provider businesses thrive, and to create a prototype for providing business education and specialized childcare service support, ensuring that Marquette County can meet the current and future demand for quality childcare. By linking entrepreneurial support services with child development professionals, the program teaches childcare providers the specific requirements to open home-based and family childcare centers, and the business and financial skills necessary to maintain and grow.



CORE COALITION MEMBERS

The [Community Foundation of Marquette County](#) was established in 1988 by a small group of philanthropic community leaders and a gift of \$30,000. Over time the Community Foundation began to expand within the County and created four affiliate funds that help serve the following communities: Negaunee, Marquette, Gwinn, and Greater Ishpeming. Through charitable giving of funds and time, the Foundation distributes grants and scholarships within Marquette County. Growing endowed funds for the future of Marquette County and addressing current community needs through community leadership projects are some of the ways the Foundation aims to enrich the lives of all people in Marquette County.

[Regionerate LLC](#) partners with tech-based economic development organizations, philanthropic organizations, workforce development partnerships, and industry associations to facilitate and support innovation and entrepreneurship, regional economic development, equity and inclusion, strategic planning, and grant writing. Regionerate understands the need and requirements to blend, braid, layer, and leverage funding sources to drive systemic change. Founder and CEO, Linda Fowler, deeply understands, practices, and implements diversity, inclusion, and equity through civic engagement, consultation, and coaching. Regionerate assists clients in developing innovative strategies to enhance their performance and achieve competitive advantage.

[Lake Superior Community Partnership Foundation \(LSCPF\)](#), is a 501(c)(3) corporation whose primary mission is to promote and advance economic and workforce development in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. As an outgrowth of the Lake Superior Community Partnership, the Foundation Board comprises a diverse group of active community leaders who promote and advance education, economic and workforce development, and cultural and recreational activities in the Upper Peninsula. LSCPF served as the fiduciary agent for the Childcare SPARK, with services including, but not limited to, business training, coaching, and lab operations.



CORE COALITION MEMBERS

Great Start to Quality Upper Peninsula Resource Center (GSQ UP RC) is focused on supporting high-quality childcare and is Michigan's Quality Recognition and Improvement System. They serve Alger, Baraga, Chippewa, Delta, Dickinson, Gogebic, Houghton, Iron, Keweenaw, Luce, Mackinac, Marquette, Menominee, Ontonagon, and Schoolcraft counties. Located in Marquette, the GSQ UP RC helps families find childcare in the Upper Peninsula and supports providers in improving their programs by providing individualized consultation, coaching, and access to training and resources. Great Start to Quality will be the one-stop/front door for potential home childcare providers/entrepreneurs.

Marquette-Alger Regional Educational Service Agency (Marquette-Alger RESA) is the intermediary school district for Marquette County. Their early childhood programs serve children from birth to age five. Programs are provided in collaboration with various agencies that serve children and families. Great Start Collaborative is available to all families with children up to age five in the Marquette and Alger Counties. Early On is available to eligible children up to age three and their families. The Great Start Readiness Program is open to all eligible 4-year-old children. Marquette-Alger RESA will provide state-funded Tri-Share Program leadership, mentorship, education, and workforce development services for child development professionals.



"It has been exciting working with individuals that are becoming entrepreneurs in the Early Care and Education field. The impact that these individuals have had on our community and the children in their care has led to a positive influence on both their early education and their parents' ability to stay in the workforce. It has been an honor to watch the growth and passion in the participants."

- Deb Dupras
Program Director
GSQ UP RC

CHILDCARE SPARK PILOT

Our program is based on five key elements. Participants receive timely education and key information needed to launch their businesses. They benefit from peer-to-peer learning and support. We also bring a network of resource providers including mentors that advise on financial, strategic, and practical know-how to succeed as home-based childcare providers. We provide hands-on technical assistance to guide participants through licensing, compliance, and operational challenges. Lastly, we provide start-up funds to participants to help cover the costs of opening their home-based businesses.

Key Pilot Elements:



Education & Information



Peer-to-Peer Learning & Support



Technical Assistance



Mentorship



Start-Up Funds

PILOT FRAMEWORK - DISCOVER, DESIGN, DELIVER, AND ADJUST

Data-Driven Strategies

The playbook is divided into four main pillars of activity. The discovery phase was critical to gather quantitative and qualitative data. The data from the needs assessment and stakeholder forums gave the design team the information needed to determine the best path forward for closing the childcare gap in Marquette County. Meeting regularly to discuss the data and its implications for building the program was a critical foundation for SPARK.

Collaborative Conversations

The second stage of working together beyond exchanging information, sharing resources, and exploring a shared vision, was the design process itself. The Community Foundation of Marquette County was the initial glue for the network. They created the space and time for design team members to share the experience and knowledge of their respective roles and organizations and go beyond to create new value together. CFMC provided a formal facilitator and a trust-building environment. No one partner was “in charge” of the group. Rather, everyone participated, building on each other’s ideas, and contributing to the overall pilot success.

CHILDCARE SPARK PILOT

Linking and Leveraging Assets

The team committed to short-term action plans in 30-day increments until outcomes were achieved. Linking and leveraging assets was required for the pilot execution. For example, Marquette-Alger RESA offered its headquarters after hours to be the location for classroom-based learning. The County grant covered food and childcare costs as well as stipends to pay the participants and their mentors. Lake Superior Partnership Foundation and Regionerate focused on Business Development materials and Marquette-Alger RESA and the Resource Center contributed educational and training resources for early childhood development and starting a home-based childcare center.

Building Trust & Learning Together

The partners identified activities that would move them in the right direction and discussed what short-term steps made the most sense for them to pursue at that moment. A positive feedback loop formed as the design team invested more and more time and resources in the collaboration. When they gathered back together to report what they learned, they would adjust as necessary and set the course for the next period needed. Working together required trust-building and constant experimentation.



Classes with Childcare Spark Cohort One participants.

PHASE ONE: DISCOVERY

Needs Assessment

We began the Discovery Process with a **Formal Needs Assessment**. Through funding from SEF, CFMC contracted a local consulting firm, Grow & Lead to interview nonprofits and the people they serve to receive feedback and generate solutions. Regionerate LLC, a national consulting firm, worked directly with service providers and facilitated stakeholder working groups to create pathway projects and develop specific funding recommendations. They co-authored a Report of Needs Assessment and Preliminary Recommendations.

(See [Appendix A](#)).

In response to the needs assessment report, the coalition determined that the most impactful move would be to help address the shortage of in-home childcare providers. In-home businesses have several advantages: (1) have a lower barrier of entry, including different regulations; (2) can be more easily located close to the families needing the service; (3) would face lower operating costs, passing on those savings to families; (4) would need less labor, thus avoiding a major challenge many businesses currently face.

Creating the SPARK Roadmap

The Child Care Coalition (CCC) met weekly by Zoom for 24 months and participated in a two-day planning retreat facilitated by Linda Fowler, President of Regionerate LLC. The in-person retreat was hosted by CFMC and included many core partners and new members throughout the two days. The agenda for the meeting included establishing a shared vision of success and creating a set of pathway projects to move the needle on closing the significant gaps in the childcare ecosystem (providers, staffing, wages, career pathways).

Solving complex challenges requires significantly more effort, a tolerance for uncertainty, and the presence of divergent voices. Change comes from the collective intelligence of the people engaged, and the right questions will guide them toward solutions.

Framing Questions & Ranking Opportunities

Regionerate reinforced the importance of asking opportunity-focused framing questions to inspire the discussion over the two-day retreat. The participants shared their unique resources and committed to working together across organizational boundaries to research supply and demand data for affordable quality childcare. By the end of the two days, the coalition had developed a draft action plan for the next 3 to 6 months to inform a business case and prepare a formal proposal to the county for ARPA dollars.

In evaluating opportunities to work together, the coalition agreed to consider whether the pilots would be (1) feasible, scalable, and replicable; (2) reasonable cost; (3) evidence-based and data-informed; and (4) aligned with county and other funder priorities. Common themes that cut across the desired outcomes included quality, affordable childcare for all ages, including infant care; livable wages for childcare providers and workers; talent pipeline for childcare and early childhood education professionals; strong employer engagement; and profitable home-based childcare.

Working Together As a Network of Assets

Next, the Childcare Coalition uncovered assets that people were willing to share. The resources were not just financial. In this way, CCC took stock of all those resources, which we call assets. Types of assets include physical spaces, talent or specialized knowledge, social capital/networks, and funding sources. Assets help CCC answer the question, “What could we do together?”

The coalition discussed the need for innovative business models to support publicly funded and privately run childcare centers. Private Sector engagement is key to covering a portion of the costs. Employer scholarships for employees to access quality and affordable childcare represent one model for consideration.

MI TriShare is an innovative approach to increasing access to childcare in the state of Michigan. Through MI TriShare the cost of childcare is shared equally between the employee, the employer, and the state of Michigan. ([MI Tri-Share](#)) After the meeting in June, the state passed legislation extending the TriShare dollars beyond the pilot period.

PHASE TWO: DESIGN

DESIGN TEAM



The CCC voted on potential impact and ease of implementation for many opportunities to work together. We discussed what we “should do together” and what we “will do together” over the next 3 to 6 months. As feasible, a core group of partners (“design team”) agreed to meet biweekly and produce results on the following commitments in 30 to 60 days.

Characteristics of Success

The CCC spent time defining specific strategic outcomes that answer questions like, “If we were completely successful, what would we see? What would be different?” The following criteria were used to help define possible pathfinder projects funded by ARPA dollars.

The first five questions published by the County provide an initial framework of analysis:

- Does the proposed project have a county-wide impact?
- Does the proposed project correlate with the County’s master plan strategies?
- Does the proposed project positively affect County-funded services?
- Does the proposed project fit into one of the categories already identified by the County Board of Commissioners?
- Does the proposed project leverage other funds or demonstrate a collaborative effort?



As stakeholders were interviewed and the design team collected data, an additional set of filters was critical for recommending county-wide initiatives. Anchored by action-oriented principles, the framework firmly places equity at the center of its work. Pilots aligned with these guidelines helped inform the formation of longer-term strategies and structures that can guide future public support.

Strategic Outcomes

- Does the proposed project address issues created or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Does the project address and eliminate gaps in outcomes for underserved and underrepresented populations?
- To what extent is this project led by or created with direct input from underrepresented communities?
- Does the proposed project directly impact underrepresented communities impacted by the pandemic?
- How sustainable is the project? Will it require ongoing support?
- How much support does the proposal currently have or will likely have?
- What is the opportunity for transformation change for Marquette County residents?



Core Coalition Members

*Zosia Eppensteiner, Deb Dupras, Meagan Guindon, Rebecca Dales, Lyndsay Carey, Christopher Germain
Linda Fowler (not pictured)*

Pilot Project Start-Up Decisions

Designing a pilot accelerator for home-based childcare entrepreneurs was embraced as the most feasible and high-impact collaboration. Based on benchmarking other similar programs, **design issues to address early on** were:

- Desired Performance Outcomes
- Cohort Selection Criteria
- Start-Up Costs
- Application and Selection Process
- Outreach and Promotion
- Program Management and Staff Support
- Curricula Development and Updates
- Recruitment and Onboarding of Mentors

Future Program Budget Considerations

As you're designing the budget for future Childcare SPARK programs, the following should be considered:

- Facility Improvements
- Stipend for Pilot Participants
- Stipend for Mentors
- Pre-Licensure Support
 - Licensing Fees and other related expenses
- Business Coaching
- Honorarium for Key Speakers
- Administration Fees for Accelerator Operator
- Other Costs
 - Ex: Childcare, Food, Events, Graduation Gifts, Suppliers, Marketing, Travel, Wonder School Subscription

Desired Performance Outcomes

To ensure the effectiveness and progress of the proposed interventions, several short-term measures of success were identified. These measures focus on providing tangible support to entrepreneurs and enhancing their access to resources. By working toward these short-term goals, we can track the progress and impact of our efforts in bridging the childcare gap for Marquette and surrounding counties. These measures not only reflect the tangible support provided but also indicate the empowerment and increased opportunities for underrepresented businesses.

Much entrepreneurial success can be attributed to the networks with which founders are connected. If they know the right people, they can more easily access capital, find customers, secure space, attract talent, and more.

Six to Twelve Month Outcomes

- At least **85%** of participants will graduate from the Childcare SPARK program with 24 hours of training credits.
- **All students** who graduate will complete licensing requirements **within 90 days** through one-on-one assistance from the CCS team.
- At least **90% of program** participants will have **filled their childcare spots** within six months of completing the training program.
- Over 70% of students will enroll in ongoing professional development opportunities.

In addition to short-term goals, there are also long-term measures that reflect the transformative impact of the proposed interventions. These long-term measures of success focus on the sustainable growth and development of home-based childcare business owners in our region. The creation of well-paying jobs signifies economic empowerment, while the provision of financial readiness training enables sustainable growth and resilience.



Kristen Carlson, Meagan Guindon, Rebecca Dales, Christopher Germain, Deb Dupras, Lyndsay Carey, Zosia Eppensteiner

Cohort Selection Criteria

An important aspect of the design process was agreeing on the Pilot Cohort Selection Criteria. The design team looked initially at only Marquette County for its geographical boundaries. They prioritized rural community residents as they were less able to access public transit and afford large childcare centers in and near downtown Marquette. Other criteria included the income of the potential entrepreneur. The [application form](#) asked for ranges of current annual income on a web-based application. Initially, the partners made home ownership a criteria but adjusted that requirement if the tenant had landlord approval to open a home-based childcare center on their property. SPARK initially set a four-week application window but did not receive enough viable candidates. As a result, we extended the deadline and were more proactive in outreach and marketing of the opportunity.

Pre-Qualification

The following requirements must be met before entering the program:

- Complete the Registered Family Child Care Classes One and Two
- Initiate the Central Background Registry
- Submit home “water testing” sample
- Verify that the Homeowner’s Association (HOA) or rental lease agreement allows for operating a childcare business out of your home.
- Complete SPARK application with key information
- Sign participant agreement to follow program guidelines

Start-Up Costs

The Childcare SPARK Capital Investment Grant is provided to active participants in the Childcare SPARK program to cover some - and in some cases, all - of facility improvements and capital investments necessary for successfully passing inspection and licensing requirements to operate a home-based childcare business.

Participants may request up to **\$5,000**.

To unlock funds, a participant must demonstrate they have invested **at least \$500** of their capital into start-up costs for the business since execution of the SPARK participant agreement and have met key milestones including completion of online and classroom-based lesson plans and meetings with mentors to complete assignments.

Start-Up Costs (Continued):

Average start-up costs are estimated at \$500.

Item	Cost
License Fee	\$50-100
Zoning	<i>Potential</i>
Furnace/Hot Water Inspection	Up to \$200
Environmental Inspection	<i>Covered by LARA</i>
Radon Inspection	\$15
Finger Printing	\$70/pp
TB Test/Physical	Up to \$120
CPR/First Aid Training	\$85
Health & Safety Course	FREE

Application and Selection Process

[Applications](#) opened in March but determining where and how to market mattered. The program struggled to find participants for the first cohort. It felt frustrating to spend months building a program and offering it at very little cost just to have no one sign up. Over those months, the start date was delayed due to a lack of interest. But the coalition pushed through, updating the program to include the stipend and removing a requirement for home ownership. When a dedicated project manager started in June, they did direct outreach to informal mom groups, made fliers, and attended events to find new candidates. These efforts yielded more than twice as many applicants for the second cohort in just a month.

Sample Application Questions

(See a full list of application questions, [here.](#))

- Are you planning to operate your childcare business in your home?
- Why are you interested in owning your own business?
- Which of the following business development areas do you feel you need the most help with?
- Why are you interested in working in childcare?
- Which of the following childcare and development areas do you feel you need the most help with?
- Since the program is hybrid, how comfortable are you with computer technology and navigating the internet?
- How will this opportunity impact you personally and professionally?

Outreach and Promotion

Initially, we had limited success attracting applicants through our [website](#) and [social media posts](#) alone. To see the marketing brochure and other social media materials, click [here](#). Our applicant pool significantly increased once we began attending outreach events and utilizing broader networks to promote the opportunity. For Cohort Two, we offered an in-person open house and invited members of Cohort One to share their experiences.

By working closely with a Parent Advocacy Coalition consisting of parents, policy and advocacy organizations, and interested stakeholders, we successfully promoted the pilot across their personal and professional networks. The pilot offered incentives. Those who fully participate could receive two \$500 stipends, and another \$500 when they successfully opened a childcare business. Additionally, SPARK offered financial support for minor home improvements, permit costs, and resource memberships.

Program Management and Staff Support

With the grant award from the County, we budgeted for a part-time program manager. Their responsibilities included participating in program development meetings, coordinating infrastructure setup, managing marketing and recruitment for cohorts, implementing program aspects (including speakers, mentoring, and business support), establishing expertise in childcare and business development, coordinating data collection and grant reporting, delivering presentations and written communications, and performing additional duties as assigned by the Director of Business Development or the CEO.

Our first hire was an undergraduate junior at Northern Michigan University who was majoring in business analytics and interested in a career in economic development. She had relevant experience from growing up with parents who owned two successful businesses downstate. However, as a full-time student, her availability was limited to Fridays and evening hours. Since the classes were held in the evenings, the CCC determined she would be a good fit for a part-time position.

Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances, she was unable to continue in her project manager role. We resumed our search and successfully hired another part-time employee who was a former teacher. This employee's contract ended with the graduation of Cohort Two, but she continues to work on an as-needed basis.

Read the Project Manager job posting [here](#).

Program Development - First Cohort Curriculum

For the first cohort, Regionerate reviewed a set of existing materials provided by the State of MI for supporting new home and family-based childcare center operators primarily for business development. After careful review, the team integrated some of the existing curriculum with newly developed educational materials to meet key learning objectives. At the same time, Marquette-Alger RESA and Great Start to Quality collated their training materials on early childhood development and quality childcare service delivery to build out the curricula to ensure that the pilot cohort would be successful in navigating the state licensing system and understand promising practices for running a home-based childcare business. It was important to focus on Adult Learner Pedagogy and make each session interactive.

Program Development - First Cohort Curriculum Continued:

During Cohort One, our in-person curricula focused on the following concepts:

- Understanding how to become a licensed home-based childcare provider
 - Complete Certifications: First Aid and Pediatric CPR and Food Handlers
 - Completing licensing requirements and submitting a Registered Family or Certified Family License Application
 - Scheduling and passing the Health and Safety Inspection
 - Best Practice Policies and Procedures for Childcare Businesses
- Understanding the financials of running a business
 - Registering business online with the Michigan Secretary of State
 - Getting a business Tax ID
 - Creating a Business Plan
 - Understanding and Managing Financials

However, based on participant feedback and key learnings we offered a hybrid model of in-person and virtual classroom content for Cohort Two. We also added more in-depth content on business basics and the opportunity to access one-on-one coaching with one or more entrepreneurship support organizations in the ecosystem, such as [Accelerate Up](#) business coaching. See the updated syllabus and schedule for Cohort Two [here](#).

TACTIC: *Provide established businesses with training development and strategic planning to help them improve operations and key connections.*

Mentorship Platform

An important aspect of the program was to identify qualified mentors who were currently running home-based daycare or had recently retired. The Resource Center staff works closely with home and family-based childcare providers, so they reached out to their professional network to recruit one mentor for each participant. Matchmaking was based on understanding the individual needs of the potential entrepreneurs and the background and experience of the individual mentors. See [Appendix B](#) for mentor selection criteria and MOUs.

TACTIC: *Engage mentors and volunteers from the target community who represent the target demographics.*

PHASE THREE: DELIVERY

After months of work between our core partners, the Marquette County In-Home Childcare Business Incubator – branded as Childcare SPARK – (“SPARK”) was born.

Cohort 1 Project Timeline

Early 2023: Program Development

March: Program Launch

March 15 – April 7: Receive Applications

April: Review and Acceptance of Students

May – July: Weekly Sessions & Mentoring

August: Graduation

Classroom Training, Setup, and Delivery

Using a cohort model, SPARK provided twelve 1.5-hour live sessions over 3 months, connected participants with a mentor, and provided support via other resources as needed. There was no cost to participate in SPARK; in fact, participants received up to \$1,500 in stipends for their time and had access to other funds to help with home improvements, licensing costs, etc. Participants did have to sign a [formal agreement](#) to participate.

Cohort 1 Program Schedule

Find sessions and content descriptions [here](#).

- Business 101
- Licensing and Regulatory Affairs
- Business 102
- Relationships and Interactions
- Child Development
- Conflict Resolution, Social Emotional, Trauma / ACES
- Routines, Schedule, & Organization
- Activities & Developmentally Appropriate Practices
 - (2 sessions)
- Observational Tools & Referrals
- Finance and Business 103
- Power of Networks
- Wonderschool

Cohort 2 Program Schedule



Childcare SPARK Content Schedule

Module A	
Content/Assignments/Tasks	Format
<input type="checkbox"/> Information and Connections <i>Introduction to Childcare SPARK, Overview of partnering agencies, introduction to MiRegistry and Licensing.</i>	In-person Meeting
<input type="checkbox"/> Sign <i>Participant agreement, permission for photography use, W-9, chromebook borrowing agreement if needed.</i>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Assignment: Create MiRegistry account	
<input type="checkbox"/> Meet your Mentor <i>An in-person meeting to meet your mentor, ask questions, etc.</i>	In-person Meeting
<input type="checkbox"/> Sign <i>Mentor agreement, W-9 if not on file already, permission for photography use if not already on file.</i>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Preparing Your Home for Licensing <i>An overview of requirements for your home from the LARA checklist.</i>	Google Classroom Content
<input type="checkbox"/> Assignment: Submit questions regarding licensing rules into the Google classroom.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Assignment: Submit completed checklist to identify what needs to be addressed to bring your home to licensing standards.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Business 101 <i>An overview of LLC, Insurance, EIN, owning a business, writing a business plan, etc.</i>	Google Classroom Content
<input type="checkbox"/> Assignment: Apply for LLC or DBA & EIN.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Assignment: Meet with Brooke at LSCP and start working on a business plan.	
<input type="checkbox"/> Envelopes, Receipts, Paperwork-Oh My! Let's Get Organized <i>An overview of the organizing of records and paperwork needed for running a child care business.</i>	Google Classroom Content



PHASE THREE: DELIVERY

Startup Grants to Remove Barriers

In addition to receiving formal classroom education and training and mentoring support, the [Childcare SPARK Capital Investment Grant](#) was provided to active participants in the Childcare SPARK program to cover facility improvements and capital investments. These funds were necessary to meet requirements for successfully passing inspection and licensing requirements to operate a home-based childcare business. Participants may request up to \$5,000. To unlock the funds, a participant must demonstrate they have invested at least \$500 of their capital into start-up costs for the business (10% match). The grant is intended to be flexible, acknowledging the different situations each participant may have upon entering into the program.

Providing Strong Program Management

Providing start-up home and family childcare providers with the resources and assistance they need to grow their businesses requires that the program has a competent staff with sufficient resources—including time—to work directly with the providers.

In the SPARK model, members of our partner network and outside subject matter experts worked directly with cohort participants to teach business basics and the foundations of ensuring quality childcare. The design team members and mentors established milestones (such as getting certified and licensed); regularly monitored cohort progress; and helped the participants navigate setbacks.

This collaborative effort worked for the pilot stage with a small cohort of individuals, but it is not practical for growing and maintaining the program.

The CCC relied on a part-time program administrator who was located at LSCP and managed by their executive director. The salary was supported by the County ARPA dollars.

As SPARK evolves and expands, it will need to be supported by an experienced program manager with responsibility for operations in addition to basic administrative functions.

GRADUATION

- At the end of August, the first cohort wrapped up with a formal graduation ceremony. Graduates were presented with certificates at the CFMC Annual Dinner. Current funding allowed for a second cohort, and efforts to fund additional cohorts are already underway. The vision is to see more family-owned childcare provider businesses thrive. This means inspiring more entrepreneurs to start home-based/family childcare businesses and surrounding them with the expertise and resources they need to successfully enter and scale the market.



Hanna Westra, Steven VandenAvond, Theresa Champion, Theresa Higdon, Rebecca Dales, Lynn Hill, Brooke Quinn

CELEBRATION OF SUCCESS



We are happy to report the following tangible results from our first cohort:



*100% Attendance
Logged by Cohort One*



*2 out of 3 participants
received First Aid
& CPR Certifications*



*Trusted relationships
were built between
program team and
providers.*

24

*Each provider logged
24 hours of free training
(Counts towards annual
training requirement)*

30

*New childcare slots!
2 centers with 12 openings
1 center with 6 openings
+ waiting lists.*

PHASE FOUR: ADJUST

SEPTEMBER 2023 OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the first cohort's graduation in August, the core design team met in September 2023 to do an after-action review. Based on the design team's observations, lessons learned, and participant feedback, the following elements of the pilot were reinforced or refined for the Second Cohort in the spirit of continuous improvement.

OUTREACH & PROMOTION

Building Awareness: SPARK informed Cohort One through various channels and engaged early with potential childcare providers. Cohort Two was launched with an Open House involving first-cohort graduates, and follow-up discussions to clarify expectations.

PROGRAM CONTENT

One Size Does Not Fit All: Participant feedback on weekly lessons varied based on experience levels in early childhood development. Some content will be optional for more experienced providers, with a potential course sequence change to better accommodate diverse backgrounds.

Access to Business Acumen and Specific Subject Matter Expertise: The first cohort's request for more personalized technical assistance will be met by exploring Wonder School modules and leveraging State of MI-supported subscriptions until December 2024. Cohort Two received online self-paced learning materials for Business Basics and one-on-one coaching with Lake Superior Partners. Participants also had the option of leveraging free mentors at Accelerate UP.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

Build a Resource Directory: SPARK will connect providers with professionals like accountants and legal advisors who specialize in small business support, particularly for home-based childcare businesses.

PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Staffing and Administration: After a part-time employee resigned, a former teacher was hired to handle various administrative and operational tasks, including communications, marketing, and evaluations.

ACCELERATOR LOGISTICS

Yearly Program Offering: Participants preferred a fall schedule over summer for the program. Consequently, the second cohort began in mid-October and graduated by February 2024.

Schedule for Weekly Meetings: The initial 12-week program will be extended to 16 weeks with two-hour weekly meetings, addressing the first cohort's request for more classroom time.

PROGRAM DELIVERY

Leveraging National Associations: Remaining budget funds will allow graduates to enroll in ongoing professional development opportunities, such as those offered by the National Association of Childcare Providers.

Mentorship Platform: A new MOU will clarify expectations for mentor-mentee interactions, ensuring regular and effective engagement.

Access to Online Portal and Knowledge Resources: SPARK uses Google Classroom to provide participants with ongoing access to training resources and an online portal, supporting continuous learning and community engagement.

Hybrid Learning: Future cohorts will follow a hybrid model, allowing participants to learn at their own pace online with support from mentors and required check-ins, ensuring comprehension before advancing and unlocking facility upgrade funds based on progress.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Support for Navigating State Regulations: SPARK will continue to offer support through MiLEAP navigators and Great Start to Quality to help providers overcome regulatory hurdles.

POST ACCELERATOR ACTIVITIES

Post Accelerator Engagement with Peers: Graduates will be invited to Cohort Two's Open House and other formal networking and educational events to continue their professional development.

Post Accelerator Coaching for Quality: SPARK will link new providers with Great Start to Quality for continuous improvement and share best practices across cohorts.

KEY LEARNINGS

Summary

The SPARK program recognizes that every entrepreneur has unique strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities, so their offerings are custom tailored to meet specific needs through a mix of cohort classroom-based and one-to-one training with an experienced mentor entrepreneur. Through these relationships, entrepreneurs develop business skills, improve problem solving, receive support, and engage with the broader community.

- **Growth & Sustainability of Home-Based/Family Child Care Businesses**
- Create communities & networks that encourage connections to access talent & funding.
- Help startups secure government funding and/or leverage government resources for success. Provide established businesses with training development and strategic planning to help them improve operations and key connections.
- Create funds specifically designed for entrepreneurs in the target demographic.
- Advocate for and facilitate customer connections and relationships.
- Form a collaborative network with other entrepreneurial support entities to help companies access the funding, talent and other resources they need to succeed.

SPARK program participants receive milestone-driven stipends as they work towards opening their businesses. Upon graduation from the program, entrepreneurs join a peer support group to work through challenges, and provide general support. Ultimately, the goal of the SPARK program is to increase the number of locally owned startups in the community while also increasing revenue and jobs overall. SPARK also engages existing community networks and creates new entrepreneurial resources.

Programming & Culture

- Be deliberate about meeting space selection, design, accessibility and culture.
- Offer specific programming and employ tactics to reach target communities.
- Engage mentors and volunteers who represent the target demographics and have a social justice lens.
- Create partnerships with other ecosystem players to provide more resources for entrepreneurs.

KEY LEARNINGS

Customize Programmatic Elements for Each Community

To help small business owners and entrepreneurs who have long lacked equal access to resources succeed in the startup world, entrepreneurship centers often also need to offer **specific programming, deliberate connections, and other targeted resources**. The approach these programs take depends on many factors, including the nature of their ecosystems and the demographic(s) they intend to target. Starting and managing an entrepreneurship program involves dozens of choices, some more significant than others. Marquette County is a rural area; the coalition recognized the importance of meeting people where they were to ensure each part of the county was considered to better understand ongoing childcare needs.

Create a Welcoming Classroom Environment

The **location of the program** can have a huge impact on the demographics of the entrepreneurs reached, especially if it is not easily accessible by public transportation. If the location has already been set or is otherwise not flexible, staff should look at creative ways to make it easy for target demographics to get there. Once they are there, they need to create a sense of belonging by how the space is arranged, what the atmosphere is like, who approaches them, and many other details. For example, we leveraged space donated by one of the partners and provided dinner and childcare for attendees.

Consider Participant Financial Limitations

Accessibility isn't just about location and appearance, though – **affordability plays an important role**, too. If the pricing structure is out of range for entrepreneurs of modest means, the program will only attract people who have a financial safety net. SPARK is free to participants and offers startup grants, as mentioned earlier.

KEY LEARNINGS

Leverage Key Partnerships to Identify All Resources

There are many resources aimed at reducing access gaps for diverse entrepreneurs and many organizations working to help underserved entrepreneurs become better connected. Creating partnership with other organizations can help bolster capacity and resources, ultimately benefiting the entrepreneurs by creating new offerings and connecting them with key opportunities.

As you contemplate the assets closest at hand for your entrepreneurial program, consider the variety of stakeholders and partners who may help support your entrepreneurship center and/or community:

- Child Development Resource Centers
- Existing place-based entrepreneurial programs
- Workforce development resources – state and federal
- Community champions – both formal and informal
- Funding resources partners – community foundations, local banks and state/federal funding organizations
- Educational institutions – community and four-year colleges and post-secondary training schools
- Commercial real estate owners of buildings or buildings in need of revitalization
- Political representatives



KEY LEARNINGS

Ongoing Evaluations & Improvements

Continually evaluate your program and make adjustments along the way. Six weeks into the program, coalition partners had already identified lessons learned for others looking to start a similar program in their communities. Perhaps the most important is that the power of connection can't be overstated. There are many online courses or one-day seminars on how to start a business; there are even ones specific to childcare, but so much learning happens through shared experiences with others. For Cohort Two, we transitioned to a virtual classroom for most sessions, but scheduled three face-to-face meetings at key points in the program to maintain opportunities for in-person connection and learning.

Establish a Financial Sustainability Strategy

CFMC started with a vision for how they wanted to utilize the ARPA funds, informed by local data and aligned with the Marquette County Master Plan. The CCC identified its short term and long term outcomes for success as a guide for measuring the effectiveness of SPARK. Begin with the end in mind and establish a Financial Sustainability Strategy. SPARK Sustainability will include leveraging diverse sources of funds, such as CMF- Statewide Equity Funders, DTE Energy Foundation, MDARD Grant Application, and MEDC-Small Business Support.

For example, in 2022, the Community Foundation established the Marquette County Childcare Endowment Fund. This fund provides grant funding for eligible 501(c)(3) organizations supporting quality, affordable childcare in Marquette County.



THIS CAN BE DONE!

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to delivering a home-based childcare center accelerator. This playbook outlines some possible tactics for designing an intentional program for communities to create new educational opportunities and helping entrepreneurs access the resources and funding they need to succeed. This book is meant to inspire readers to get creative about what will work best in their communities.

Supporting home-based family childcare entrepreneurs is so much more than just providing a classroom, training, and some technical assistance and mentoring. There has to be a champion in the community, with boots on the ground. The accelerator of the businesses is the synergy, the services, and the partner relationship between the participants and advisors, and among the participants themselves. It is the emotional support entrepreneurs receive because they know that someone knows what they are going through, and often that knowledge has come from personal experience.

Please take note of the playbook's lessons learned and undertake the actions that you feel most closely fit the program that you are looking to build. And remember – entrepreneurship programs do not happen overnight, and they do not happen alone. Reach out and listen to your community to ensure that you are serving your local entrepreneurs' needs and leveraging your ecosystem's existing assets to the best of your ability.

The best accelerator programs are highly customized to meet local needs as well as customer-focused. The best entrepreneur support programs and organizations, regardless of location and demographics, have developed or are collaborating within regional networks. These networks increase staff efficiencies while expanding the program's resources.

Successful programs also operate like the businesses they help to launch. When budgets are tight, best-practice programs focus on leveraging resources efficiently, creating new initiatives, and implementing innovative solutions that bring in specialized expertise and services to support business growth.

We hope you have found this playbook helpful to your community as you undertake the actions that you feel more closely fit the program that you are looking to build. We look forward to hearing about your efforts and following your progress as you take the initiative to create new opportunities for your community.

For more information on SPARK, contact:

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: REPORT OR NEEDS ASSESSMENT & PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the childcare shortage was as significant as 6,446 slots. Additionally, the report determined that the county had just 20 in-home childcare providers and that nearly all planned to retire in the next 5 years. Combine those local statistics with the overall challenges in the industry, such as regulations and wages, and the coalition knew the answer wouldn't simply be more money.



APPENDICES

Appendix B: Mentor Selection Criteria and MOUs

Mentor Agreement



APPENDICES

Appendix B: Mentor Selection Criteria and MOUs

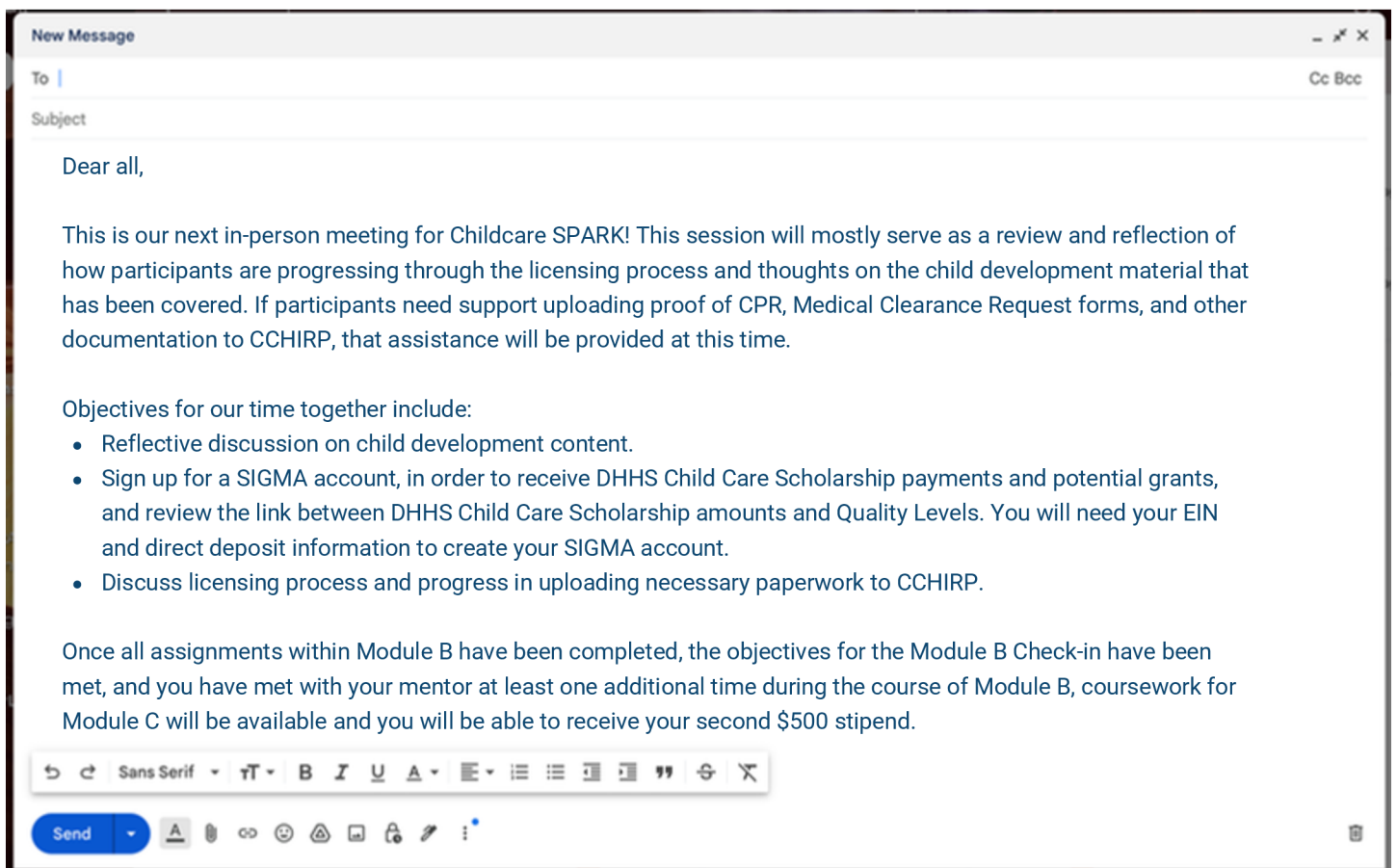
Participant MOU



APPENDICES

Appendix C: Check-In Meetings

After students complete each of the three modules, they have a face to face check-in meeting. They must attend these meeting in order to receive their \$1500 stipends in \$500 installments. Below is a sample announcement/outline for a check-in meeting.



[Sample agenda for instructors here](#)

APPENDICES

Appendix D: Additional Resources

Applications & Agreements

- [Childcare SPARK application form](#)
- [Childcare SPARK Information Questionnaire](#)
- [SPARK Capital Improvements Grant application form](#)
- [Sample Childcare SPARK Capital Improvements Grant Agreement](#)
- [Mentor Agreement](#)
- [Participant Agreement MOUs](#)

Participant Websites

- [Amanda's Home Daycare by Amanda Gonzales-Gravedoni](#)
- [Paradise in Nature Wonderschool by Theresa Higdon](#)

Project Manager Hiring

- [SPARK Project Manager PD](#)

Marketing & Outreach

- [Flyer](#)
- [Marketing Materials](#)
- [Logos](#)
- [Social Media Graphics](#)

Logistics

- [Family & Group Home Compliance Check-list](#)
- [GSQ Home Provider Resources](#)
- [EC Pilot Equipment Budget](#)
- [Strategic Doing Action Pack](#)

APPENDICES

Appendix D Continued: Additional Resources

Curriculum Information

- [Cohort One Curriculum](#)
- [Cohort Two Curriculum](#)
- [Business Series - 12 Modules](#)
- [Starting a Business Resources from Kristen Carlson](#)

Press Coverage

- ["Copper Country Great Start Collaborative offers new in-home child care program,"](#)
Upper Michigan Source, February 25, 2024
- ["Another daycare opens through Childcare SPARK,"](#) *Upward*, January 17, 2024