

# Sparkling Innovation in U.S. Communities and School Districts

## CASE STUDY



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Ensuring early learning that is sustained requires coordinated community efforts that are context specific.

### By Tony Berkley

The SPARK initiative, launched in 2001 by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, was developed to promote permanent improvement in the systems that affect early learning, particularly for vulnerable children ages three to eight. Unlike other initiatives that focus solely on policies or the classroom, SPARK addressed a much larger set of issues. These included parent engagement, public will, culture, and coordinated service delivery. A central component driving the SPARK initiative was partnerships.

SPARK programs were situated in diverse communities where they could be catalysts to unite communities in pursuit of success for school children both before and after they enter kindergarten. Programs were funded in the District of Columbia and seven states: Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Ohio. More than three-fourths of the children enrolled in these programs were children of color, and most came from low-income communities and did not have access to co-

ordinated services or high-quality learning environments.

SPARK was developed differently than most early childhood interventions. While most interventions begin with research and “expert knowledge,” SPARK grounded itself in local context and community initiative. That shift in orientation seemed to work. Evaluations show that SPARK children were more ready for school than non-SPARK children. By 1st grade, some SPARK sites continued to show strong evaluation results, and at least three sites report sustained gains into 3rd grade. SPARK children exceeded their non-SPARK counterparts in school behavior and social skills as well as in their approaches to learning. In addition, some sites report that SPARK kids excelled in reading and math.

Four key principles guided the overall SPARK effort. First, strong partnerships anchored the work in communities and developed contextualized solutions to community needs and conditions, while also creating cross-sector coalitions. These local partnerships worked with private providers, school systems, and

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state-funded preK and Head Start centers to improve quality and create a seamless transition and alignment from the early years to the early grades. Second, all of the projects focused on high-quality early learning at home, in day care, and in preschool to ensure that children were being prepared for school. Third, many sites supported parents so they could be their child's first teacher and best advocate. Fourth, school leaders and teachers worked with community supports to create smooth transitions from early learning settings so children could succeed in school.

**Evaluations show that SPARK children were more ready for school than non-SPARK children, a finding that elevates SPARK to the top tier of successful early childhood interventions.**

An excellent example of engaging community supports for early childhood education is the Local Children's Partnerships (LCPs) in Mississippi. Mississippi SPARK created a community engagement model focused on linking local early care and education with schools and the broader community. Overseen by a state-level steering committee, these LCPs included government officials, business leaders, childcare center directors and teachers, public school teachers, ministers, school administrators, parents, and SPARK staff. Together, they created plans for improving the quality of early childhood education in their communities. Because there are no state-supported preK programs in Mississippi, the LCPs serve as an effective mechanism for overcoming challenges and gaps in services while advocating for increased quality and access.

**PARTNERSHIPS FOR CHANGE**

SPARK clearly demonstrated that community coalitions can drive significant improvements in early education. SPARK not only built a wealth of knowledge for positive change through partnerships, it also directly affected vulnerable children and communities. Building partnerships across communities, childcare and education settings, and schools took place in three phases.

During the *planning phase*, SPARK grantees engaged in three activities to develop the foundation for SPARK implementation. They analyzed community readiness, engaged local stakeholders, and produced implementation plans that became the basis for their follow-on grants. As the partnerships took root and grew, their scope of work evolved.

The New Mexico Community Foundation implemented its SPARK model in Albuquerque and

two other sites across the state. The foundation was able to draw upon an existing framework — called *Joining Hands Together* — developed by the Albuquerque Public Schools. The framework had never been widely implemented, but it provided a blueprint for how to organize transition committees. As the name implies, *Joining Hands Together* tried to create collaborative partnerships to help the child transition smoothly from home into school and, once in school, from one grade to the next. Participants included kindergarten teachers, other elementary teachers, principals, preschool providers, center directors, and child advocates, as well as engaged parents. Their work evolved from building a common orientation among participants to tackling challenges. These included data sharing and tracking from preschool into the early grades, joint professional development between preschool teachers and kindergarten teachers; and parent information and engagement activities, such as parent fairs.

During the *early implementation phase*, SPARK partnerships focused on strengthening early education in their community. As SPARK children began to transition into kindergarten, the conversation expanded to include school leaders. Many programs created structures to tie these two worlds together, such as transition and alignment committees staffed by a mix of preschool providers, parents, and early-grade teachers.

In 2007, using existing Title I funds, Gwinnett County Public Schools adopted and funded the Georgia SPARK school transition model. They hired a countywide Transition Project Manager, organized school transition teams at each of the 21 Title I schools, developed annual transition plans that included a summer transition camp for four-year-olds, and provided training for parent-resource specialists in schools. Since then, a second school district — DeKalb County Public Schools — has also funded 15 schools to implement parent-engagement and school-transition activities. These accomplishments are the result of targeted efforts to align SPARK Georgia strategies with Title I requirements.

Currently, some SPARK leaders are in the *sustainability phase*, working to maintain gains made in the earlier phases by strengthening partnerships at the regional and state levels. As the SPARK initiative evolved, it matured and developed a greater capacity to contribute beyond early childhood education programming, particularly in the areas of agenda setting and advocacy. A key lesson was that systemic initiatives such as SPARK require active leadership that goes well beyond traditional program implementation.

The Miami SPARK grantee, the Early Childhood Initiative Foundation (ECIF), is working on sustain-

ing and scaling services to all needy children in the Miami-Dade area of Florida. ECIF created a coalition of partners that included state voluntary preK providers, health and nutrition programs, the Miami-Dade County Public School District, and university researchers to track and evaluate the effects of the SPARK work through elementary school. Through its partnership with the Children's Trust, ECIF is succeeding in radically rewriting the rules of school readiness in Miami-Dade.

In September 2002, Miami-Dade County approved an independent special district—a dedicated funding source for all children generated through property taxes—called “The Children's Trust.” A “sunset provision” required that the initiative be returned within five years for voter approval. On Aug. 26, 2008, Miami-Dade voters decided in overwhelming numbers—86%—to reauthorize the Children's Trust, this time in perpetuity. The trust will invest \$100 million each year to support a broad base of education, health, and human services programs for children prenatal through age 18.

### SPARK'S SUCCESS

The SPARK initiative has provided much-needed, coordinated services to 8,109 vulnerable children, and in 2009-10, SPARK's proven strategies will help get an estimated 17,885 additional children ready for school. Moreover, the Kellogg Foundation's investment of \$59 million across the eight sites provided a “spark” for further public and private investments. By 2008, SPARK grantees were able to leverage more than \$100 million in additional funds for children in addition to the \$100 million a year from Miami-Dade County.

Seven of eight SPARK grantees provided credible evidence that SPARK children were more ready for kindergarten than a comparison group of their peers (Walter R. McDonald & Associates 2009). This is a strong result, which elevates SPARK to the top tier of successful early childhood interventions. Another outcome was to sustain these gains into elementary school and through 3rd grade.

There were challenges. As SPARK children entered elementary schools, the schism between early childhood education and the K-12 system became apparent. While the transition work supported SPARK kids through kindergarten, in many sites this was not sufficient to support their learning through 3rd grade. Evaluations show that while SPARK sites made significant gains in getting children ready for school, some did little to maximize those gains after kindergarten or 1st grade. Some sites did not have enough data to determine long-term effects.

However, some sites show results that continue into the early elementary school years. Preliminary

findings from an ongoing longitudinal study with six SPARK sites in Ohio, Mississippi, and Hawaii suggest that some gains are sustained into 3rd grade, though further investigation is necessary

### Community coalitions can drive significant improvements in early education.

The Ohio grantee, the Sisters of Charity, recruited Sharon Lynn Kagan, an international expert in early childhood education, to lead the design work while the SPARK team managed the project. This division of labor gave Ohio a world-class intervention customized to that state's circumstances and aligned to a rigorous evaluation. The results are clear and compelling. SPARK children in Ohio not only out-performed their non-SPARK peers, but they also surpassed the average for all Ohio's kindergarteners despite coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. The most recent evaluation indicates that these gains were sustained into 3rd grade for math.

Some of the key lessons from the SPARK initiative are:

- We must address the persistent disconnect between the early childhood education field and the K-12 system at the school district level;
- We must inform state-level education policy makers about what works to align preK to 3rd-grade education;
- We must engage parents in their children's education; and
- We must develop research designs that determine the effectiveness of the systems that connect children's learning experiences from three to eight years old.

The SPARK programs have shown strong results and have attracted the attention of other funders, state leaders, and federal agencies. However, while every SPARK program succeeded in increasing the inputs into vulnerable children's lives, not every site succeeded in measuring gains in children's development. Taking the lessons learned from SPARK and translating them into future grantmaking is the next step. **K**

### REFERENCE

Walter R. McDonald & Associates. *SPARK Final Evaluation Report*. Washington, D.C.: Walter R. McDonald & Associates, 2009.

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