

SUPPORTING PARTNERSHIPS TO ASSURE READY KIDS™

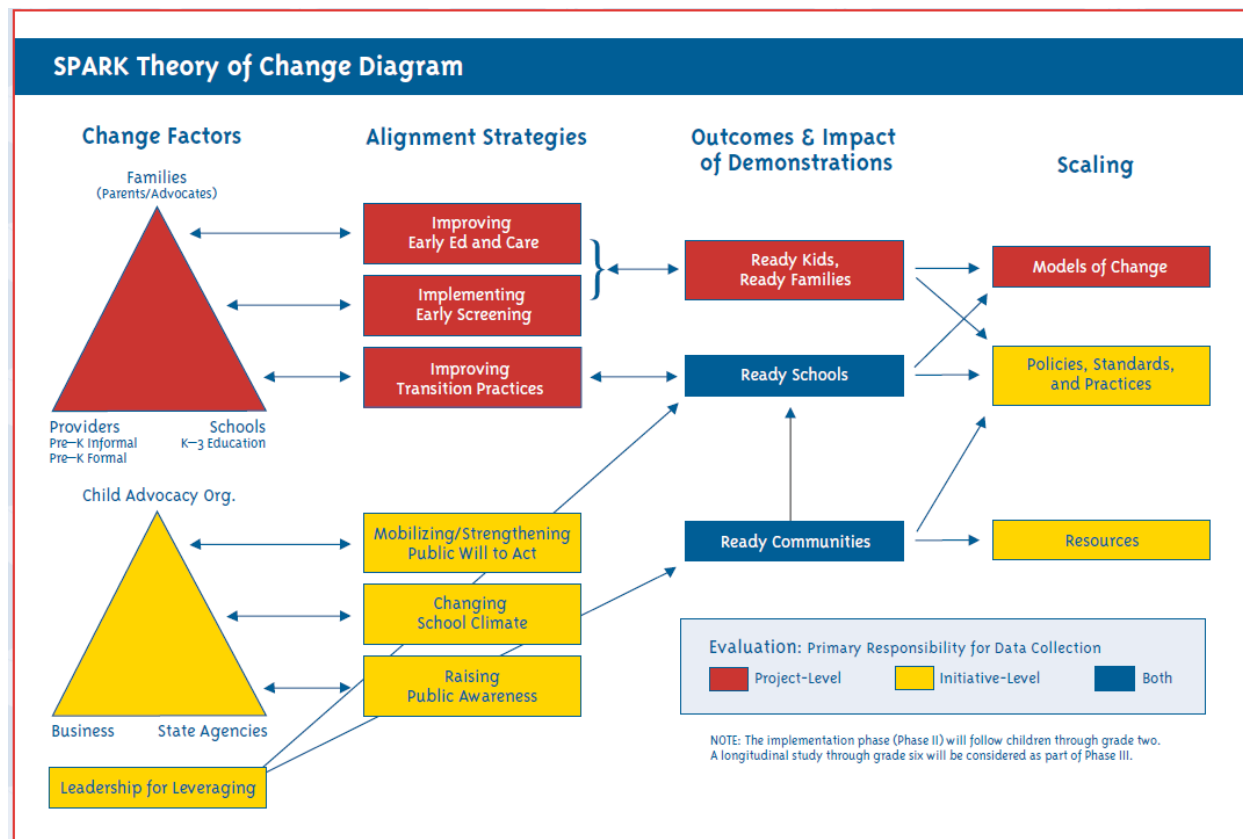
An Overview of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's SPARK Initiative

The SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) initiative was one of the largest, in scope and duration, ever undertaken by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) - a 7-year investment of more than \$160 million in direct and indirect support to 8 grantee states. The ambition of SPARK was to discover how to stem the tide of children who arrive at kindergarten each year unprepared to learn and, thus, start with a handicap that they might never overcome; half the academic gap seen in grade 12 can be attributed to gaps that existed in first grade (Heckman, 2006). As one superintendent involved in the initiative put it, "When children show up in kindergarten with no pre-literacy skills, it's like we're already seeing who our eventual dropouts will be." SPARK also served as a first step for WKKF in moving away from traditional grant making toward a more activist role as a change maker.

SPARK was launched in 2001 with eight grantees in the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Ohio, representing urban and rural school communities and preschool traditions and practices of widely divergent character. While the target population was children ages 3 to 6 who were at risk for struggling in school, SPARK progress would benefit all children, vulnerable or not.

Kellogg's investment was \$58.5 million over the seven years and the grantees were able to leverage that for an additional \$106 million in financial and in-kind services to support their strategies and programs. At the conclusion of the grants, state grantees reported that 8,100 vulnerable children received services, which aided their preparation for, and transition to, kindergarten. Strategies in place for 2009 and 2010 would bring nearly 18,000 more children into the SPARK "ready kids, ready schools" realm (Walter R. McDonald Associates, 2009). Five out of seven SPARK sites demonstrated that their students outperformed children from similar backgrounds for kindergarten readiness. The children served by two grantees performed as well as their peers, despite the SPARK children's vulnerabilities. Six grantees provided data from the first grade; two showed their students outperforming peers, while four others were on par. Data into second grade weren't as available, although children at one site were doing better than their peers and children at a second site were doing as well as their peers (Walter R. McDonald Associates, 2009).

As one person noted, "if you've seen one SPARK site, you've seen one SPARK site." The approaches by the eight grantee states were very different, making it essential for foundation leaders to create a frame for the diversity of the work under the initiative and a strategy for measuring progress. To that end, a theory of change was created prior to launching the implementation phase of SPARK. The SPARK theory of change (see below) was significant because it helped reconcile an ongoing internal debate about whether social change is a product of grassroots organizing or top-down leadership. The theory explained how it is a product of both. Parents, community-based early childhood educators, and elementary schools drive change by providing a well-grounded perspective on what supports children and families need in order to achieve school readiness, and work directly to create systems that provide those supports. School-system leaders, government, leaders and other education policymakers assist, expand, and sustain change by setting priorities, providing funding, and establishing supportive policies. Influential groups such as business leaders and child advocates serve as important intermediaries between these two groups by drawing attention to needs, promising solutions, and the benefits they offer. The SPARK theory of change framed the initiative and shaped the evaluation plan. (See on page 2)



The view among grantees and their partners and allies is that SPARK will go down as a “game changer” in school readiness. The initiative raised the national consciousness, and the willingness to act, on ensuring that children are ready for school and schools are ready for them. SPARK sites will be the vanguard for that movement. But SPARK also offers important lessons for philanthropic institutions dedicated to social change on a national scale. Perhaps the most important lesson is that success can depend upon their ability to lead – to clearly define an end result and to take responsibility for its achievement. While giving primacy to the role of grantees in creating approaches that suit their communities, foundations must recognize and respect their own role as well: Grantees want foundations’ guidance, especially in taking their efforts to a level they have never before attempted. They want the benefit of knowledge and resources foundations have developed by working on a national scale. And they need the active influence of these foundations in creating a more supportive environment for their work. Foundations must be flexible in their approaches while remaining committed to achieving tangible progress. Social change is by nature a process of discovery, so there will always be a need to change tactics and even strategies when they aren’t working. But this must be done with a relentless focus on an end result. The Kellogg Foundation, like its grantees, often struggled during the SPARK initiative. But because it shared their determination to succeed, the struggle paid off. Perhaps a final lesson is that success requires patience and persistence. SPARK was a seven-year initiative. During that time, grantees and the Kellogg Foundation itself found their way through the highly complex work of building new systems of early childhood education and arrived at a level of clarity that allowed them to influence progress on a large scale.

Excerpted from "Beyond the Grant: How the W. K. Kellogg Foundation Went Beyond Grantmaking to Contribute to a Major Early Childhood Initiative " by Stephen Greeley, M.S., and Beth Greeley, M.S., DCA, Inc.

SPARK Florida, also referred to as Ready Schools Miami, focused on school readiness in Miami-Dade County using child advocacy, professional development, family engagement, and public awareness strategies. The program offered services in 66 child care centers and eight elementary school. Ready Schools Miami followed the 1,600 children from age 3 to grade 3. Through Ready Schools, families received supports that would strengthen their position as their child's advocate and were provided with information about the transition to elementary school. Ready Schools Miami provided extensive professional development opportunities to teachers, directors and elementary school principals. Through learning communities Ready Schools brought together principals, early childhood directors, teachers, and staff around transition expectations and benchmarks. Activities of this initiative included:

- Aligning standards, curriculum, instruction, and assessment from prekindergarten through grade 3 at the school level to assure child success;
- Improving child care quality through hands-on coaching, technical assistance, and accreditation support;
- Sharing data on the progress of SPARK children across the early learning and K-12 systems for evaluation purposes;
- Creating the University of Florida/College of Education job-embedded, practice-based Master of Arts degree program for teachers in public schools and in early care and education;
- Establishing teacher and principal fellowships, provided teachers with professional development and coaching for creating cross-system learning communities and enhancing principal and director leadership and management;
- Facilitating of meetings between center directors, principals, and public school curriculum staff to talk about the expectations for children in different settings and how to work toward alignment;
- Visits by public school curriculum specialists to early care and education programs in the community to strengthen ties between the early care and education community and the public school system ;
- Facilitating Health Connect, a multi-organization partnership to place teams of health professionals in each school and provide health support services for all children.

SPARK Mississippi, led by the Children's Defense Fund Southern Regional Office, was an early education initiative that brought together parents, schools, early education providers including child care and Head Start, child advocacy groups, state and local government agencies and businesses for the purpose of ensuring school readiness and academic success for Mississippi's children ages 3 to 8. Key components of SPARK Mississippi included:

- **Governance and Operating Structure:** A statewide committee would provide initiative-level oversight, while each target region was to develop a Local Children's Partnership, designate a fiscal agent, and hire a Local Coordinator.
- **Funding Model:** Fiscal agents and technical assistance providers would receive re-grants based on the number of SPARK students served and/or SPARK staff members being hired and supervised.
- **Student Cohorts:** Two cohorts of 540 preschool students each were to be identified by early care and education providers for enrollment in SPARK, one cohort in 2003 and one in 2004. SPARK would provide interventions affecting these students and their school environments through the end of their second grade year.
- **Screenings and Assessments:** Upon enrollment and throughout the program, students were to receive periodic screenings of physical well-being, motor skills, social and emotional development, and cognitive/ language skills. Prior to school entry, students would be assessed using Mississippi Department of Education benchmarks. Following school entry, progress would be measured using school-administered standardized assessments. Measures would also include environmental assessments of students' early education and school environments.
- **Child and Family Interventions:** In addition to the Local Coordinator, each local fiscal agent would hire Learning Advocates to conduct home visits and give parents and caretakers information about how to strengthen students' skills in preparation for school. SPARK activities would also include parent/ child events and parent trainings.

- Early Care and School Interventions: Financial resources and technical assistance would be provided for quality enhancements in early care and education environments and schools based on results of environmental assessments. Early care and education providers and school personnel would also receive joint professional development regarding strengthening students' readiness for and early success in school.

The goal, by the end of the five-year implementation period, was for each of the SPARK children to enter school having mastered the necessary skills to be successful. The longer-term goal was for students to achieve on grade level by third grade

SPARK Ohio is a family-focused intervention program that helps children get ready for school by building reading, language and social skills, and seeks to create a seamless transition into school for children ages 3-6. The program was managed by the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton from 2003 through mid-2013 and is now managed by the Early Childhood Resource Center. SPARK has helped nearly 5,000 families prepare their preschool-aged children for kindergarten while working collaboratively with schools to enhance transition practices. Although the initial investment in SPARK was made by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation in partnership with the Sisters of Charity Foundation of Canton, multiple funders now support SPARK sites in ten Ohio counties. Working with numerous funders, community organizations, and school districts throughout Ohio, the program continues to expand. SPARK parent partners deliver monthly home- and group-based lessons and activities to families of preschool-aged children. The structured lesson plans and activities SPARK offers are aligned with the Ohio Department of Education's Early Learning and Development Standards. In partnership with community agencies and schools, SPARK ensures that barriers to school readiness are removed. Children with developmental, social, emotional, or mental health issues are referred to community resources to address issues before they prevent school readiness. **For ten consecutive years, SPARK children in Ohio have been found to be better prepared for kindergarten, and they retain that advantage through the fifth grade.**