



What Is SPARK?

The SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) Initiative was launched by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 2001 to help grantees in seven states and the District of Columbia unite community resources to better prepare children for school. SPARK was designed to smooth the transition to school and to align early learning and elementary school systems for children from ages 3 to 6 who were vulnerable to poor achievement. SPARK supported partnerships of selected communities, schools, state agencies and families to ensure that they worked together effectively for children's early learning. With the initiative serving as a catalyst or "spark," the goal was to ensure that vulnerable children were ready for school and schools were ready for the children. SPARK grantees were located in Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio and the District of Columbia.

SPARK Key Principles

SPARK was built on four key principles:

1. Strong partnerships among families, providers, community organizations and ready schools ensure that all children can learn and succeed in school.
2. Quality is a critical element of a child's early learning from birth through the early years of school.
3. Parents and families at home working with early care providers are critical to ensuring that children succeed in school.
4. School leaders and teachers, working with the community's support, can create smooth transitions from early learning settings so that children can succeed in school.

Seamless Transitions to School

SPARK sought to align early learning and elementary school systems to better support children. For SPARK, a centerpiece of alignment was a smooth transition to school that became a process of months or years—not days. Grantees successfully implemented a variety of transition practices such as aligning expectations and standards, coordinating training for pre-K, and elementary teachers, and increasing parent involvement.

Ready Kids and Ready Schools

In addition to aligning systems serving children, SPARK also sought to increase the quality early learning experiences necessary for a child's later success in school. Strategies that were developed supported parents through skill building opportunities and providing parent partners or learning advocates to work with parents and children at home. Additionally, SPARK sites used early assessment of 3 and 4-year-olds to identify learning and developmental delays sooner. Finally, SPARK sites worked in center-based programs to increase program and teacher quality through professional development and enhancements to learning environments.

To assure that schools were "ready" for children, SPARK focused many of its efforts in the final years on creating and supporting "Ready Schools." SPARK sought to provide a continuous set of services and supports that spanned early care and education and the early grades. In this way, SPARK engaged elementary teachers, principals and superintendents, as well as early care and education providers and community-based service providers, and impacted the cultures of both schools and early learning systems.

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For more information, contact:
Dr. Anthony Berkley
Deputy Director for Education Learning
W.K. Kellogg Foundation
One Michigan Avenue East
Battle Creek, MI 49017-4012
Telephone: 269-968-1611
Fax: 269-968-0413