

Success Story: Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

SPARK - Mississippi



“On your mark, get set, ready, go!” We hear these familiar words and instantly conjure up images of well toned runners anxiously awaiting the sound of the starting gun, their toes nervously marking their place in the sand while their eyes remain fixed on the finish line in the distance. They come to the starting line prepared and ready for the task ahead. Now picture a different type of “runner,” children who like the athletes are anxiously awaiting the start of another race, one that begins in early childhood and ends at graduation. Will they be ready? Will they be prepared to start and finish their race? Are their parents, communities and teachers prepared to run alongside them?

The early care and education “family” in Mississippi is bound by a common belief that all children should be well prepared to enter kindergarten, but often child care providers, Head Start centers and even public schools prepare for the race on their own without any dialogue among each other. Recognizing the need for smoother transitions to school and an alignment for pre-school and elementary school settings, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 2003 began working in seven states (Mississippi, Hawaii, Ohio, Florida, North Carolina, Georgia, New Mexico) and the District of Columbia to align early childhood education with the K-12 system by using community involvement as the main driver or catalyst. “The only way to create a system was to bring everyone into the room at the same time and to have them equally engaged in developing an aligned system,” says Oleta Fitzgerald, Director of the Children’s Defense Fund Southern Regional Office located in Jackson, Mississippi. “We knew that collaboration had to be in the center of it to affect change.”



From the initial discussions in the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, and Mississippi, SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) was conceived and began to link early learning advocates with elementary schools. In Mississippi, the Children’s Defense Fund Southern Regional Office was selected to administer the state’s five million dollar initiative. “SPARK is not an initiative to bring in a new program,” says Ellen Collins, the Executive Director of SPARK-Mississippi, “SPARK is an initiative that brings together communities and stakeholders to look at what they already have—

Early Care and Education

their strengths—and use their existing resources to work together to maximize those strengths and leverage additional resources.

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After a year of planning, the SPARK model was implemented in five Mississippi school district catchment areas: Pearl, Cleveland, Hollandale, North Bolivar, and Mound Bayou. At the core of every SPARK Mississippi site is the creation of a Local Children’s Partnership (LCP) which brings together child care providers, Head Start, public schools, mental health, health department, government and business leaders to the table to advocate for quality early childhood education. “They understand their community’s livelihood is based on the children being ready for kindergarten,” says Collins, “and they are working to address any gap or service need in their community and advocate for increased quality and access.” The LCP’s are overseen by a state-level steering committee.

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Barbara McKee, Pearl Learning Advocate

In addition to the Local Children's Partnerships which meet quarterly guided by the Local Coordinator, each site employs Learning Advocates who work with families and children on a one-to-one basis. This unique aspect of SPARK provides a parent training track from age three to grade three. "We are the in-between for the children and their families," says Patsy Clerk of Cleveland. The Learning Advocates serve as case managers, tutors, and friends and often set up referrals, identify resources, and make home visits. "One of the ways we help families is just being visible for them," says Barbara McKee a Learning Advocate for the Pearl site. "Being there to bridge the gap between schools and child care and Head Start is important. The most exciting thing I have witnessed is the day I saw Head Start, child care and the public school sitting down together."

Children who are selected to participate in SPARK are closely monitored from age three to grade three. The first cohort took the Mississippi Curriculum Test, Second Edition (MCT2) in Spring 2009, and the results are encouraging. Two hundred and nineteen SPARK-MS third graders' test scores and performance levels were compared to a selected elementary school located in Humphreys County. In Language Arts, 6.9% of SPARK-MS students scored in the Advanced level compared to 6.1% of the comparison group; 39% scored Proficient compared to 22.9% of the comparison group. At the other end of the spectrum, the SPARK-MS students scored 8.5% in the Minimal range while the comparison group more than doubled the ratio with 29.0%. In the mathematics portion of the MCT2, again SPARK-MS students outscored their counterparts in Humphreys County. Results reveal that a higher percentage of SPARK-MS (6.9%) students scored in the Advanced level than the comparison group (2.3%),



Satoya Payne and son Ricky

Early Care and Education

and similar results in the Proficient category indicate that 48% of SPARK-MS students scored Proficient compared to 24.4% at the comparison school (Turner-Davis, 2010).

Statewide results indicate that SPARK-MS students scored comparable to state level scores on the third grade MCT2 Language Arts section, with a higher percentage of SPARK-MS students scoring in the Proficient and Basic levels. In Mathematics, test score percentages for SPARK-MS were higher in the Proficient and Basic levels (85% to 74.8%), and in the lowest testing category, analyses indicate that 13.2% of the state level students scored Minimum compared to only 8.1% of SPARK-MS students (Turner-Davis, 2010).

The children and their families who have been selected to participate in SPARK consider the Learning Advocates part of their own family unit. "She's like the preacher, the teacher, the mama, the counselor, the husband, the wife, all in one," says Tena McNair as she reflects on Pearl Learning Advocate Barbara McKee. "To me, she's everything." McNair's grandson Tamarius has been with SPARK since age three and is now a successful fifth grader. Raising her grandson alone, McNair is grateful for the assistance Mrs. McKee and other SPARK employees provide. "They are always just a phone call or a ride away. If it wasn't for them, I don't know what I would do sometimes."

"When he was in first grade, struggling with his speech, I didn't know what to do," says Satoya Payne whose son Ricky was one of the first SPARK participants in Pearl. "Then SPARK came in, and it was a big turn around." Learning Advocates petitioned the school district for Ricky to receive speech and language services and individualized tutoring and equipped his parents with behavior management tools. Today Ricky is a fifth grade honor roll student who wants to be a firefighter when he grows up. "Dr. Rancier [a Pearl Learning Advocate] helps me to read books and helps me to know how to be respectful. She makes visits to my house and to my school and helps me with my flash cards."

With a proven track record and measurable results, SPARK-MS is now moving into another phase. "We know the model works; now we want to focus on improving the system," says Collins. "As we move forward, we're going to be looking more closely at the systems that work with the young children, not targeting specific children."



Tena McNair and grandson Tamarius

Early Care and Education

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One key to continued success is the non-traditional members of the “family”—those who first came to the table as guests and now occupy a permanent seat. In the past, business and local government leaders were not considered early care and education partners with the traditional advocates. SPARK believes that in order to have “ready” families, children, and schools, we must also have “ready” communities. Members of the LCP’s create plans for improving the quality of early education and encourage others to realize the need for it. “We did not begin by pushing a policy agenda,” says Fitzgerald. “We wanted them to learn about the value of early childhood education.” Jimmy Foster, the former mayor of Pearl admits that there was initial skepticism over thoughts that SPARK would be just one more program whose chances of success were slim. He soon came on board and offered city facilities as the home of SPARK in Pearl. “Your heart should be with your community,” he says, “and your community is about its people, the welfare of its people, especially its children. We were willing to help in any way that we could because they are the future mayors and business leaders.”

Although SPARK was initially funded by Kellogg, those who work with the program feel that the success of the initiative is not because of money. According to Collins, “A lot of the changes that happened in SPARK districts were not because there was an infusion of a lot of money. We just had people look at resources they already had and encouraged them to use them better.” With the dialogue now in place among child care centers, Head Start and school districts, collaborative opportunities are emerging. The three groups are creating professional development opportunities together, sharing resource materials and are even sharing staff. Patsy Clerk, a former Learning Advocate for SPARK in Cleveland is now employed by the local school district. Collins says that a main goal of SPARK is to institutionalize the model and “there is no better way to do that than to have SPARK staff become part of the school district.” When school



Jimmy Foster, Former Mayor of Pearl, Mississippi



Oleta Fitzgerald, Director, Children's Defense Fund, Southern Regional Office

Early Care and Education

districts and child care providers work together using existing resources, the outcome is a positive one. According to Fitzgerald, “resources must be spent differently, interventions have to be done differently, and when the system works together, our children will be successful.”

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Five more SPARK sites will be added this year in the Clarksdale, Humphreys County, East Jasper, West Bolivar and West Tallahatchie school district catchment areas. SPARK advocates quickly point out that any community can employ the SPARK model once families, child care providers, school districts and community leaders recognize the need for linking the systems. According to Collins, “You get better outcomes for children, and you get better outcomes for communities and schools. In the end, the community has well supported schools and well supported families.” And when that happens, everyone involved is ready for the race ahead.

