



## **SPARK: Ready Kids, Ready Schools**

### **What Is SPARK?**

SPARK is a national initiative launched by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to help grantees in seven states and the District of Columbia unite community resources to better prepare children for school. SPARK seeks to smooth the transition to school and to align early learning and elementary school systems for children ages 3-6 who are vulnerable to poor achievement.

The goal of SPARK is “ready children” and “ready schools” that are prepared for all children. SPARK grantees are partnerships of communities, parents, schools, state agencies, and child advocacy groups. Partners work together to support children’s early learning and ongoing success, aligning existing services for children now and in the future. SPARK stands for “Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids.”

### **Early Learning For Lifelong Success**

Nationally, 4 million youngsters enter kindergarten or first grade every year, but as many as one-third of them won’t be ready to learn. Research shows that quality early care and education are critical, especially for low-income children. Young children begin learning far earlier than previously understood. With most parents working outside of the home, too many vulnerable children spend their preschool years in unhealthy and un-stimulating environments. They come to school from many different settings, and many families and caregivers need support prior to the school years. More than 40 states fund pre-kindergarten programs but few states or localities are linking those programs to formal school systems.

### **Seamless Transitions to School**

SPARK seeks to align early learning and elementary school systems—as well as health and critical services—to better support children. For SPARK, a centerpiece of alignment is a smooth transition to school that becomes a process of months or years—not days. Grantees will implement a variety of transition practices such as aligning expectations and standards, coordinating training for Pre-K and elementary teachers, and increasing parent involvement.

In addition to aligning systems serving children, SPARK seeks to increase the quality early learning experiences necessary for a child’s later success in school. Strategies will support parents through skill-building and providing parent partners or learning advocates. Additionally, SPARK sites will use early assessment of three- and four-year-olds to identify learning and developmental delays sooner.

### **How Is SPARK Different?**

Even though many existing efforts focus on low-income children, these programs fail to reach all eligible youngsters. SPARK is not a new program but instead seeks to coordinate available services—engaging parents, families, and communities in the process of creating a plan of support. Further, communities will be connected to state-level agencies and advocacy groups to sustain and replicate best practices and make a lasting impact for more children’s success. SPARK also seeks “ready schools” that are better prepared to serve all children. Schools can “reach back” to families of young children and align what happens before school with what happens afterwards.

### **Who Are the Children that SPARK Will Serve?**

Each SPARK grantee will serve a minimum of 1,000 children and will work with two or more communities, targeting children in a variety of early learning settings—at home, preschool and Head Start programs, and child care settings. Nationwide, SPARK sites include both urban and rural areas. SPARK is building on the existing efforts of grantee organizations that have strong track records of success in serving children. The Kellogg Foundation selected grantees in eight localities based on their high potential to achieve ready children, ready schools, and ready communities.