



Policy Brief

Early Learning/Transition

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While no one was looking – Community-based solutions to linking early learning and the early grades: Implications for state policy Lessons from the SPARK Initiative

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As states look for ways to improve student outcomes by creating more “seamless” systems of education starting at preschool and beyond (P-20), communities have been making it happen. SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) — a five-year initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation — is one good example of what can and is being accomplished at the community level to create continuity across early childhood and K-12 education. SPARK efforts are designed to assure children are successful both before and after they enter school. Working with schools, early care and education providers, families and community partners, SPARK makes a unique contribution to those looking for policy opportunities to link early learning and the early grades.

Beginning with children at age 3 and following them through grade 3, SPARK provides a continuous set of services and supports designed to increase school success. What SPARK sites have done to create connections across local-level systems of learning, stands to impact larger school reform issues and current state policy discussions regarding what’s needed to create a more holistic system of education across levels. The initiative includes grantees in eight locations: District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina and Ohio.

SPARK calls attention to the fact that children’s achievement is a function of what happens both before and after they enter school. While educators and policymakers have long focused on the importance of school readiness — and more recently on the importance of students’ acquisition of strong academic foundations in literacy and math at grade 3 — little attention has been given to the possibility and potential for creating state policies that support a continuum of teaching and learning across early care and education, and the early elementary grades.

Creating a seamless continuum necessarily requires that two separate and very different systems come together to work in a more coordinated way. Using three high-impact strategies, SPARK sites successfully bring the early learning and the K-12 communities together to focus jointly on creating more continuous learning experiences for children. Following is a description of each strategy, implementation examples from SPARK communities and policy opportunities associated with each.

Strategy 1: Work is deeply rooted in the community and its context, and in the creation of cross-sector partnerships (including public schools) sharing responsibility for children’s well-being.

WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN DO



Build community-based, cross-sector coalitions to support learning across systems.

SPARK creates multi-sector community teams to improve quality and facilitate linkages across early care and education, and the early grades. Teams work to increase understanding of the importance of the early years and broaden commitment to supporting children’s success. Teams include community leaders, service providers, business leaders, parents, policymakers and educators. Teams intentionally engage both K-12 and preschool educators. In the process, they provide a neutral forum for educators at both levels to work together and explore ways to create more continuity. Outcomes include: new voices and champions for linking early learning and the early grades; improved program quality for preschool and elementary grades; and successful implementation of strategies for creating linkages.

SPARK Implementation:	Keys to Success:
<i>Create teams that are self-sustaining and effective.</i>	Establish coordinating or oversight structures at the state or regional level, build leadership capacity, and provide teams with training and support in communication and other group process skills.
<i>Equip teams with the authority and leadership to make change.</i>	Include community leaders, local policymakers and administrators who have the authority to make decisions and enact change as well as influence others.
<i>Ensure teams have the capacity to make informed decisions.</i>	Provide teams with training and information to increase their understanding of the issues.
<i>Engage schools in ECE (please define) quality improvement.</i>	Include K-12 educators as key partners to develop quality improvement strategies for feeder early care and education programs.
<i>Encourage schools to address their own quality improvement needs.</i>	Provide opportunities and incentives for schools to examine their own classroom quality issues and implement quality improvement measures in the early grades.
<i>Frame education as an economic development issue.</i>	Engage business leaders by demonstrating how linking systems supports school achievement and workforce development.

WHAT STATES CAN DO – POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

- Support the creation of cross-sector, community-based teams.
- Create a state-level coordinating body to support community teams.
- Provide training and technical assistance to support the effectiveness of teams.
- Convene community/regional forums to improve communication and understanding.
- Expand public private partnerships for program delivery and quality improvement.

Strategy 2: Engagement with children and families spans the years before and after school entrance, creating consistency for effective parent engagement and impacting both early care and education and school cultures.

WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN DO



Sustain parent support and engagement across learning systems.

Recognize and build the capacity of parents as their child's first teacher. SPARK has built on the foundation of theory and best practice to develop approaches matched to the circumstances and abilities of the parents they serve. Further, support is ongoing and evolves over time to meet the needs of parents and children as they move from early learning settings and home to kindergarten and the early grades. Programs range from intensive home visiting to informal support for resources and referrals; and from small peer support groups to leadership training, family literacy and customized parent-child programs. Special attention is given to children and parents during the critical transition into school. Overall, the most important aspect of the SPARK work has been its continued focus on sustained interactions and support for parents as children move from early care and education settings into schools.

SPARK Implementation:	Keys to Success:
<i>Provide developmental screening as a starting point.</i>	Start with developmental screening and involve parents by asking for input, sharing results and providing individualized learning plans.
<i>Provide parents and children with school readiness materials and opportunities.</i>	Develop and provide parent-friendly materials to use at home. Create parent-child programs such as family literacy, family math and kindergarten readiness.
<i>Provide home visiting for intensive, ongoing support.</i>	Use multi-year home visiting to increase parents' skill and knowledge. Use home visits to link parents to schools and facilitate transitions and engagement with elementary schools.
<i>Develop strategies for connecting families and schools.</i>	Provide parents with information and assistance to register children and visit schools. Encourage schools to offer off-site registration and improve parent outreach through teacher training and home-school liaisons.
<i>Address issues of parental stress through access to support services.</i>	Address family support needs through information resource and referral services, family service hubs, health clinics in schools, and adult education and workforce development training in schools and other community locations.
<i>Create outreach strategies for hard-to-reach families.</i>	Identify staff to work with parents in their first language, locate services in non-traditional locations and train other professionals who routinely interact with parents to deliver additional support and information services.

WHAT STATES CAN DO – POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

- Support developmental screening and interventions before children enter kindergarten.
- Create and fund home visiting programs.
- Support the co-location of services such as medical clinics in schools.
- Establish community service hubs staffed by agency staff and parent support specialists.
- Provide incentives for schools and districts to offer school registration off-site.
- Expand resource and referral services and increase access to information about child development and early learning programs.
- Create parental leave and family friendly workplace policies.
- Provide incentives to schools and districts to create parent liaison positions in schools.

Strategy 3: The role of the elementary school is a key focus of the work and is driven by intentional efforts to introduce and support practices for creating “ready schools” — schools that can smooth transitions and establish continuity across systems.

WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN DO



Define ready schools and support school leaders.

When children entered kindergarten and SPARK programs moved into schools, it became evident that school leaders did not always see a reason to work with the early care and education programs in their community. As the instructional leaders of the school, principals are critical to instituting practices and policies that support more coordination and continuity across systems.

Because they operate as separate systems, coordination between ECE and schools is not always easy. Principals need information and guidance on effective and tangible ways to create better linkages. SPARK created a definition and a self assessment for ready schools designed to increase continuity and smooth transitions across early education and the early grades. The ready school assessment provides principals and planning teams with a useful tool for measuring school capacity and setting improvement goals.

SPARK Implementation:	Keys to success:
<i>Define ready schools and assess ready school capacity. Provide training and peer support to principals.</i>	Plan and implement training focused on ready schools and the role of principals in creating a ready school culture. Leadership academies, communities of practice, and mentoring support and inform principals.
<i>Designate principals as leaders of school transition teams.</i>	Create transition teams that operate under the leadership of the principal. When principals are involved in planning, their understanding of effective transitions increases. In their role as building leaders, principals can exercise authority and flexibility to make adjustments and allocate resources.
<i>Include transition in school improvement plans.</i>	Integrate transitions and other ready school components into school improvement plans. Offer incentives and resources to principals and planning teams to develop action plans.
<i>Develop a resource guide for linking systems.</i>	Provide practice-based guidelines and resources for principals to increase continuity. Support implementations through piloting and technical assistance.

WHAT STATES CAN DO – POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

- Create a statewide definition of a ready school and a ready school assessment.
- Create guidelines for implementing ready school components.
- Support training and professional development opportunities for principal leadership.
- Support pilot programs and demonstration sites for ready schools.
- Provide incentives for including transition strategies in school improvement plans.
- Include principals and K-12 leaders in state early education efforts and initiatives.



Use quality improvement efforts to increase alignment and continuity.

Providing high-quality, integrated learning experiences that are aligned and continuous across early care and education and the early grades results in better outcomes for students.¹ SPARK increased alignment and continuity by focusing on program and teacher quality, and creating opportunities for professional development. Alignment also was increased by collecting and sharing data across schools and programs, and training teachers to use data to inform instruction.

SPARK Implementation:	Keys to success:
<i>Increase teacher qualifications through an embedded Master's degree program.</i>	Focus training and mentoring on child development birth to 8 years.
<i>Establish multi-level learning communities to support alignment of curriculum and instruction.</i>	Create time and opportunities for teachers to work together to coordinate curriculum, instruction and assessment across levels.
<i>Provide resources to improve classroom quality.</i>	Encourage preschools and elementary schools to use common or aligned program quality assessments to set goals. Provide resources for quality improvement and continuity.
<i>Provide shared professional development for preschool and early grades teachers.</i>	Bring preschool and early grades teachers together for joint training. Support national accreditation for preschool and kindergarten teachers. Create cross-system cohorts for training and peer support.
<i>Provide information and data on children entering kindergarten.</i>	Use portfolios, common transition forms, school readiness assessment tools and informal cross-sector communication. Train teachers to use data to inform and align instruction across levels.

WHAT STATES CAN DO – POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

- Support teacher training and mentoring to align pedagogies.
- Provide guidance for coordinating curriculum, instruction and assessment across systems.
- Develop and align standards for early care and education, and the early grades — K-3.
- Establish a common student identifier system that begins before children enter school.
- Create incentives to develop joint professional development plans.
- Develop a P-3 teaching credential.
- Establish partnerships with institutions of higher education to develop and deliver embedded courses.



Position transitions as a key mechanism for linking systems.

SPARK-supported transitions play a dual role — to help children and parents make the move from home and early care and education settings to school, and to establish a broad system of supports and resources to increase continuity across levels. Strategies range from offering traditional transition to kindergarten events to creating a framework for transitions embedded in quality improvement efforts and school improvement plans. Outcomes include better adjustment to kindergarten for children, increased parent engagement, and kindergarten and early grades teachers being better prepared to support the individual strengths and needs of children.

¹ Bogard, K. & Takanishi, R. (2005). PK-3: An aligned and coordinated approach to education for children 3 to 8 years old. *Social Policy Report: A publication of the Society for Research in Child development*. 19 (3), 1-24.

SPARK implementation:	Keys to success:
<i>Create transition teams in schools.</i>	Establish transition teams comprised of early education and early grades teachers, parents and school staff. Provide training and support to teams for planning, communication and outreach to parents.
<i>Develop a common transition form.</i>	Create and encourage early care and education programs to utilize a common transition form to provide feeder schools with common data.
<i>Include transition in quality improvement planning.</i>	Embed kindergarten transition plans in school improvement plans. Include measures of effective transitions in quality rating and improvement tools. .
<i>Provide specialized transition opportunities for children who did not attend preschool programs.</i>	Avoid later adjustment and attendance problems through extended opportunities to become familiar with the school, personnel and procedures.
<i>Tailor transition programs to meet the needs of the population.</i>	Create transition plans based on characteristics of programs, families and children. Engage teachers from early care and education and the elementary school in delivering transition services.

WHAT STATES CAN DO – POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

- Support the creation of school-based transition teams.
- Develop a common transition form for elementary and feeder community ECE programs.
- Provide innovation grants and support efforts to improve transitions.
- Require transition strategies in school improvement plans.
- Support state efforts to address transitions at the systems level.

Conclusion

SPARK demonstrates what it takes to create an early learning/early grades continuum. By linking school readiness to ready schools, children’s experiences before they enter school can be sustained through transitions, and high-quality and coordinated teaching and learning across all levels of learning.

State level policies can provide the “enabling mechanisms” districts, schools, and early care and education programs need to create linkages and aligned and continuous systems of learning. However, a true continuum takes more than just putting adjoining pieces together. It takes policies that:

- Give those pieces intentional similarity across systems
- Operate as part of an interconnected set of services and supports
- Reflect understanding and insight into the contextualized nature of the work as it is implemented on the ground in schools, districts and communities.

Policies can provide a framework for linking systems, but for those linkages to take shape and be put into practice at the school and district level requires something else — the acceptance and willingness of both the ECE and the K-12 communities to work cooperatively and establish shared accountability for the creation a learning continuum.

SPARK sites have been highly successful in bringing two learning communities not traditionally accustomed to working together to the table to investigate how their joint efforts can improve outcomes for children. Creating a more seamless system across early learning and the early grades cannot be viewed as the sole responsibility of either ECE or K-12 education. Rather it is the willingness and capacity

of both sectors to work together and share accountability for building student success, supported by strong state policy that will make a difference in the end.

As states continue to expand their efforts to create P-20 councils and other mechanisms for making education a more seamless continuum, they should consider looking to community-based efforts like SPARK for examples of what works. Strong community-based efforts represent a transparent and highly effective laboratory for developing good state policy — and should be considered a viable and valuable resource.

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