

SPARK: Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

Every year, four million children in America enter kindergarten. As many as one in three will not be ready for school, and many will never catch up.

SPARK is a national initiative of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to help communities unite resources to better prepare children for school. Seeking “ready children,” “ready communities” and “ready schools,” SPARK has been working for five years in seven states and Washington, D.C., to smooth the transition to school and align pre-school and elementary school settings. Information on the national program can be found at www.wkkf.org/spark.



Children's Defense Fund

CDF-SRO is the grantee for SPARK Mississippi, a \$5 million initiative that has improved school readiness for over 1,000 Mississippi children ages 3 to 8 who were vulnerable to poor academic achievement. They live in the catchment areas of five school districts – Cleveland, Hollandale, North Bolivar, Mound Bayou and Pearl.

To help these children master skills and receive the cognitive, physical, family and community support necessary for school success, SPARK Mississippi brings together parents, school officials, child care and early education providers, child advocacy groups, Head Start providers and state and local government agencies.

SPARK Mississippi's strategies for ready kids and ready schools are:

- Early Education Classroom Improvement Plans,
- Individual Learning Plans,
- Early Education/School Curriculum Alignment,
- Support for Basic and Special Needs
- Learning Advocates
- Local Children's Partnerships
- Parent Education

This five year demonstration project is unique in having invested up to \$350 per SPARK participating child, upgrading the classroom environment as the child progresses through the early educational process – from child care center or Head Start to the kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grade classrooms. Additional funds are allocated to support staff, administration and teacher training. Over the past five years, SPARK Mississippi has created networks and partnerships, provided professional development training, distributed books, visited the homes of targeted children, evaluated classrooms and assessed individual children. Accomplishments include:

- 5,000 professional development hours provided
- 7,200 home visits (three per year per SPARK child over three years)
- 200 early childhood education providers/teachers/administrators directly affected
- 100 classrooms assessed
- 10,000 donated books distributed (free books to more than 1,000 children)
- 200 early childhood education evaluations conducted
- 2,500 individual child assessments conducted
- 50 early childhood education partners (local, state and national)
- 1,200 parents/guardians involved

With the initiative serving as a catalyst or “spark,” the goal is to establish a long-term, ongoing network and support structure to ensure that vulnerable children are ready for school and schools are ready for them.

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