

Cultural Identity, Teacher Quality, and an Outcomes Orientation Pave the Way for Young Children to be Ready for School



The Issue

New Mexico ranks 46th in the nation in child well-being¹, measures of which include parent employment, health care access, low birth-weight babies, immunization rates, teen parents, and high school dropouts. Not surprisingly, it is poverty that most informs this statistic, with 51 percent of children in the state (compared with 39 percent nationally)

living below 200 percent of the poverty level². Just 39 percent of New Mexico children ages 3 and 4 are enrolled in preschool, and only 24 percent of the state's 4th graders were reading at grade level in 2007³.

We know that long-term success is tied to the level of stimulation and engagement created in a child's life from infancy onward, and also that such preemptive intervention is not only empowering but economical – compared with the \$1 billion New Mexico spent in 2005 in juvenile justice, child abuse, welfare, and correction costs⁴.





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SPARK is about communities preparing young children for success in school, in ways that reflect family and community culture. In New Mexico, this means parents and educators working together to share information, expectations, successes, and challenges about their young children. For the children, it means engagement with caring adults and hands-on learning. Confident transitions into elementary school are the happy result.

The Solution

SPARK – Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids – fosters family engagement and collaboration between early childhood programs and elementary schools to streamline the transition into school for young children. Launched at eight sites nationwide in 2001, SPARK New Mexico serves six school districts in and around Albuquerque, and is funded by a \$4 million Kellogg Foundation grant, with support from the McCune Charitable Foundation, Daniels Fund, J.F. Maddox Foundation, the Brindle Foundation, and the Thornburg Charitable Foundation. State partners include the New Mexico Community Foundation, the state’s Office of Child Development, and the New Mexico Association for the Education of Young Children.

Each site’s parents, caregivers, and educators are empowered to design their own strategies to meet SPARK’s goal to ensure that all kids have strong preparation for school. In New Mexico, this has resulted in three core programs. A Joining Hands team of educators, parents, and social service providers works at each site to set and implement homegrown strategies and measure outcomes. Teacher Education and Compassion Helps (TEACH) New Mexico gives scholarship support and financial incentives to early childhood educators for attending college, toward improving the overall quality of care and education for the state’s most vulnerable children. Project FLECHA (Family Leadership for Education, Culture, and Healthcare Access) emphasizes the use of a family’s cultural strengths to support children’s journey through early education and the school years.

The Results

School readiness has improved significantly since this program began, and practices are being shared statewide through project partners. Parents have become empowered to realize and respond to the constant flow of teachable moments with their young children. Educators on both sides of the transition into public school join together in goal setting, training, and most important, communication about expectations and assessment regarding their young charges. Throughout and because of the process, the whole educational community develops unity and capacity around the shared focus on their most precious assets.



The major beneficiaries are poor children and their families, who have long struggled with the multifaceted challenges that poverty brings to child rearing. The earliest possible support for children’s health and educational success is a key concern for the W.K. Kellogg Foundation as it works to improve opportunities for children and their families.

¹ Kids Count Data Book, 2005-2006

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ TANF, Medicaid & Correction: 2005 State, Expenditure Report, National Governor’s Association (NGA), NASBO: Juvenile Justice, Child Welfare: NM Inventory of Early Childhood Programs, 2007