



Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids

# School Readiness Update



A program initiative of the  
**NEW MEXICO COMMUNITY FOUNDATION**

## TOP 10 BENEFITS OF NM SPARK

1. **Joining Hands**, a proven homegrown framework that expands opportunities for families, children and schools to transition in a seamless way, leading to better outcomes for children.
2. **Communication**, as a starting point for change, a connection between two learning systems and the conduit for family engagement.
3. **Equal partners/joint decision-makers**, helping Joining Hands teams become highly effective and capable of influencing change.
4. **Families as partners**, integral to the design and implementation of efforts to promote school success. NM SPARK has organized a robust base of families through the Family Leadership Action Network (FLAN) and has promoted the Family Leadership for Education, Culture and Health Access (FLECHA) learning advocate course. Most participants notice benefits, including positive student behavior, within three months of course completion. *(continued)*

## JOINING HANDS FOR CHILDREN

**Ages 3 to 8**

Ready children. Ready schools. Ready families. Simply put, these are the goals of a national initiative at work in New Mexico with guidance from a home-grown approach and caring adults in six local communities. By finding better ways to communicate and connect, program participants want to ensure that children make a low-stress, high-success transition from preschool to kindergarten and elementary school.

New Mexico Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (NM SPARK) is a New Mexico Community Foundation initiative with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the McCune Charitable Foundation, the Daniels Fund, the J.F. Maddox Foundation and the Brindle Foundation. The approach, called Joining Hands, was co-developed and piloted by several New Mexican communities and the state Head Start organization almost a decade ago.

To build on past investments and proven practices, NMCF infused New Mexico's SPARK initiative with the eight principles of Joining Hands: 1) communication; 2) equal partnership and joint decision-making; 3) comprehensive, responsive services; 4) families

as partners; 5) knowledge and skill development; 6) culture and home language importance; 7) developmentally appropriate practice; and 8) assessment of partnership effectiveness.

Every local site has a Joining Hands Team that may include school administrators, pre-elementary/early childhood program providers, kindergarten teachers, first-grade teachers, social/emotional service providers, and families. Guided by the eight principles, the teams set local strategies, implement their plans and measure the outcomes. Representatives from each Joining Hands team meet regularly to share best practices and lessons learned across the NM SPARK sites: Albuquerque, Doña Ana County, Española, Hobbs, the Pueblo of Laguna and San Juan County. *(continued)*



*Students at Duranes Elementary School in Albuquerque.*

## TOP 10 BENEFITS OF NM SPARK *(continued)*

5. **Culture and home language** as an NM SPARK cornerstone, acknowledging that these elements factor strongly into the social interactions and learning processes of children.
6. **Developmentally appropriate practice** realized through Joining Hands Teams, professional development opportunities, family engagement experiences and transition activities.
7. **Knowledge and skill development** across the state—building bridges and alignment between early learning settings for ages 3-5 and those for K-3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Data show that teachers in NM SPARK schools are using T.E.A.C.H. scholarships to increase their knowledge and credentials.
8. **Comprehensive, responsive services** integrated within a complete, consistent early childhood system for New Mexico that builds on best practices, such as families as partners and developmental screenings.
9. **Assessment of effective partnership** used to help sites plan their action and reflect on best practices.
10. **Authentic assessment** available to pre-kindergartners in New Mexico.

## JOINING HANDS

*(continued)*

**“Joining Hands really helps us know how we can help each other,”** says Barbara Trujillo, an involved teacher.

Locally, each Joining Hands Team collaborates within its community to structure a continuum that helps young students feel comfortable, confident, eager to learn, and able to achieve their greatest potential. The teams also foster communication among adults and institutions to ensure children’s needs are met at every stage in their development.

In the Pueblo of Laguna, the Joining Hands team provided teachers with training and strategies for making home visits to students about to advance from preschool to kindergarten. As families welcome kindergarten teachers into their homes, they provide a safe, comfortable place for student-teacher bonding and affirm the teachers’ role through their hospitality.

In Albuquerque, a more populous NM SPARK site, the Joining Hands Team is exploring options for engaging parents as they prepare their children for school. In one local school, the Joining Hands Team’s purchase of math kits for K-5 students inspired a principal to buy an age-appropriate kit that helps preschoolers grasp simple math concepts, preparing them for future studies.

With the help of Joining Hands Teams, parents and educators across the state are supporting school readiness in myriad ways. Three sites incorporate a special family health and readiness curriculum developed through NM SPARK and offer the designation of “parent liaison” with a small stipend to parents who play an active role at local child development centers and Joining Hands meetings.

**“My child learned so much,”** says a parent whose son attended a three-day NM SPARK Kinder Camp. **“Overall, he was left with a great impression of school.”**

Because quality teachers are essential to positive early educational experiences, NM SPARK has also fostered the development of T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood New Mexico, a program that offers scholarships to support the professional development of educators. At least four providers at each NM SPARK site have since attained their bachelor’s degrees. NM SPARK’s funding of 35 T.E.A.C.H. scholarships prompted the state of New Mexico to fund 17 more. With help from NM SPARK, T.E.A.C.H. has expanded its reach and developed cooperative relationships with public schools, large municipal early childhood programs, Head Start agencies, and tribal communities.

Through strategic grants and human resources, New Mexico Community Foundation is prioritizing this community-centered initiative with statewide impact. NM SPARK is a key example of growing our future, together, in the connections it forges among families, educators and community institutions and the investments it makes in the social, emotional and academic development of the state’s youngest residents.

### New Mexico Early Childhood Policy Highlights Related to NM SPARK

**Title I:** Promote use of the Joining Hands Framework at Title I Schools

**Rural Education:** Imbed the Joining Hands Principles into Family Policy Statement

**Early Childhood Higher Education Task Force:** Incorporate Joining Hands Principles and Transition best practices in Early Childhood Degree Syllabus