The SPARK Story:

A History of SPARK Mississippi

With substantial support from the

W.K.KELLOGG FOUNDATION

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I
SPARK

FOREWORD

THIS IS A SPECIAL MOMENT IN MISSISSIPPI. Years of momentum, conversations, and challenges surrounding the issues of early childhood education and school readiness have culminated in legislation designed to facilitate regional voluntary pre-K plans developed by consortia of early care and education stakeholders. As we dive into this work, it is important to do so with a sense of perspective that can only come from understanding the path that has led us here. This sense of *sankofa*, Akan for looking backward to retrieve what is of value, is especially salient when one considers the great extent to which the state's current strides in early care and education reflect the learnings and successes of earlier efforts at systemic reform.

Above all, it is this desire to learn from the past and grow a strong system of early care and education that has prompted us to attempt this ambitious project: to tell the story of SPARK Mississippi, from its origins over ten years ago to the many iterations and offshoots that have become its current legacy. This document does not intend to romanticize the past: the work of developing ready children, ready schools, and ready communities is not easy, nor does it always work exactly as planned. This story is written from the perspective that we can learn at least as much from the challenges we have experienced and those that remain as we can from our successes.

With that in mind, we have sought the voices of statewide and local SPARK partners, state and local staff, contractors, early care and education providers, and parents to present a complete picture of the SPARK initiative. It is our hope that this recounting will serve to birth a new crop of initiatives designed to ensure that Mississippi's youngest citizens can indeed realize the promise of education by entering school ready to learn and to succeed.

Thelma Barnett Fitzgerald


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ONE

IN THE BEGINNING:
DEVELOPING THE SPARK MODEL

The initiative known as SPARK Mississippi – Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids – began as a weaving together of ideas that had been percolating in conversations throughout the state's nonprofit, public education, higher education, and early care and education communities for several years prior. When Governor Ronnie Musgrove took office in 2000, the lack of a coordinated early childhood education system in the state became one of his administration's top concerns. The governor almost immediately convened over 100 stakeholders and articulated as a priority the challenge of ensuring that all students entered school ready to learn. Led by early learning experts Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan and Dr. Richard Brandon, this group explored the cost of a statewide coordinated pre-kindergarten system, advocated a funding model, and recommended a referendum effort that could attain the support of the business community.

The Children's Defense Fund Southern Regional Office (CDF-SRO), a participant in this work, had been grappling with the state's early childhood crisis since opening in 1995. In 1998, CDF-SRO helped to form the Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative, a statewide network of child care providers, parents, and supporters who serve or represent low income families. In 1999, CDF-SRO convened stakeholders and produced a report as part of a multi-state initiative funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to understand the impact of devolution on families in poverty. One of the findings concerned the strain that federal welfare-to-work policies were putting on the state's early care and education system. On the heels of the devolution work, the Kellogg Foundation chose to emphasize education as a priority sector to impact through its grant making.

In 2001, the Kellogg Foundation announced the availability of funding for Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) Phase I planning grants, which targeted seven states – including Mississippi – as well as the District of Columbia. CDF-SRO was not the first potential partner the Foundation approached in Mississippi. However, as the Kellogg Foundation and project consultants from the Better Homes Fund traversed the state to identify target

regions and a lead partner with the capacity to direct the work, stakeholders repeatedly referred them to CDF-SRO. Rhea Bishop, former SPARK-MS Executive Director, reflected, "I think CDF's involvement at that level with early childhood, the connection to Head Start, made them, at the time, ripe to submit the proposal to the Kellogg Foundation."

Along with its early childhood experience, CDF-SRO brought to the table a history of and commitment to community organizing and broad collaboration. In the words of Oleta Garrett Fitzgerald, CDF-SRO Director, "SPARK is an initiative that was guided by a group of people broader than us." Partners recruited to help develop the Phase I application included the Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative; Mississippi State University's Early Learning Institute; the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service; Even Start; the University of Southern Mississippi's Institute for Disability Studies; state agencies including the Departments of Human Services, Health, and Education; the BRIDGES collaborative; parents; the Cleveland, Hollandale, North Bolivar, and Pearl school districts; and Head Start providers Friends of Children of Mississippi and Bolivar County Community Action Agency. Anjohnette Gibbs, a member of the original planning committee who is now serving as interim SPARK-MS Executive Director, reflected, "In the beginning it was [Head Start] education directors from across the state who helped to write the proposal and make sure that it was geared toward the needs of the children and families that we served….Child care directors and kindergarten staff from the school districts were key people who were at the table from the beginning."

According to Fitzgerald, the partnership recognized that the other SPARK "states were eons ahead of Mississippi" in terms of having coordinated early education systems and funding mechanisms. Ellen L. Collins, another previous SPARK-MS Executive Director, recalled, "In Mississippi we had a very fragmented system in early childhood education. You had your child care centers, your Head Start, and you had some school districts that had pre-K. But it was not an aligned

system, a connected system." While this was a challenge, the lack of a coordinated system also meant, in Fitzgerald's words, "that we were starting with a clean tapestry." For the group involved, which came to call itself the State Planning Committee, this was more than just another project: it was an opportunity, as Fitzgerald stated, "to build out a system in a state where we knew we weren't going to have a great infusion of resources. The one thing that was constant in the conversation was that this was an opportunity for Mississippi to try to start building a system for early childhood education." According to Bishop, the group's mindset was, "…we don't want it to be another program or report that goes on a shelf. We want whatever comes out of this three to five million dollar grant, we want this to be something that's lasting and meaningful to vulnerable children in the state."

"Communities need to continue their conversations and have a local strategy of how they will work together."

The Mississippi partnership requested and received a one-year Phase I grant in 2001, beginning this planning phase in January 2002. The committee used the SPARK Theory of Change developed by the Kellogg Foundation as its starting point. According to this theory, partnerships among families, providers, schools, community organizations, the business sector, and state agencies, combined with action in the form of transition strategies, produce ready children, ready schools, and ready communities. The theory also identified the anticipated results of this work, which included better schooling outcomes for participating children as well as improved systemic policies and practices resulting in better outcomes for future children. In a nutshell, the Theory of Change posited that "strong partnerships among families, providers, community organizations, and ready schools ensure that children succeed in learning."

Using this framework as a guide, the planning committee conceptualized a five-year initiative that would identify at least 1,000 of the most vulnerable three-year-olds in target communities, recruit them in cohorts, and provide them

TIMELINE **2003** ■ Joy Gorham Hervey selected as first SPARK-MS Executive Director

with school readiness interventions during their preschool years and throughout their transition into kindergarten and through second grade. The initiative aimed to work in four target school district catchment areas – Pearl, North Bolivar, Cleveland, and Hollandale – and establish localized, coordinated approaches to assuring that all children enter school ready to learn, regardless of where they receive their early care and education.

During the planning phase, the partnership decided how SPARK would address several challenges: identifying the children through early education partners; aligning assessments and curricula across early education providers based on public school benchmarks; and involving parents and caretakers as well as the community in the task of tracking children's well-being and preparing them to succeed in school. By using a subcommittee structure and making regrants to key stakeholders with specialized knowledge and experience, the planning committee gathered and assessed programming recommendations while also identifying resources and challenges and discussing best practices. Throughout the process, the team sought to understand what children need to be ready for school and what schools – including child care, Head Start, and public schools – need to be ready for children.

Key components of the SPARK-MS model developed during the planning period included:

- Governance and Operating Structure: A statewide committee would provide initiative-level oversight, while each target region was to develop a Local Children's Partnership, designate a fiscal agent, and hire a Local Coordinator.
- Funding Model: Fiscal agents and technical assistance providers would receive regrants based on the number of SPARK students served and/or SPARK staff members being hired and supervised.
- Student Cohorts: Two cohorts of 540 preschool students each were to be identified by early care and education providers for enrollment in SPARK,

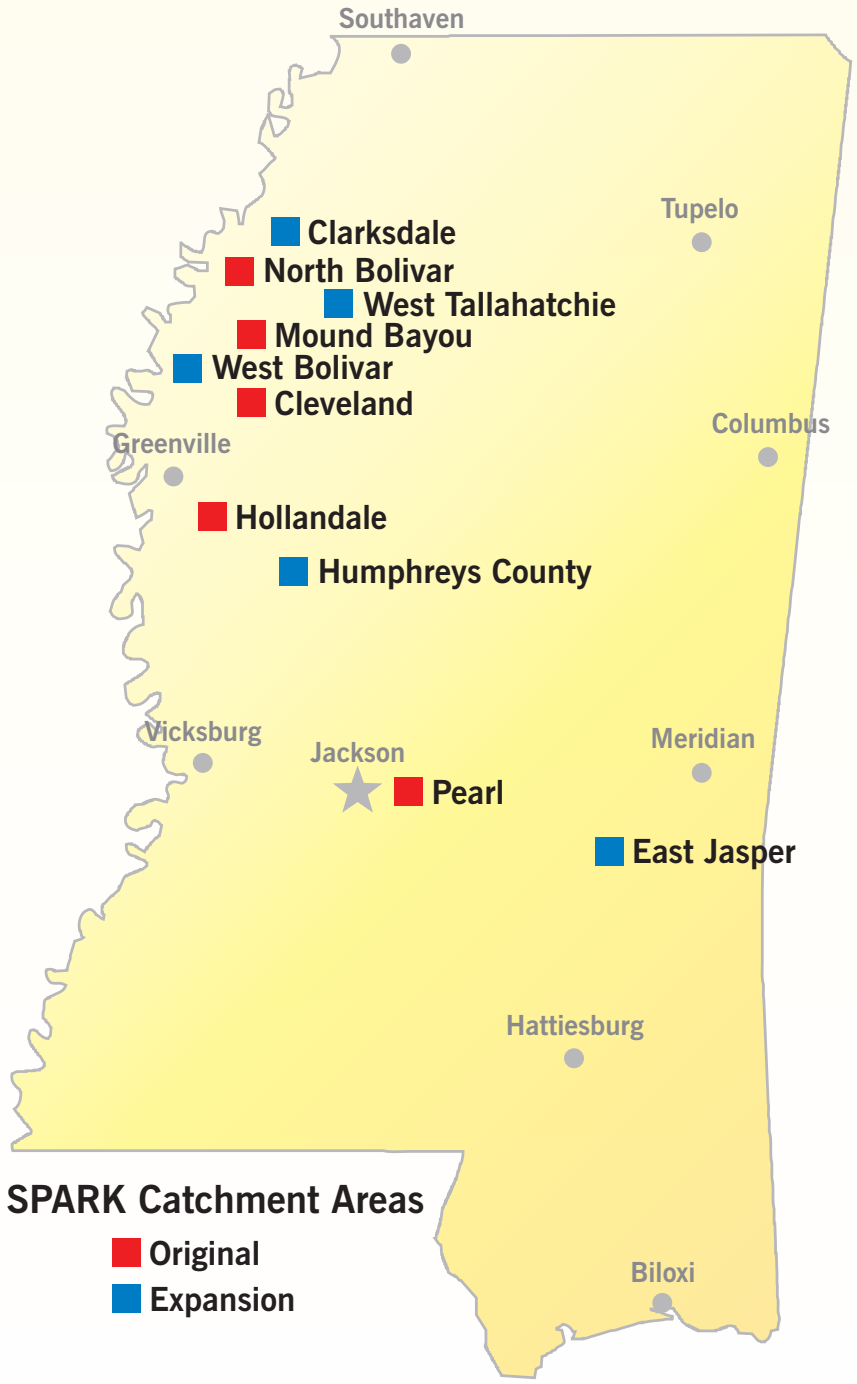
First cohort identified

one cohort in 2003 and one in 2004. SPARK would provide interventions affecting these students and their school environments through the end of their second grade year.

- Screenings and Assessments: Upon enrollment and throughout the program, students were to receive periodic screenings of physical well-being, motor skills, social and emotional development, and cognitive/language skills. Prior to school entry, students would be assessed using Mississippi Department of Education benchmarks. Following school entry, progress would be measured using school-administered standardized assessments. Measures would also include environmental assessments of students' early education and school environments.
- Child and Family Interventions: In addition to the Local Coordinator, each local fiscal agent would hire Learning Advocates to conduct home visits and give parents and caretakers information about how to strengthen students' skills in preparation for school. SPARK activities would also include parent/child events and parent trainings.
- Early Care and School Interventions: Financial resources and technical assistance would be provided for quality enhancements in early care and education environments and schools based on results of environmental assessments. Early care and education providers and school personnel would also receive joint professional development regarding strengthening students' readiness for and early success in school.
- Project Goal: The goal, by the end of the five-year implementation period, was for each of the SPARK children to enter school having mastered the necessary skills to be successful. The longer-term goal was for students to achieve on grade level by third grade.

CDF-SRO submitted the Phase II implementation proposal in December 2002. In 2003, the Kellogg Foundation awarded SPARK-MS funding in the amount of $5 million over five years. Then the real work began.

TIMELINE **2003**



Phase II implementation grant awarded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation

TWO

WORKING THE PLAN:
IMPLEMENTING THE SPARK DESIGN

STRUCTURE

At the start of implementation, the State Planning Committee became the Statewide Advisory Committee. Because Head Start agencies were generally the most well established community partners and had office space, in all but one target region they became the fiscal agents that hired and housed the newly hired local SPARK staff, receiving regrants for their salaries and related expenses. The fiscal agent for Pearl was Friends of Children of Mississippi, for Cleveland and North Bolivar it was Bolivar County Community Action Agency (BCCAA), and for Hollandale it was the Hollandale School District. Soon after the commencement of the grant, the Mound Bayou School District asked to be included, so the initiative expanded to include this fifth catchment area. The first SPARK-MS Executive Director, Joy Gorham Hervey, hired in 2003, was given the task of collaborating with local fiscal agents to hire the Local Coordinators, who then recruited and hired two Learning Advocates per region.

Fiscal agents also spearheaded the task of forming a Local Children's Partnership (LCP) in each target community. LCPs were a reflection of the State Planning Committee (SPC) in terms of their diverse composition: they included representatives from the public school district, the local Head Start agency, child care center directors, parents, advocates, and other service providers such as health care professionals. According to Carol Burnett, SPC member and Director of the Mississippi Low Income Child Care initiative, "The local and the state committees were reflective of each other, in terms of trying to include a real comprehensive representation of all the services that were trying to be brought to the table to support the project."

The heart of the SPARK-MS model was local partnerships. As Collins recalled, "The Local Children's Partnership was made up of community members. So there was always a representative from child care, Head Start, and the school district. When we started the partnerships, we intentionally recruited so that the

TIMELINE 2004 Second cohort identified

groups were diverse and broad enough to represent the community." Fitzgerald stated, "In each local area where we had a SPARK program, we had a Local Children's Partnership for two reasons. One was we wanted somebody in the community to understand what we were trying to do and be vested in keeping it going. Two, there were resources that we didn't have. And around the table when the child or family needed something, the staff was able to get the Local Children's Partnership to help put that in place." Of each LCP's composition, Bishop stated, "It has faith-based presence. You had to have youth leaders. You had to have a huge array of folk working on behalf of children. Requiring at the local level the collaboration between the business leaders, faith-based leaders, private providers, Head Start, and the school district, that's the heart of SPARK." This bringing together of child care, Head Start, and public schools represented a significant breakthrough; Rose Jenkins, Local Coordinator in Pearl, stated, "Until SPARK came into play, there were no interactions between any of them."

In addition to the LCPs, the commitment to hiring local staff was another hallmark of the SPARK model. Elnora Littleton, BCCAA's Education Director, recalled, "…we were able to receive funds and employ local employees to come in and actually work with SPARK and along with the public school system and day care centers." Local Coordinators managed and reported on SPARK activities, assisted the LCP in its duties, and became the local public faces of SPARK. They also supervised the work of the Learning Advocates, who served as liaisons between the LCPs and SPARK parents. In Bishop's words, "… you may hear those Learning Advocates refer to themselves as the foot soldiers for SPARK." One of the first tasks of the Learning Advocates was to identify and recruit students and parents to participate in SPARK. Dr. Jobana Frey, Associate Superintendent of Federal Programs for the Hollandale School District, stated, "The early time of SPARK when the Learning Advocates came, they had to go

Rhea Williams Bishop selected as second Executive Director

out into the homes in town and in the neighborhoods and actually find these children. We had an idea about them, but they had to actually put a face with a name and a parent."

Beyond helping parents with the technical aspects of promoting learning at home, SPARK Learning Advocates proved to be critical to leveraging resources and information and making them accessible to local communities, most of which were rural. They were also able to articulate the needs of the population to the LCPs and state SPARK partnership since they were "on the ground." Bishop recalled, "A lot of times, I found particularly in the Delta and rural areas, resources might exist at the state level or the national level. But because people don't know how to get to those resources they suffer more….The local staff made connections for children that otherwise wouldn't have been made."

During the course of the SPARK initiative, there were several State Executive Directors and various iterations of funding from the Kellogg Foundation. The original SPARK $5 million grant was awarded from 2003-2008. Hired upon award, the first director, Joy Gorham Hervey, recruited initial staff and set up systems, processes, and interventions in alignment with the approved Phase II grant proposal. Hervey served until 2004, at which time Rhea Williams Bishop assumed the role. Bishop transitioned the initiative through the end of its first round of funding. In 2008, at the conclusion of the Phase II grant, CDF-SRO received funding to adjust the program model in alignment with new Kellogg funding priorities. This funding, though not as plenteous as the initial grant, allowed the initiative to expand into additional catchment areas offering a more limited menu of interventions focused specifically on literacy. Ellen L. Collins was hired to lead this reinvented version of SPARK, called Expanded Early Education. She served through 2013, when Anjohnette Gibbs became interim Executive Director.

"The key to learning is parent involvement, community involvement, and beginning early."

TIMELINE 2005 ■ First cohort enrolls in kindergarten

INTERVENTIONS – PROVIDERS AND SCHOOLS

Many SPARK interventions focused on achieving alignment between different early care and education experiences, as well as between those experiences and public school. In Burnett's words, "SPARK was created to try to introduce some alignment in local communities among all of the different places where children were being cared for before going to school."

One SPARK intervention focused on alignment was to contract with technical assistance providers to conduct environmental assessments of Head Start and child care centers, then use the results to create quality improvement plans that prescribed a combination of purchases, facility improvements, professional development, and targeted technical assistance. These assessment, planning, and technical assistance services were provided by the Mississippi Low Income Child Care Initiative for private day care centers, by the Mississippi State University Early Learning Institute for Head Start centers and public schools, and by the Mississippi State University Extension Service for family home care providers. The environmental assessments used were the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS).

The environmental assessment scores highlighted the dire need for resources, especially among private care providers. Burnett recalled, "The starting line for child care was football fields behind Head Start and public school, because they had such a dramatically smaller amount of resources to call on for anything. They didn't have money for quality improvement, they didn't have money for teachers' salaries, they didn't have money for learning materials; they didn't have money for training." SPARK funding helped to address these resource needs: funding for the improvements identified in the quality improvement plans was included in the contracts to the technical assistance providers who then purchased items for the centers in their purview. According to Burnett, "The quality improvement plans that we developed were really extensive." Fitzgerald stated, "We did regrants based

upon where children were and we did a per-child cost-out that went with the number of children in that particular setting and the needs there."

As SPARK students progressed through preschool and began to enter kindergarten, the LCPs noticed that there was an unexpected level of need for resources, information, and other interventions even in public schools. Dr. Cathy Grace, SPC member and former Director of the Mississippi State University Early Childhood Institute, stated, "I think one of the big decisions that was made was that the money follow the child…." Fitzgerald recalled, "So then we go up the ladder and the children are moving up from age four into kindergarten…And we were flabbergasted again! Because we had not planned to put any money in public schools. But then we get in there and the kindergarten teachers were like, 'Can you talk to our principal? Can you talk to the school board? They don't get early childhood. They don't understand.' The schools didn't have playground equipment for young children. So we actually had to infuse [resources]."

Not all ready schools interventions required contract or regrant dollars. For instance, Rose Jenkins, SPARK Local Coordinator in Pearl, recollected, "The majority of child care centers didn't have learning centers." According to Patsy Clerk, former SPARK Local Coordinator in Cleveland, "The technical assistant would come in and say, 'Okay. We're going to look at what you can change without spending money first.' If that is just rearranging some furniture to make your centers identifiable, that was one of the things that we did. The hand washing thing: there was soap already there, but they may not have been being consistent with the hand washing. Those were things that the technical assistant did. Then, if money had to be spent, then SPARK provided so much per child." LCPs also leveraged additional resources from the community. For instance, a dentist in Pearl provided free services to SPARK students. In some instances, Head Start

centers or public schools allowed children in child care centers to participate in their on-site health care screenings and services.

In addition to aligning quality of care, the SPARK model also promoted alignment of assessments and curricula used by providers and educators. At the inception of the initiative, there was a wide discrepancy between approaches to assessment. Fitzgerald stated, "Child care centers for the most part weren't using any assessments. Head Start centers, even within a Head Start program, might have been using a different assessment. And public schools were using something else." SPARK staff researched assessment options and encouraged all early care providers to use readiness assessments aligned with the Mississippi Department of Education preschool benchmarks.

Alignment efforts also included bringing staff members from diverse early care and education environments together for joint professional development as well as conversations about individual students. Professional development opportunities included early childhood education conferences attended by child care, Head Start, and public school teachers both within and outside of SPARK. SPARK also contracted with the Institute for Disability Studies to provide professional development for early care and education providers on how to identify students with special needs. Prior to SPARK, according to Frey, "There had not been very good communication between Head Start and Hollandale School District." By contrast, during SPARK, "We had for the first time in many years our Head Start people and our kindergarten teachers having regular meetings about those children." Bishop agreed: "It was the first time that anyone had brought the three different facets of education together. Head Start provided providers in the school district to work on behalf of the students they were serving, which lent itself to the first-time conversation we were having about transition and alignment in most communities."

INTERVENTIONS – PARENTS AND KIDS

In addition to alignment interventions focused on providers, SPARK partners and staff equipped parents to prepare their children for school. Pat Burt Brown, one of the original SPARK Local Coordinators in Bolivar County, recalled, "There was a big, big need for literacy improvement in the area. We had homes that had absolutely had no printed materials in them. We had parents, not all parents, but some parents, who did not see the importance of reading to the children. Some parents, that was because they didn't read well." Anjohnette Gibbs, one of the original planners who now serves as interim SPARK-MS Executive Director, agreed, "We saw parents who wanted to work with their children and were unsure how to."

> "We see a smarter parent, a more informed parent. They're just ready. They're ready for kindergarten."

In order to meet these needs, SPARK's work with parents included home visitations, parent workshops with free child care, and parent resource fairs, as well as hands-on learning experiences such as field trips that parents and children could attend together. Former SPARK parent Tammy Jackson marveled, "Every time you look around, SPARK is doing something…and it's not about just the kids, it's about the parents too. Parents come to meetings, they get, you know, a lot of incentives, and the [SPARK staff] just have so much. And that's a good thing." Grace reinforced Jackson's comment, stating, "I think that the engagement of parents and some of the things that they did with the field trips and giving them an opportunity to see things outside of their own little five-block area was tremendous and probably life-changing on an adult level [whether] they were parents or not. I would say those things were very positive." Home visitation was an especially successful strategy: as Fitzgerald stated, "We put a lot of money into home visitation and it paid off."

TIMELINE **2006** ■ Second cohort enrolls in kindergarten

Upon enrollment of a new SPARK student, the first step was to administer a developmental screening to determine areas of need. Collins explained, "If a child was struggling or having some challenges in literacy and language, we were able to work one-on-one with the child and also do home visits to help the parent understand what their child was struggling with in the class and what they could do at home." Jenkins concurred, "We were able to get the services needed for those children." Former SPARK parent Carol Mack stated, "The most important thing that I loved about the SPARK program was that they followed my child, even up until… probably sixth grade. They used to go to his classroom, they would just, you know, just pop up, go to his classrooms at Pearl School and just kind of, you know, track his grades, track his behavior, talk to his teachers, talk to the counselors, things like that, and then … if there were any problems, they would always, you know, call and set up an appointment, come to my house and discuss some things, talk to him about some things, and I loved that because they were very involved." The initiative's early work with parents incorporated the Ages and Stages curriculum from Mississippi State University. Later, a highlight of SPARK's work in this area was developing, in collaboration with Mississippi Public Broadcasting, an at-home literacy development curriculum for use by parents based on the children's television series *Between the Lions*.

Learning Advocates helped students transition between home, preschool or Head Start, and the public schools where students attended kindergarten. In Bishop's words, Learning Advocates were "working within the home, connecting the parents to the schools. Serving as a translator, is what I called it." The results were dramatic: Littleton stated, "Within a year we could see a difference. Every year brought about another difference, and every cohort of children brought about a change in terms of what we were trying to actually do…you actually could see a difference in our children and our families and even within our staff and our schools."

THREE

LESSONS LEARNED: CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

CHALLENGES

Building Partnerships

SPARK-MS partners and staff experienced many challenges throughout the implementation process. One of the earliest was the difficulty of building trust among partners that had no experience working together. Fitzgerald noted that, even at the outset, "…we realized that day care really didn't like Head Start. And public schools didn't like Head Start or day care. Then we started recognizing that there was no cross communication between those systems, or very little. The more progressive Head Start programs were doing work with public schools. But child care was not in the conversation at all for the most part in the communities where we were…."

In particular, the lack of trust within the early care and education sector was a challenge in every SPARK community. Patsy Clerk, who worked in Cleveland, recalled, "The number one need was a need for the early educators to come together and form an alliance… because before SPARK, we were not meeting as partners." Part of the mistrust sprang from the realities of competition for resources: Clerk stated, "Head Start felt like child care centers were trying to take the children…." Similarly, Frey recalled tension in Hollandale between Head Start and the school district, which was acting as fiscal agent for SPARK: "Our Head Start was a little apprehensive. I think there was a little bit of, 'Oh, they're getting ready to take our children.' There was always a little bit of apprehension. I think that was a problem at first, but they came. They saw that we were not a threat."

"The investments that need to happen in order to improve long-term outcomes are multiple and time-intensive."

Into this environment of mutual distrust, SPARK emerged as a threatening unknown: according to Clerk, "Everybody felt like SPARK was this new initiative coming in to say you don't know what you're doing and we're going to take your

children and we're going to do a better job, but it was not that. It was to partner… together we can do a much better job for our children." In addition, some in the early care community thought that SPARK employees were there to replace them. Brown recalled, "When the SPARK initiative came on the scene…some people had decided that we were in there to take their jobs… that was a challenge. We had to get that straight that we're not in here to take your jobs, we're in here to just help you any way we possibly can."

Given these initial misconceptions, SPARK partners and staff had to display patience as they worked through others to get things done. Anjohnette Gibbs, who worked in both an original and expansion SPARK catchment area, recalled regarding the latter, "SPARK was new for Indianola and they were not familiar with it. So we did have some problems. It took almost six months to get an agreement signed [with the school district]. We did have some challenges there. But once we were able to get the agreement signed we have seen a good working relationship with kindergarten teachers."

Gaining Parents' Trust and Engagement

Another challenge, particularly for local SPARK staff, was building trust with parents. This was especially critical given that the initiative included home visits. Clerk stated, "Sometimes people just didn't want you in their space, but once they got to know us, they were calling on us. They were like, 'There goes that SPARK lady.'" Frey concurred: "After the Learning Advocate gained their trust, they really opened up and started to participate."

Several other factors made the task of increasing parental engagement difficult. First, many parents did not themselves have fond memories of school. For instance, as Clerk stated, "Maybe they dropped out or just didn't have a good experience in school…." As a result, the parents themselves often had low levels of literacy. Brown surmised, "In the case of building literacy through reading, I think the parents in many instances did not want the children to know that they didn't

read well." In addition, the decreasing age of the parents was a potential barrier. Clerk described, "Another challenge, our parents are getting younger. We see that with the teen parenting program because our youngest clients are in seventh grade, some of them." Finally, logistical difficulties were a challenge to many parents, as Frey recalled: "It was hard to get our parents out. They didn't often have sitters so that they could come to meetings during the day or at night. Travel was an issue with a lot of them. They couldn't travel. At one time, we sent a bus."

Building Public Will

Another significant challenge was building public will to devote the requisite amount of effort and resources to early care and education. Bishop spoke of the early task of "selling the fact that early childhood was the way to go and important….At the time it was an issue because people just viewed it as babysitting." Another barrier to political will was the fact that, though he and his wife convened a task force on early childhood education, former Governor Haley Barbour was adamantly opposed to the creation of what he called a "thirteenth grade" in K-12 education. In addition, the state legislature consistently refused to fully fund K-12 education at levels required by the existing formula; therefore, there was a lack of traction to fund pre-K. Another contributing factor to the challenge of building public will was the aging population in SPARK communities. During her tenure, Clerk addressed the Cleveland school board: "You may not have children in the school system or they may be all grown, but if we don't get these children learning and try to help build some self-esteem and help their families to help them, they'll be the ones snatching your purses and breaking the windows out." This challenge of educating the public regarding the need for quality care was one the local SPARK staff took on. Gibbs characterized this task as "making sure that the community…is knowledgeable about early ed and the need for it and what they can do and how it helps the community economically as well as providing a workforce."

Along with the challenge of educating the public was that of then getting the community to take action. As Littleton stated, "Some of our challenges were actually to get people to buy into SPARK; to actually come together on our local levels with our school system...." Gibbs described the task as "…making sure that the community is involved from the beginning so you'll have support from all levels."

Systemic Challenges

Early in the SPARK program, many child care centers received a fatal blow due to a new requirement from the Mississippi Department of Human Services that parents must initiate child support proceedings in order to receive a child care voucher. As Collins described, this and other systemic barriers were pervasive: "There were challenges in just the barriers in the systems themselves…Just not being flexible enough to be able to work together. I guess an example of that is when you're talking about aligning programming or aligning services for children, you run across barriers around the use of funding. Barriers with staffing.... Sometimes trying to work with different state agencies, they just didn't have the staff to provide the services that we needed to be there."

Once the SPARK initiative was fully operational, a major challenge became sufficiency of funding to maintain progress. Bishop called this challenge, "finding the funding to keep it going, because traditionally foundations, or any other funders, have a time span." Particularly challenging was the combination of quality standards and lack of funding. As Burnett stated, "We're saying kids need this Cadillac, but we're not willing to give families a car at all. How can both of those things be true?" Collins elaborated: "In my opinion, [one of] the challenges that remain…is that quality costs. I feel like there's still this assumption that we can still piecemeal programs together and that we will get the outcomes that we want for young children and families, and that's not the case. I think we all know that we get what we pay for." In some cases, partnerships were able to be creative

around funding, as did the Hollandale School District. Frey stated, "Funding is always a challenge. We decided when we had that first pre-K classroom that we wanted it enough to fund it with federal programs money. It took a nice big chunk out of the budget, but it was worth it, and there was never a time when we said, 'We can't do this anymore.' We found the money." In some cases, there was a lack of awareness on the part of school district personnel that Title I funds could be used for early education activities. Bishop recalled, "We ended up co-sponsoring two major state-wide conferences because we had administrators and Title I folk that didn't even realize that their Title I dollars could be used for early care and education. But here so many people are using Title I dollars to fill holes from what they don't get from the regular state allocations."

Lack of standardization among schools, even within the same district, proved to be a challenge to alignment efforts. Bishop recalled, "Within one county you have children coming home with report cards where a P is passing, a parent sees that and thinks P is good, they change schools in the same county, and a P means poor." Turnover among district- and school-level administrators was also a challenge in some areas.

Evaluation and Data

Another major challenge was showing results through evaluation. Bishop stated, "I think the biggest challenge is proving that what we did worked and still works…Mississippi didn't even have a data stat conducive to say okay, the children started here, and we moved them this far." The lack of baseline data collected prior to SPARK implementation made it difficult if not impossible for SPARK to demonstrate measurable impact. Bishop recalled, "Mississippi didn't evaluate on a standard level with any child until they reached second grade, then they changed it to third grade, which was another hurdle for us. And so we compared the most vulnerable children to those who had had years and years of intervention through Reading First, because that was the only other group we

could compare them to and SPARK children were on par with them and in most cases ahead of them. But I don't know whether that's enough or not, because when people fund you, they want to see huge gains, and we couldn't show that. I think that was the biggest challenge of ours."

Dr. Grace concurred regarding data challenges: "I do think that another challenge was the lack of understanding school districts ... let me put it this way, the lack of understanding that everybody had in the collaborative process about the importance of data and how data was really going to have to be gathered and treated as an information source to help improve things and I think that is still a problem we have."

SUCCESSES

Improved Collaboration

Despite the challenges, SPARK-MS proved to be a success in many areas. First, the implementation of the highly collaborative partnership model produced better statewide and regional collaboration, marked by mutual respect. This was true at the provider level, as recalled by Littleton: "We were able to come together on alignment of curriculum, assessments, parent training, as well as training for staff. [We were] able to track our children, not just in Head Start, but to see what was actually going on once they left Head Start." According to Gibbs, "Shared training events were always a big plus because we saw kindergarten, Head Start, and child care teachers come together, to be trained together, learn from one another. And it gave all of them a respect for each other that sometimes we don't have." Frey agreed that these joint sessions had the desired result, "that first realization that Head Start teachers and kindergarten teachers have something in common….That was an eye opener, a really good thing that we did." This paradigm represented a radical change from the status quo in which, for example, "public school had the perception that Head Start was a babysitting service," in the words of Jenkins.

Gibbs iterated that as a result of joint professional development, "we were all knowledgeable and not wondering what was going on in kindergarten, what was going on in Head Start, what child care was doing. We were all at the table, so we were able to have conversation around what was going on and what was available." These kinds of conversations resulted in leveraging and sharing of resources, as Gibbs described: "[Child care centers] knew that there was somebody there to help them. Not trying to take their children. We were not there in competition. But we were there to work together and to share resources which Head Start had much more than they did. We would share resources. If they needed something, they knew they could come to the Head Start center and get it." Jenkins recalled that, as time progressed, "the fear of [providers] losing their children [to one another] went away.…Since SPARK, they're continuing to work together."

The Local Children's Partnerships also contributed to this dynamic of increased trust. In Burnett's words, "I think the key success was that the sectors that had operated in parallel universes, unaware of one another, really did develop relationships. That was very exciting to see. Over time, those silos, isolated sectors, parallel universe lines broke down and those groups really did begin to see each other as partners in this larger effort. I think that was fantastic." In Brown's words, "Finally, we got parents, school teachers and administrators, and Head Start folks on the same page. Because they saw us as not the enemy, but as somebody that's going to help all of these entities." The involvement of upper-level school district administrators went a long way toward producing buy-in. Collins recalled about the districts, "They were engaged at the administrative level. Where we had the true buy-in from superintendents, or deputy superintendents. And whenever there were decisions being made in the Local Children's Partnership, if the superintendent or their designated person was there, we were able to see traction and movement on things."

Local SPARK Staff

In addition to emerging collaboration and partnership, another arena of success was the effectiveness of local SPARK staff. Burnett stated, "I think that the local SPARK staff, over time, became so key to the success, because they were really the individuals who made all these moving parts have a common denominator." In particular, the Learning Advocates became the literal and figurative heart of the program. Frey stated, "I think the Learning Advocates were so instrumental in doing the leg work, finding these children, the way they formed relationships with parents. That was such a huge piece of it. We could not have moved forward without that." While some of the Learning Advocates' strategies varied between regions based on the needs of the families – some focused on providing uniforms or backpacks, while others worked within homes, connected parents to schools, or interacted directly with kindergarten teachers regarding individual students – Bishop recalled that the commonality was that "they [Learning Advocates] had a heart for the kids. They knew the kids, they knew the families. Some of them even had taught the parents of the SPARK children. So, they knew them in an intimate way."

Parent Engagement

SPARK realized many of its successes with parents. Gibbs recalled "young parents in particular, who gained skills and who gained self confidence. [Learning Advocates] worked with them to work with their own children and to feel more equipped to go into school districts and schools, and find out what they could do for their children." As Brown detailed, this was true of the grandparents who were responsible for their grandchildren as well: "In some cases you had little people who were not with their parents, they were with grandparents and that meant these were older people….They would say, 'Miss Brown, I just don't understand how to do this, but if you'll help me….'" Collins stated, "I know that some of the

feedback that I got from parents around the community was that they were so excited that there was someone there to help them to understand what they could do at home on a really basic level to help their child. And also if their child needed connections to different services, there was somebody to help them walk through that. So I think some of the successes were around our Learning Advocates being able to have that more one-on-one time with the parent to provide guidance and support where they need it."

Parents who may have started out distrustful eventually came to know and trust the SPARK staff. Clerk experienced this firsthand: "Another thing, with the families, they know us. A lot of times, now, they'll talk to us before they talk to a teacher or open up to the principal. We're seeing that happen a lot lately." Similarly, parents began to view the Learning Advocates as a resource, as Gibbs stated: "…they not only call you for this program, but they are calling you saying, 'Well, I have this problem, do you know anybody that might be able to help me? Or do you know where I can get some resources for this?' from housing to getting back in school, to getting their GED…." In the end, as Brown noted, "the families thought of us as a part of the landscape. We were no longer the outsiders. They thought that what we were doing was worthwhile."

SPARK parents were informed and empowered. According to Collins, SPARK's work enabled parents "to have a voice because in the Local Children's Partnership where we had the really active parent participants, I think they felt heard, or being legitimate. Because I think some of our parents were a little intimidated by the school process. And they may not have gone to their school district to their child's teacher and expressed some concerns about some things because they didn't feel equipped with the tools to do so. And so I think through our process we empowered…we worked to give parents information that empowered them to be more advocates for their children." Former SPARK parent Sheila Bell stated, "It brought me closer to my children, and more concerned and involved in their education, making sure that they maintained everything that

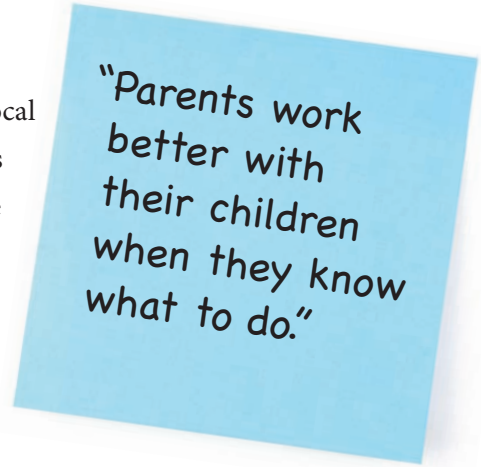
TIMELINE **2009** ■ Phase II grant ends; program transitions to Expanded Early Education

they're supposed to, and continue to succeed and grow. So they really inspired me to, you know, stay on top of that."

In addition, according to Bishop, "SPARK helped elevate the expectations of parents in terms of quality." In Hollandale, the school district noted that parents were more informed. Frey stated, "I think parents were made more aware of exactly what their children were doing at that age and what they were capable of doing. [I saw] parents wanting to participate, be in classrooms with their children…." Littleton concurred: "…parents are able to actually go into the classroom and actually work with their children on a volunteer basis." Brown "saw parents become engaged. I think maybe they understood their role in helping to build literacy…." Jenkins stated, "As time went on, [parents] became self-sufficient and were able to become their own advocates….Parents work better with their children when they know what to do."

Infusion of Resources

Another area of impact was the resources that SPARK infused into local communities. Before SPARK, according to Littleton, a "challenge was moneys in our communities…. With SPARK coming in and with the money that came in to our local communities, it made a difference in the lives of our staff, our children, as well as our families." These resources were especially critical for private child care centers – as Burnett noted, "The formula for success in child care in Mississippi is intense on-site technical assistance, coupled with financial resources targeted to quality improvements. Those are the two things that make a difference in child care. Those were the things the SPARK program allowed us to do in the child care centers in all the SPARK communities." Sheila Cooper, a child care center teacher and, later, director, during SPARK said, "My center, my children, we were able to receive things that enhanced their learning that we would not otherwise be able to receive."



Quality Enhancement

Among early care and education providers, SPARK helped to develop a culture of assessment. Said Gibbs, "Well, we've seen early care providers improve their centers, look at assessment, be open to receive help with assessments, because most child care centers do not assess their children. But because we provide that opportunity, and our staff handles that, we've seen providers become open to their children being assessed and accepting help on how to use that information to work with their children and what their needs are."

SPARK also helped to reinforce the professionalism of early childhood education. Bishop recalled, "We were able to introduce creative curriculum, child assessment, environmental rating scales, things that most providers had no knowledge of before. And in essence, we didn't know it then, but… it's given them a jump on being prepared for what's rolling out in 2013, in terms of what the state is pushing for quality. I think also it made providers feel like, finally, someone was listening to them. They were being acknowledged as educators." Collins concurred: "Well I think [what] we did in many of the communities is that we allowed the providers to be at the table with the other so called child professionals. I think for our child care providers, many of them….even though they know they're professionals, they didn't feel like they were professionals. But by giving them the opportunity to share their concerns and be a part of planning processes… we helped them to raise their level of professionalism. And we were also in lots of professional development courses and workshops for providers as well. And we didn't limit that to just child care. Our goal was to always bring them into rooms together and learn together. So putting them on the same playing field, I feel, was one of the successful things that we did." In return, staff rose to the occasion. Littleton

recalled, "We could actually see people that thought they couldn't get their CDA's. They got their CDA's or got their A.A. degrees or B.S. degrees or their confidence in what they were doing." Cooper concurred regarding her center's staff: "We went through the CDA program through SPARK."

Public School Improvements

With respect to school districts, SPARK provided the impetus for them to start or further develop their transition activities for students entering kindergarten. Clerk, who transitioned from SPARK to work for the Cleveland School District, recalled, "We started transition activities. We started with child care centers and Head Start centers. For the last couple of years, we added something to our transition piece. We started pre-K assessment. All of the kindergarten teachers, after the children participated in transition activities, visiting the school, and all of that, then the kindergarten teachers would go to all of the Head Start and child care centers and do a pre-K assessment, which gave them a heads up of what to look for."

There were other successes with respect to public schools that can be traced to SPARK. First is an emphasis on bringing students up to speed rather than placing blame for their deficits. In Clerk's words, "To me, I see our schools doing better, because in the beginning, I can remember SPARK had us collecting kindergarten report cards and it was so alarming the number of children who were being retained in kindergarten. Instead of the blame game, we're now working so hard to say, 'This is where this child is now. What can we do to get him school-ready? What can we do to get him ready and reading on the level that he needs to be on by the time he leaves elementary school and enters into middle school?' Another contribution from SPARK was innovation. Collins stated, "So I think what we did for school districts, we offered innovative and new ideas and practices and many of them took them on." This was certainly true in Pearl, where two schools were certified as Ready Schools through HighScope.

Child Outcomes

The mission of SPARK was to wrap around children and prepare them for school. The initiative accomplished gains for children in literacy. According to Brown, the literacy emphasis in homes translated into increased interest in reading among students: "The thing that I was real pleased with at the end is that we had a lot of books in the homes and that not only would the parents pick up the book and read to the kids, the kids would pick up the book and want the parents and/or other people to read to them." These reading strategies, along with other interventions, resulted in students who were ready for kindergarten. For instance, students gained from field trips on which, according to Littleton, "the children were exposed to many things they had not been exposed to. They were able to go to the State Capitol, they were able to go to the zoo, they were able to go to museums…." As a result of all of these interventions, Frey stated, "We're seeing a stronger child come to kindergarten. A stronger child, a child who knows what a book is about, some of them know how to read by the time they get to kindergarten. We see a smarter parent, a more informed parent. They're just ready. They're ready for kindergarten. We see a happier child, a much happier child."

Frey's last comment makes reference to children's social and emotional well-being. SPARK appears to have influenced this positively as well, according to Collins: "I don't think we looked at the social, emotional, or how a child's interaction was going on in the classroom. But I got evidence that children who were becoming better in the classroom were behaving better. You know they were more vocal. They would come home and talk more with their parents. Or they were doing better in the classroom as far as their interaction with their peers." Brown stated, "I had children who, when I got them, they didn't talk, they didn't do anything in particular. Then, as they went through SPARK and we read to them, they became loving little children — like the light bulb went off and their little faces would light up and they would be glad to see us coming." Cooper marveled that her original SPARK three-year-olds are now in seventh grade, and

most of them are honor roll students. "Parents bring them by to see me," she said, "and they thank me for the foundation."

Also in terms of health, SPARK contributed to a better quality of life for students. Frey spoke of the positive effects of health screenings. "When we started following children making sure they were healthy, they had good vision, good hearing, dental care, all of those things that Head Start was doing… I think that was a good part of it…."

KIDS COUNT Award and Head Start Convening

Receiving a KIDS COUNT Award in 2010 from the Annie E. Casey Foundation was a key point for the initiative. According to Collins, the award "gave us a statewide platform of what we were doing and I think it legitimized the program." Another key point was a Head Start collaboration convening sponsored by SPARK. Said Collins, "That also showed the statewide programs what we were trying to do. I think that convening preceded the KIDS COUNT award, and we were able to show this unified approach at this convening. It was collaboration between, I always say, between public and private. And we all stood together in saying that this is the direction that Mississippi needed to go in this collaborative model. And so we began to start putting it out in the public arena that we were all in this together."

Evaluation Findings

The attempt to use common assessment methods made it easier for the initiative to measure and evaluate students' progress. Collins stated, "We were able to see children move on their assessment scales. And [the scales] were different, depending on where they were enrolled because we were working across the board with child care, Head Start and the school districts.... There was some tangible evidence in what we saw." (Please see the *2011-2012 Evaluation Highlights Summary* that follows.)

2011-2012 EVALUATION HIGHLIGHTS

BRIGANCE SCREENER RESULTS: SPARK STUDENTS (PEARL)	
Fall 2011	**Spring 2012**
Students scoring below 60 (%)*	Students scoring below 60 (%)
72.7%	27%

**On the Brigance Screener, a criterion-referenced assessment, 60 is the threshold score at which students are referred for evaluation.*

MEAN DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FOR SPARK SCHOOL DISTRICTS		
	SPARK School Districts	**Mississippi**
African Americans (% of population)	81.25%	37.4%
% Students Receiving Free Lunch	89.5%	63.85%
Median Household Income	$22,455	$38,718
Per Capita Income	$12,314	$20,521
HS Graduates (% of adults ages 25+)	62%	80.3%

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Mississippi Department of Education

SCREENINGS AND ASSESSMENTS USED IN CATCHMENT AREAS	
School Districts	**Head Start Agencies**
Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)	LAP-D
AIMSweb	Brigance
DIBELS	LAP-3
LAP-3	Teaching Strategies GOLD CAP
Brigance	

Parent Survey Results

- 100% of parents reported that the home visitation component provided them with a service or linkage to a service otherwise viewed as unattainable.
- 85% of parents reported that had the SPARK Learning Advocates not been providing services to their children, they would not have gained knowledge of the Common Core Standards.

LOCAL SPARK STAFF ACTIVITY, 2011-2012	
Total Number of Home Visits	191
Total Number of Class Visits	893
Total Number of Referrals to Child Supportive Services	231
Total Number of Referrals to Family Supportive Services	3
Average Caseload	27 Children

Child supportive services include hearing and vision screening, special needs assessments, medical testing, and counseling. Family supportive services include economic supports, housing, transportation, and other social supports, as well as educational support services for parents and family members.

Collaborative Partnerships Reported by SPARK Staff

- Parents for Public Schools
- Teach for America
- Excel By 5
- HighScope Ready School Assessment

Professional Development Activities/Topics Reported by SPARK Staff

- Safe Spaces
- Common Core
- Early Learning Standards
- Ready School Assessment
- *Between the Lions* Home Literacy Curriculum
- Education Summit
- National Black Child Development Institute Conference
- ITERS/ECERS
- Excel By 5/Parents for Public Schools
- USDA Food Service and Reimbursement
- Parent Educator Training
- Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service

SPARK Transition Activities (Hollandale)

- Parent Luncheon or Dinner
- Transition Day
- Teacher Luncheon
- Fun Friday at the Park

FOUR

THE SPARK LEGACY:
TOWARD AN ALIGNED SYSTEM OF EARLY EDUCATION

INCREASED LOCAL CAPACITY

Expanded Early Education funding comes to a close in 2013, and the first cohort of SPARK students is now entering senior high school, yet the initiative's legacy lives on in many different forms throughout the state. One aspect of that legacy is increased capacity at the local level. As Gibbs described, the SPARK model consisted of "user friendly" pieces, which helped to keep things moving even when there were minor hiccups. "…The pieces that make up SPARK are…grass roots and user friendly, anybody can take it and work with it and build a core group, and engage the parents…." The fact that SPARK worked to increase local capacity meant that the work could continue when grant funding decreased or ended.

SPARK used several means to increase local capacity, one of which was to hire individuals from local communities. As Bishop stated, "We insured that all those folk on the ground were from that community, knew those children, knew those families. Everybody from the Local Coordinators to the Learning Advocates." The initiative went beyond hiring practices to increase capacity through professional development. Bishop recalled, "We made sure that they received the best training available on a national level, not just in the state of Mississippi….We sent them to Smart Start in North Carolina, which is the best of the best. They attended all the Kellogg-sponsored SPARK meetings. And through the Learning Lab, we reached out and sent additional [staff to training] with the funds that we had available. Because professional development was something that was lacking then in the state of Mississippi…because of lack of resources."

TIMELINE **2011** ■ Early childhood included in Momentum MS and Blueprint MS agenda

COLLABORATION, QUALITY, AND RESOURCES

The SPARK legacy also includes attention to collaboration, quality, and resources within the early childhood community. Collins stated, "…When you had collaboration among the three [child care, Head Start, and school districts], and good collaboration, you had a better road. And an understanding of quality, of quality care and experience, is what that means. A true commitment to professionalism. And when I say that I mean understanding that in order to reach quality, we had to have resources and that staff had to be qualified…and willing to move away from what was standard process or standard protocol; being flexible to make shifts in policy."

The legacy of collaboration means that SPARK is now institutionalized both in schools and in early care and education centers. As Gibbs noted, "Now we have space and the teachers are familiar with us and now are comfortable making referrals and talking to parents and saying this is a really good program, and you need to enroll your child." Grace Williams, Director of Cassie Pennington Head Start Center in Indianola, stated, "… I welcome people from SPARK in this building anytime they want or feel like they need to come, because they really have helped us a lot. I mean…SPARK is just like one of my staff. I'll tell Kellogg, as far as Cassie Pennington, [SPARK] is well worth it.… I love SPARK seriously. I hope SPARK would stay around a long time."

REITERATIONS OF SPARK'S WORK

In every district, SPARK's work continues, though under other auspices. For instance, in Cleveland, according to Clerk, the school district has instituted a regular "partnerships meeting with the early ed partners – child care representative, public school, and Head Start representatives….Cleveland also has a Healthy Mayor's Task Force that does a lot of the events. It sponsors a lot of the

events that SPARK was doing."

Another legacy is the involvement of "unlikely partners," including representatives from the business community, in the cause of early childhood quality and access. Bishop stated, "You had to have a huge array of folk working on behalf of children. ...Unlikely partners really led to the big kickoff of the major work at the state level because we intentionally sought out business leaders. We received a tiny grant from Kellogg, sort of an add-on that we could not spend, which I thought was a great model. They gave us $75,000 to reach out to an unlikely partner." Fitzgerald recalled that "Kellogg came to all of the SPARK groups and said we want you all to expand your network to include unlikely partners…. When Kellogg said, 'We want you to work with unlikely partners,' Rhea and I were sitting down and I said, 'I know a partner that's about as unlikely as you can get.'" Out of that grant and involvement came a partnership with the Mississippi Delta Council, which led to an expanded relationship with the Mississippi Economic Council (MEC). In Fitzgerald's words, "Well, MEC started adding us to their agenda so that every time they did a road trip, we were asked to do a presentation on SPARK as part of that road trip. This led to us getting early childhood education into Blueprint Mississippi and MEC pushing early childhood along with us to the Mississippi legislature."

As SPARK involved other partners in the cause, momentum built throughout the state for initiatives focused on early care and education. Bishop stated, "SPARK has to be given credit for sparking other early childhood programs, whether local or state. From Excel By 5, to Mississippi Building Blocks, to the State Early Childhood Advisory Council, SPARK had a presence. At least half of the Council were members of the SPARK State Steering Committee, and I think that's huge. If you look around at the leadership in early childhood, and you backtrack them, you'll find some SPARK connections."

There were many critical moments that created transitions within the SPARK trajectory – one was Hurricane Katrina. Fitzgerald said, "I think Katrina was a key

turning point. Because it was then that everybody realized that child care was not seen by the federal government as something necessary to emergency response or long-term recovery efforts. So people had to put their heads together to rebuild a child care system and the Chevron Corporation kicked in in a big way. Working with Dr. Cathy Grace, Chevron, and Kaplan, we used some Kellogg money to rebuild centers on the Gulf Coast, and to help rebuild them at a higher level."

SPARK has been part of several emerging early care and learning initiatives, including Mississippi Building Blocks, formed and funded from the business community, and Excel By 5, funded by Chevron. The Mississippi Center for Education Innovation (MSCEI) and the State Early Childhood Advisory Council also have roots that intersect with SPARK. SPARK has also influenced legislation – for instance, some components of the recent Early Learning Pre-K Collaborative Act reflect the SPARK approach. Bishop stated, "I think SPARK is a good model to show how you can take this practice and influence policy. ...You can make policy all day, but if it doesn't work from the ground, at the implementation level, and really make a difference, it's not going to work. And so any time you can have a best practice model influence the way policy is designed, you really are able to make a difference."

The continuation of SPARK components locally is a rewarding reminder of the strength of the SPARK design. Dr. Frey, from Hollandale School District, stated, "We still have a member of our SPARK team with us. Even though SPARK has ended, we picked her up about three years ago, and she's essentially doing the same thing that she was doing before…I think she was the Learning Advocate. Now she continues to work with parents, particularly parents of our preschool children, making sure they get to class, just support…we knew it was important to have someone that could be that link between parents and the school district."

This transition program is now in its third year. Similarly, the former SPARK Local Coordinator in Cleveland has now been hired by the school district to manage transition activities for entering students.

In Indianola, the work of SPARK continues under the auspices of the Indianola Promise Community, which began in 2011 and also employs a former SPARK Local Coordinator. West Tallahatchie will also continue to operate components through Morgan Freeman's Rock River Foundation, which also expanded programming into East Tallahatchie. In Pearl, the school district's Parent Center offers home visits and parent training. Jenkins posited, "It's basically a spin-off from SPARK."

The Mississippi Center for Education Innovation (MSCEI) was also "sparked" by SPARK. According to Fitzgerald, the Kellogg Foundation created a Learning Labs initiative, which was a learning community of practice for programs related to early childhood and school readiness. "Other states got … resources to do the Learning Lab work.... In Mississippi, we were participating in Learning Labs; however, the Kellogg Foundation funded a new initiative in Mississippi called the Mississippi Center for Education Innovation." The SPARK-MS Executive Director, Rhea Williams Bishop, went to the MSCEI as its Early Childhood Director. Fitzgerald recalled, "When Rhea left CDF to go over to MSCEI, she took the Learning Lab mantra into MSCEI as a major part of her work…."

Another Mississippi school readiness initiative with a connection to SPARK is Mississippi Building Blocks. Fitzgerald recalled that the Barksdale Institute "had put a lot of money into child care centers and into public schools. They were doing a lot of work and investing a lot in early education. When Mississippi Building Blocks was formed, a number of SPARK advisory committee members were brought into the conversation and onto their advisory committee."

There is also a connection between SPARK and Momentum Mississippi and Blueprint Mississippi, platforms of the Mississippi Economic Council. Fitzgerald recalled the formation of Momentum Mississippi and Blueprint Mississippi: "The

Mississippi Economic Council promoted Mississippi Building Blocks. However, at the same time, they also promoted SPARK. And I'm pretty sure that could be linked back to the Learning Lab and our work with the Delta Council. So every year the business community pulls in all of these people to talk about the blueprint for economic development in Mississippi. So the conversation expanded to early childhood. Early childhood education was listed as one of the platforms for both Blueprint and Momentum Mississippi."

On the heels of President Obama's emphasis on expanding access to quality early childhood education in his 2013 State of the Union Address, Mississippi is tackling this task at the state level, while many districts are addressing it as well. In Hollandale, SPARK has provided a model for the school's district pre-K program. Frey stated, "I think SPARK is a wonderful road map to pre-K. Having already done the things, so many of the pieces are already there, no rethinking or anything, it pretty much is a road map for other communities to start pre-K programs."

EARLY LEARNING PRE-K COLLABORATIVE ACT

On the state level, SPARK was a spark for Mississippi's new early childhood strategy. The Early Learning Pre-K Collaborative Act of 2013 (Mississippi State Senate Bill 2395) invites districts and county-wide collaboratives to apply for

state funding for voluntary pre-kindergarten program pilots; this is the first step toward rolling out a statewide pre-kindergarten system. The influence of SPARK-MS is clearly seen in the bill's requirement that collaboratives represent a broad partnership of diverse stakeholders, including public schools, Head Start, private care providers, and organizations serving children and families. Districts that participated in SPARK-MS, having already embarked on this work of building local capacity, are in an excellent position to apply successfully for this funding. Collins stated, "I think we positioned the districts we were working in to be top contenders for their new funding for the pre-K model that's being proposed by the state." In the long term, successful local pilots may become the basis for a statewide model. In Fitzgerald's words: "My vision is that if you can make this pre-K collaborative work and you can show the difference, then you've got something you can take to the people in a referendum."

LESSONS LEARNED

Lessons learned from SPARK-MS have value for ongoing state and federal efforts to build a comprehensive, aligned system that ushers students successfully from pre-kindergarten through school entry. Littleton emphasized that the availability of financial resources facilitated SPARK's success: "I learned that if there are funds available to come in to do the things that we need to do, then we are able to do a better job with the collaboration, communication, and following of the lifestyle of our children and parents to make a difference." Burnett agreed: "The investments that need to happen in order to improve long-term outcomes are multiple and time-intensive. It's not something you can just do an hour a month. It really requires a significant investment of time and resources. I think SPARK demonstrated what you could get if you made that kind of investment, because I think SPARK brought a significant investment,

but I think the other part of the SPARK story is that a great deal more would be required if we really wanted to do what needed to be done in these communities for these kids." Collins echoed the theme of investment: "There has to be an investment in the staff who work with young children and investment in the systems we design.... We truly need to be looking at evidence-based models that can be replicated across demographics and areas." However, resources alone are not enough – the resources must be used appropriately, as Fitzgerald implied: "We need to do something different than what we're doing with the money that we have." For instance, Bishop noted, "There's still no child assessment."

Another lesson is the impact of personal commitment and cultural competence on program success. Bishop stated, "Commitment on the ground [and] cultural competence [of] the people that work with the children and the families is very important. All kinds of issues of self efficacy. All those things that are important early on. That can't be provided by the State. That has to be provided by communities and families. So we need to make sure we do more on that end."

SPARK also teaches practitioners to embody a comprehensive approach to child well-being. Bishop stated, "You have to make sure that the children have adequate health care, proper nutrition." In this sense, the case management approach used by SPARK proved useful. To that point, Bishop stated, "I think we can find $350 million in the current budget and do the job right on a case management basis versus piecemeal stuff that gets caught up in politics and keeping adults employed and all that. If we took a case management approach, we could have all our children reading by third grade on grade level."

REMAINING CHALLENGES

There are several challenges that remain to be addressed in this system-building work. First, stakeholders are still seeking a shared understanding of what alignment really means. As Burnett stated, "We don't all agree on what we want to

use as the measure of children's success. It seems to me that is a really important thing we need to come to some agreement on. What are we aligning ourselves to all aim to do for these kids?" Another challenge is that of providing a tighter safety net to help ensure that students do not fall through the cracks despite interventions. In Bishop's words, "We have to build a pipeline from birth to third grade to 12th grade on up that makes sure that children don't get out of that pipeline to success. A pathway you wander off of. It's not enclosed. It's wide open. You can lay out the pathway all day, but if you don't put anything in place to make sure that the children stay on a positive trajectory, you can lose them…. It's got to be aligned every step of the way to make sure that we don't have children that fall through the cracks."

If this is to happen, a critical step is for communities to come together, as happened in the early stages of the SPARK work, to design a strategy. Burnett advocated "a clear, useful, user-friendly, effective strategy for equipping all these sectors to implement what kids need to have happen for them in those settings…. What it means is we have to be very realistic about where we are. We have to be clear about what it is we're trying to do and build a plan for how to take us from where we are to where we want to go." Collins concurred, "Communities need to continue their conversations and have a local strategy of how they will work together."

In that planning process, some components of SPARK may be replicable. For instance, Frey stated, "I think the learning advocacy is huge. I think the community involvement and the parental involvement that came out of SPARK was good." Clerk also emphasized parental involvement: "To keep the parents' involvement would be key for pre-K." Especially critical is the need for strong cross-sector partnerships, as Fitzgerald states: "[SPARK] is an initiative… that was guided by a group of people broader than us. And so, what I would like to eventually see happen at the state level is what happens in the school district. In these areas where you have the pre-K collaborative, you would have

that kind of network of people to guide implementation." SPARK showed how this could happen, even in rural communities; in Bishop's words: "I feel we can bring to the table some lessons learned from how rural communities can come together despite their challenges and have an effective collaboration and alignment model."

CONCLUSION

Some of the lessons learned from SPARK are profound in their simplicity:

- "I learned where there is unity there is strength. I learned communication with the other entities is the only way that we can survive and support." (Elnora Littleton)
- "Parents want to help their children. And when they receive help that is non-threatening then they are open to receiving that help, and then taking it and working with their children." (Anjohnette Gibbs)
- "It's better for the child in school when everybody's working together for the same cause….The key to learning is parent involvement, community involvement, and beginning early." (Rose Jenkins)
- "We didn't treat children like they were pieces of a puzzle. All the programs that we usually deal with are piecemeal. SPARK staff was able to bring all that together for the child and for the family." (Rhea Williams Bishop)

Perhaps the most important lesson from The SPARK Story is that the story has not yet reached its conclusion – SPARK continues to bear fruit in the form of effective interventions throughout the state. As Clerk marveled, "It's just like SPARK is like a sparkle for us in Cleveland.... It's still sparkling. It's not going out."

NOTES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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