

Beyond the Grant: How the W. K. Kellogg Foundation Went Beyond Grantmaking to Contribute to a Major Early Childhood Initiative

Stephen Greeley, M.S., and Beth Greeley, M.S., DCA, Inc.

Introduction

The SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) initiative was one of the largest, in scope and duration, ever undertaken by WKKF. The ambition of SPARK was to discover how to stem the tide of children who arrive at kindergarten each year unprepared to learn and, thus, start with a handicap that they might never overcome; half the academic gap seen in grade 12 can be attributed to gaps that existed in first grade (Heckman, 2006). As one superintendent involved in the initiative put it, “When children show up in kindergarten with no pre-literacy skills, it’s like we’re already seeing who our eventual dropouts will be.”

SPARK also served as a first step for WKKF in moving away from traditional grantmaking toward a more activist role as a change maker. This article examines the SPARK initiative in that way. Foundations seeking to achieve large-scale social progress are in a uniquely challenging position. They can bring funding, knowledge, visibility, influence, and a broad perspective to the issues they take on. Yet, the activities that yield change are usually in the hands of grantees and others. Foundations face a balancing act between inspiring and supporting grantees to dictating and micromanaging, between staying in the background and lending a credible voice. SPARK proved a dynamic way for the Kellogg Foundation to tackle those issues.

This article is based on a report prepared for

Key Points

- The seven-year SPARK (Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids) initiative, created by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF), aimed at systematically linking the pre-K and kindergarten worlds as a way to position vulnerable children for greater success in the early grades.
- At the foundation, the initiative served as a departure point for WKKF to move from its traditional grantmaking role to a changemaker role.
- To create change, a foundation must articulate – and commit to – a point of view about how change can occur. A theory of change can be a powerful tool to guide ongoing planning and action.
- A foundation that intends to create change must be prepared to take responsibility for results and create the internal structures that promote accountability and collaboration. The nature of the SPARK effort called for abandoning the silos of portfolio management and developing a new collaborative approach.
- Foundations must be prepared to advocate for change, and bring their visibility, credibility, knowledge, and convening power to it.

WKKF by DCA, Inc., a consulting organization that specializes in guiding efforts to achieve large-scale social progress. DCA was engaged by WKKF to assist grantees and foundation staff over the course of the initiative. The report presented a candid assessment of what went well and what didn’t work well in the SPARK initiative in terms of the new ways foundation manage-

ment interacted with grantees, provided technical assistance, and took on a more visible advocate's role in order to achieve a significant impact in advancing children's school readiness.¹

The Environment

School readiness was a fairly well-established concept when SPARK began. Research abounded on the skills that are essential to children's success in kindergarten and beyond.² As seen by the emergence of childcare rating systems and advances in early-childhood education (ECE) accreditation, policymakers and early childhood educators increasingly strove for higher-quality programs to prepare young students for kindergarten (National Governors Association, 2005). Schools welcomed the prospect of gathering children in who were better prepared to succeed. But each system continued to circle in separate orbits.

Few³ were actively wading into that space between preschool education and the early elementary grades and the very idea of bridging the gap between preschool and kindergarten was controversial. On a fundamental level, the concept trod on entrenched perceptions about professionalism,

value, educational attainment, even social rank. Practically speaking, it presented yet another layer of work for education systems that already felt just about stretched to the limit. One grantee observed that a Head Start program had existed for years next door to an elementary school, but the preschool director had never been successful at establishing any relationship with the kindergarten teachers. The school principal saw the value, but had many other more urgent priorities. There was no outside pressure to push for a tangible link between the two systems.

Yet, nationally there was growing focus in education, policy, and philanthropic spheres on creating a continuum of learning for children and better alignment across the educational spectrum, as evidenced by the emergence of P-3 and P-20 councils in a number of states (Communications Consortium Media Center, 2009). The time appeared ripe for a system-building initiative that moved beyond the theoretical to developing models for young children's learning and school readiness at the community level that could yield lessons to be applied nationally.

SPARK Overview

Kellogg saw the logic of linking the pre-K and kindergarten worlds. It banked the SPARK investment on a belief that creating common expectations between the two sectors, building effective transitions from one to the next, and engaging parents to a much higher degree would be fruitful. Additionally, the foundation recognized that such an effort would require as much "horsepower" as possible, which meant reaching out to community and governmental partners to move the idea forward and give it life beyond the length of the initiative. As one educator involved in the initiative put it, SPARK represented "a container in which all the people and organizations involved in early childhood education could articulate a new system." It was "the most comprehensive, coherent vision for the state and the school system to rally around three and four-year-olds" that this person had ever seen.

SPARK was launched in 2001 with eight grantees in the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia,

¹ The authors reviewed the original internal SPARK proposal, a visioning statement, grantee reports, a WKKF Foundation/Education Commission of the States SPARK overview, an internal WKKF SPARK comprehensive historical review, DCA's own reports, the Walter R. McDonald & Associates Resource Organization Report and Initiative Evaluation Report, and publications prepared for a *National Forum on Linking Ready Kids and Ready Schools*. DCA interviewed 25 individuals involved with SPARK, including current and former Kellogg managers, program and evaluation staff; grantees; educators and school administrators; community and business partners; and the five resource organizations that supported SPARK. In the course of its work with SPARK, DCA also initiated discussions with 67 national organizations representing early childhood education and care, state and local education policymakers, parent- and family-serving groups, business organizations, and education and early care thought leaders. Those discussions informed many observations in this article.

² The National School Readiness Indicators Project identified the following components of school readiness: physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, approaches to learning, language development, and cognition and general knowledge.

³ The Foundation for Child Development, Graustein Memorial Fund, David and Lucille Packard Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Council for Chief State School Officers were among a small group of organizations that had made a priority of working toward greater alignment of K-12 and community-based early care and education.

Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Ohio, representing urban and rural school communities and preschool traditions and practices of widely divergent character. While the target population was children ages 3 to 6 who were at risk for struggling in school, SPARK progress would benefit all children, vulnerable or not.

Like most large-scale, multiyear initiatives, the SPARK evaluation story is complicated to tell and is still unfolding, with longitudinal studies following SPARK preschoolers through the early grades. Some figures sketch the outline. Kellogg's investment was \$58.5 million over the seven years and the grantees were able to leverage that for an additional \$106 million in financial and in-kind services to support their strategies and programs. Grantees report that 8,100 vulnerable children received services, which aided their preparation for, and transition to, kindergarten. Strategies in place for 2009 and 2010 would bring nearly 18,000 more children into the SPARK "ready kids, ready schools" realm (Walter R. McDonald Associates, 2009).

Five out of seven SPARK sites demonstrated that their students outperformed children from similar backgrounds for kindergarten readiness. The children served by two grantees performed as well as their peers, despite the SPARK children's vulnerabilities. Six grantees provided data from the first grade; two showed their students outperforming peers, while four others were on par. Data into second grade weren't as available, although children at one site were doing better than their peers and children at a second site were doing as well as their peers (Walter R. McDonald Associates, 2009).

It is important to note, however, that each grantee has successfully positioned itself to continue the work: They have all begun the systems change work, forged the partnerships, energized the stakeholders, and raised up the SPARK notion of ready kids and ready schools to a level that won't allow it to recede. There is a connotation to the word "initiative" in philanthropic circles that implies initiatives stop when all the money has been spent. The consensus of SPARK grantees is that

they are equipped, and committed, to carry on.

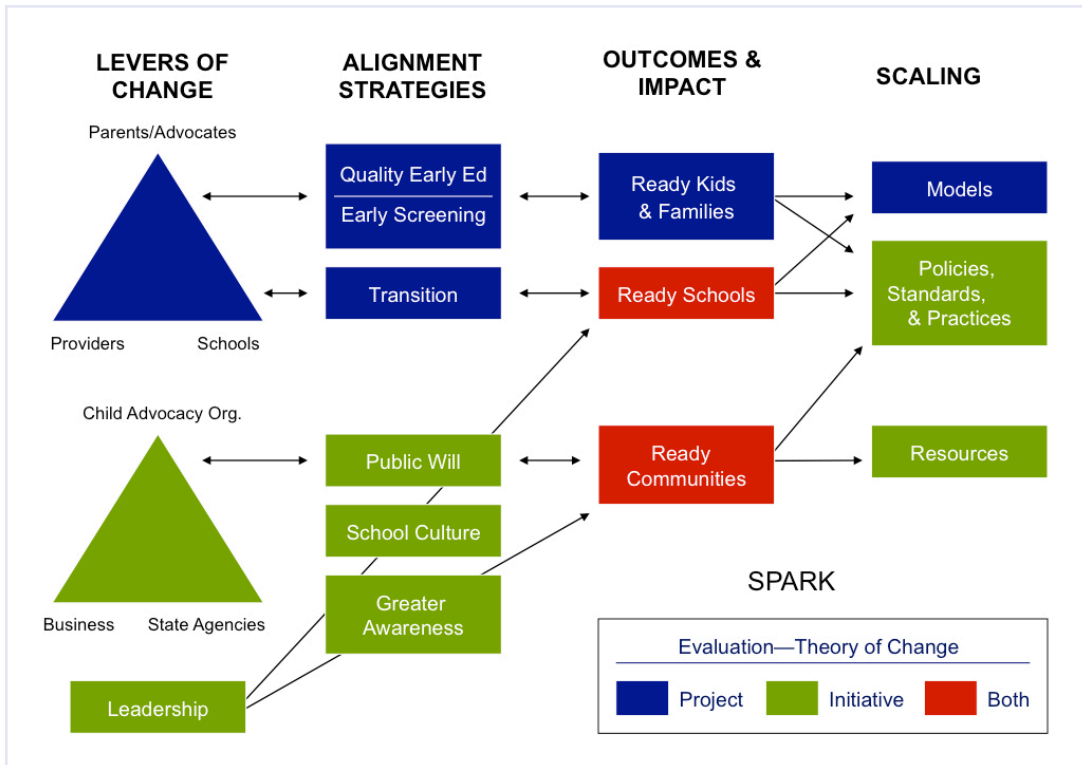
Developing a Theory of Change

The "container aspect" referenced earlier was a product of the SPARK initiative's theory of change, which was developed by foundation staff with substantial input from leaders in the field of early childhood education. According to staff involved in this process, no Kellogg initiative had ever been so keyed to the development of and agreement to a theory of change. In fact, the foundation board held funding back for launching SPARK until the theory of change was in place – a decision that offered grantees and their partners clear direction while giving them the freedom to adapt to their individual circumstances.

Arriving at the theory of change proved to be a long, painful process for foundation staff. It forced those involved to explore their own understanding of – and then agree on – how progress occurs on a large scale. But it yielded a durable result.

Arriving at the theory of change proved to be a long, painful process for foundation staff. It forced those involved to explore their own understanding of – and then agree on – how progress occurs on a large scale. But it yielded a durable result. One important aspect of the theory was that progress was essential on three fronts: "ready kids, ready schools, and ready communities." Furthermore, it made clear that this progress required the synergistic efforts of two basic types of partners: partners that have a direct involvement in children's lives, who were best positioned to design and manage a more effective system to serve them; and partners who control or influence resources and policy, who were best positioned to provide a supportive environment for the system and work toward its sustainability.

FIGURE 1 SPARK Theory of Change



The SPARK theory of change (Figure 1) was significant because it helped reconcile an ongoing internal debate about whether social change is a product of grassroots organizing or top-down leadership. The theory explained how it is a product of both. Parents, community-based early childhood educators, and elementary schools drive change by providing a well-grounded perspective on what supports children and families need in order to achieve school readiness, and work directly to create systems that provide those supports. School-system leaders, government, leaders and other education policymakers assist, expand, and sustain change by setting priorities, providing funding, and establishing supportive policies. Influential groups such as business leaders and child advocates serve as important intermediaries between these two groups by drawing attention to needs, promising solutions, and the benefits they offer. The SPARK theory of change framed the initiative and shaped the evaluation plan. By all accounts, the spirit of the work that resulted came very close to what the theory of change predicted.

The theory of change elicited worry, complaints, and confusion among the grantees when they first saw it. As it took hold, though, grantees said that it added real value to their work. Some hung poster representations of the theory of change in conference rooms to use almost like a road map. Others used it as a presentation tool, especially to outside groups like the Chamber of Commerce. One project director said it helped them “focus on who was not at the table. It gave us a visual to show the complex networks and linkages we needed to institutionalize change. It highlighted grassroots, while elevating the work to the next level.” The power of the theory of change to focus the work was essential to grantees in moving the effort forward.

Managing Change Making Versus Grantmaking

Kellogg was organized around the traditional foundation model of program directors holding a certain number of projects in their portfolios and working independently of their colleagues. With SPARK, the foundation set off in a new direction

and envisioned a structure that gathered a number of program directors and staff from multiple functions (such as communications and evaluation) together as a team. The idea was to bring a wide range of talents and experience to bear on this ambitious national initiative (Appendix A).

This new structure also called for a new way of interacting with grantees. It left behind the customary, more *laissez faire* relationship between program director and grantee, calling for Kellogg staff to be much more involved with and supportive of the sites. The theory was that each site's work would be guided by a common understanding of the initiative's goals forged among the program directors. Learning and successful strategies would emerge from each site and be shared among the entire initiative's participants.

Very early on, however, flaws in that structure began to surface. Foremost was that the staff serving on SPARK had a variety of reporting relationships rather than reporting to one individual who had ultimate responsibility for the overall success of the initiative. This created an imperative for consensus that was very difficult to achieve: No matter how much work went into reaching agreement, program directors' individual experiences and interests constantly overrode the common understanding.

The lack of a unified reporting structure also undermined the ability to coordinate staff activities and the messages they imparted to sites in the crucial early stages. As a result, throughout its early implementation phase, SPARK basically operated like eight separate initiatives, resulting in confusion and frustration among grantees and WKKF staff. Lines of authority and responsibility were obscured, which diminished a strong sense of owning the initiative within the foundation. At the same time, while the foundation was asking staff to operate in an entirely different way, staff performance was still tied to how many grants each program director was getting out the door. That wasn't the kind of performance measure to promote effective teamwork.

The multiple-program-director model also laid bare an unresolved, yet critically important, ques-

tion: How directive should the foundation be in terms of what it expected of the sites? Some staff felt the sites should be free to find their own way, since only they had the knowledge to adapt to and capitalize on local characteristics, as well as the experience to build systems that were truly effective for their children. Others felt that stronger guidance was needed, since sites were charting new territory and could benefit from a national perspective.

The multiple-program-director model also laid bare an unresolved, yet critically important, question: How directive should the foundation be in terms of what it expected of the sites?

By the end of SPARK's second year, it became apparent that the foundation's staffing structure was a roadblock. Sites were doing good work and making progress, yet they were struggling to envision the broader change they were working toward. What were the most essential components of the systems they were creating? What were the keys to the success of those systems? What were they learning that could move the entire cause of school readiness forward nationally?

Unless SPARK could answer those questions and achieve greater clarity, it would have limited ability to contribute to national progress or even have significant impact in SPARK states. It was plain that the initiative required more unified leadership from Kellogg, and a management structure that supported a cohesive vision and consistency in working with individual sites and advancing the initiative as a whole.

In response, the foundation collapsed the multiple-director model into three foundation managers and combined program and evaluation into the ongoing program management structure (Appendix B). The smaller foundation team provided

FIGURE 2 Shared Vision of SPARK Impact

<p>Every child will ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experience a continuum of success – before school, upon entering school, and through the early school years – in acquiring and using learning skills. • be supported by adults and institutions who understand what a child needs at each stage of development, are equipped for their role, and communicate with one another. • be at the center of a system that values him or her as an individual and is determined to provide the foundation for lifelong success. • be eager to learn, confident in his or her skills, and at home in learning environments.
<p>Every parent will ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be more knowledgeable about their child's learning, social, and physical development and how to nurture it. • be prepared to be proactive in advocating for their child with the professionals and institutions that serve their child. • be welcomed as partner in education, with a restored sense of school ownership.
<p>Every school will...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • view early childhood education as central component of its mission and key to student/school success. • have highly qualified teachers and staff to serve young children, as well as well-defined approaches to ensure performance. • view itself as a critical part of a larger early childhood education partnership, and be open and proactive in working with other members of that partnership to ensure child's continuum of success. • value every child, and strengthen its performance by continuous assessments of child's learning skills and needs.
<p>In every community ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • child-serving professionals and institutions will share the goal of ensuring early learning success and will work together to achieve it. • a new early care and education system will lead to greater sense of purpose and satisfaction, high-performing schools, and fewer social problems.

some immediate relief to grantees. It eliminated conflicting directions and streamlined reporting. Kellogg staff, though, still struggled with how to approach the partnership with grantees.

The desire was to strike a balance between being overly prescriptive and too open-ended. Kellogg was striving for empowered, insightful grantees that could discover for themselves what would be most effective for their communities, yet benefit from a more clearly defined vision of success as well as strategic input on the problems they were trying to solve. Kellogg wanted out of the power-play dynamic that can infect philanthropic work and to work as a team with the grantees. Teamwork, though, requires trust, and trust takes time to build. Even with the smaller management team in place, grantees still felt somewhat adrift.

Momentum shifted when the new management team signaled clear Kellogg staff ownership for

the initiative. They declared Kellogg's intention to be not only a champion for the grantees, but also a leader in ensuring that SPARK produced results that could have national significance (Crutchfield & McLeod Grant, 2008). The reconfigured management team convened all the SPARK site leaders to develop a shared vision of the future they were working toward collectively.

The resulting vision (Figure 2) was significant because it unified the initiative, clarified the impact SPARK intended to produce, and helped elevate what had been a *programmatic* orientation to a *cause* orientation. For some grantees this came naturally and they defined their work in systems-change terms. But others had a more programmatic lens and moving to this cause view was a struggle. Both kinds of grantees, though, came to understand that through the cause orientation, SPARK leaders were explicitly seeking to create powerful and lasting change on a large scale for

young children, their families, and their communities, and Kellogg explicitly sought to help guide and accelerate similar progress nationally.

The Kellogg management team strongly and consistently encouraged sites to identify system-building approaches that had proven highly effective in building transition and alignment between preschool and kindergarten, and had the potential to be adopted on a broad scale. They urged the sites to clarify the end results they were seeking for their states or municipalities. They reassured each site that it didn't need to create a "perfect" system, but insisted that it produce and scale up approaches that could contribute substantially to a better system. The underlying assumption was that the sites would produce a range of approaches that could form important elements of a highly functioning system and, in so doing, together inform national progress.

The Kellogg team underscored their commitment to the theory of change, and helped sites use it as a guide to determine how they could move from system development on a local scale to adoption of their systems and associated best practices on a large scale. This, too, helped elevate SPARK sites from a program-level focus to an emphasis on broader impact.

SPARK leaders and their key allies now knew what was expected of them, but understood that there were few restraints on how they got there. Kellogg had found its way out of the "prescription dilemma," as one subject called it, and set a true partnership in motion.

That was a turning point. Some SPARK sites at first resisted the need to focus their strategies and elevate the scope of their ambitions, but relatively quickly all embraced the idea that doing so gave them greater clarity of purpose and a clearer path to success. Equally important, SPARK had transitioned from a collection of projects to what it had originally been intended to be: a coherent initiative that could achieve national impact.

The Kellogg commitment to large-scale progress had a significant effect on important SPARK site

allies as well. One superintendent of a SPARK site system balked at the pilot size of the program, arguing that pilots belie the urgency of the problem: "It's like using a garden hose on a forest fire," he said. The price for his cooperation was straightforward: Work to convert all my schools to ready schools or take your initiative elsewhere. The Kellogg management team joined with site leaders in meeting with him and, with the foundation's backing, the local SPARK team accepted the challenge. Looking back, the superintendent said that Kellogg could have easily have walked away, but didn't because it had a clear commitment to the work and to achieving a major result.

The resulting vision was significant because it unified the initiative, clarified the impact SPARK intended to produce, and helped elevate what had been a programmatic orientation to a cause orientation.

Another SPARK ally reported that the "whole constellation of the foundation and the resource organizations made a big difference. They were troubleshooters and advisors." He noted that the public policy and economic development arguments were very valuable.⁴

"We were a group of business folks with very little knowledge of early education," he said, but their involvement with SPARK led to "discussions at a deep level" and spurred them to investigate and compare other models for early education. Their work with SPARK has convinced them that improvements in early education are not only the right thing to do, but also are a wise investment that will benefit everyone over the long term.

⁴The Committee on Economic Development's ongoing work on the cost/benefit of early education investment was influential.

A Different Path for Technical Assistance

A question Kellogg faced from the outset of SPARK was how to ensure that sites gained the benefit of expertise they would need to succeed. As noted earlier, the eight grantees had a range of experience and ability in thinking in systems-change terms, creating powerful collaborations, and advocating at the highest levels of policy-making realms; and the SPARK management team had specific ideas about the kind of know-how that would move the grantees' work forward. Another concern was insuring the continuity of assistance from site to site; since they were linked in a national initiative, it was important that the sites received consulting of the same kind and caliber. As a solution, Kellogg decided to forgo the more traditional technical assistance route – providing funding to each grantee to hire its own outside consulting – and to assemble instead a collection of consultant groups that the foundation would offer to the sites to support their SPARK work. Kellogg referred to this network as “resource organizations.”

As the initiative unfolded, however, an additional role for the resource organizations materialized. Foundation staffing, keyed to the portfolio-management model, is typically very stable. The scale of the SPARK initiative, and its essence as a *change-making* operation that called for much deeper and sustained involvement, overwhelmed the capacity of the Kellogg team. The resource organizations became an extra “set of hands” for Kellogg to manage and assist the grantees with everything that was happening at the site level.

The first network of resource organizations and the attempts to connect them to the sites did not live up to the management team's expectations. Like the struggle over how prescriptive the foundation should be in the overall work, Kellogg was seeking balance deploying the resource organizations. It viewed the network as a strategic investment in the work to accelerate progress at the site and national levels, but it didn't want to foist the group on grantees. The resource organizations were meant to represent to grantees that the foundation didn't consider itself to have all the answers, that it truly wanted to engage in a part-

nership with the sites and offer resources they could use in the way that would best help them.

But, like the mixed signals in the early management structure, the open-endedness of the arrangement made it difficult for grantees to see how the resource organizations' particular skills and processes could move them forward. Some perceived Kellogg's stance toward the resource organizations as ambivalent, while others viewed working with them as an added requirement of the foundation rather than as a benefit. The confusion and discomfort with the arrangement was generally evident to Kellogg staff and the resource groups, but it was also communicated directly to them by many of the grantees.

After this unsuccessful beginning effort to connect sites with external assistance, Kellogg recalibrated its resource-organization team and how it wanted that team to function. The new team included expertise in communications, evaluation, leadership development, community engagement, cause visioning, and policy development. Kellogg presented the resource organizations and their capabilities to SPARK sites in initiativewide meetings and gave them substantive roles in those sessions. Those meetings gave grantees a tangible sense of the kind of assistance the resource organizations could provide. As the grantees developed a clearer understanding of the broad change they were seeking and the pathway to that change, they could envision how the consultants' services would work for their efforts.

Another important management decision was to re-orient the relationship between the foundation and the resource organizations. The foundation encouraged the resource organizations to take intellectual ownership of the initiative and use their own discretion in guiding, assisting, and motivating grantees. It brought the resource-organization network, independent of the sites, together on a regular basis for sessions to develop site- and initiative-level strategy, help coordinate resource organization activities, and share the foundation's perspectives. The result was that resource organizations shifted their view of Kellogg from “client” to “partner,” which freed them

to weigh in with vigor on strategies relating to the initiative as a whole.

Ultimately, the resource organizations had an impact on nearly every site. One grantee said, “If we had known early on what we know now about the resource organizations, we could have seen even more possibilities.” In concert with the Kellogg team, the resource organizations helped grantees define where they were most likely to succeed and to chart a path to make it happen. The resource organizations became “thought partners” for grantees. One remarked, “We are a small organization and had a gap in resources. We needed someone who can think and plan strategically.”

Sites benefited from being able to speak frankly to people with an outside perspective and different experience and skills. One site leader offered that the resource organization with which she worked closely “opened us up to new ideas that we wouldn’t have thought about ourselves.” Grantees drew on resource organizations to establish their evaluation plans, to create entirely new alliances, to link their work with others around the country, to discover funding streams, and to keep going. “We wouldn’t have made it without them,” one grantee said. “They pushed us, made meetings happen, helped us make connections.”

Resource organizations also played key roles in developing core SPARK messages and encouraging their consistent application, and in defining key concepts, such as the characteristics of ready schools, that helped guide site work.

The process of putting the resource organizations together was intentional on Kellogg’s part, but how well the group functioned was unexpected. The combined resource-organization network was noncompetitive and extremely collaborative. Each one’s work informed the others’ and the exchanges were substantive. In an effort as far-flung as SPARK, coherence isn’t easy to reach or maintain. The resource organizations contributed to a sense of connection among the sites and between the sites and Kellogg. They emphasized what the

sites had in common and what they were doing that had national significance. One observed that the resource organizations created “our-ness” for the SPARK initiative among all its players.

Resource organizations shifted their view of Kellogg from “client” to “partner,” which freed them to weigh in with vigor on strategies relating to the initiative as a whole.

There were major contributing factors to this success. First, the Kellogg management team carefully selected the resource organizations not only for their expertise, but also for their perceived compatibility and their interest in the cause. Second, participation in the network had sustained involvement from the highest echelons at each firm. Lastly, Kellogg treated the resource organizations as an extension of their management team in a shared cause, rather than vendors enlisted to execute tasks or functions. That said, the job of building and sustaining the resource-organization network was arduous and required a significant investment in management time and dollars.

Advocacy and the ‘Soft Power’ of Foundations

A nationally known foundation like Kellogg has the capacity to be a powerful advocate for change. But how can that capacity be realized to its greatest effect? SPARK provided some useful lessons.

Historically, Kellogg has been reluctant to play a highly visible role as advocate. The foundation defers to the people and institutions who are directly involved in an issue that it is supporting. SPARK, though, required something more. The idea of ready schools – of creating a bridge between the worlds of community-based early education and the traditional K-12 educational system – was so difficult and controversial that it

The idea of ready schools – of creating a bridge between the worlds of community-based early education and the traditional K-12 educational system – was so difficult and controversial that it was critical for Kellogg to lend its name more directly to this effort. There was a need for national leadership in drawing these two worlds together in order to create a more fertile environment for SPARK sites and for the impact of the initiative as a whole.

was critical for Kellogg to lend its name more directly to this effort. There was a need for national leadership in drawing these two worlds together in order to create a more fertile environment for SPARK sites and for the impact of the initiative as a whole.

Kellogg had the advantages of national recognition and being viewed as unallied between the two sectors. But to be effective, the foundation needed a sound understanding of the landscape of potential support. Accordingly, Kellogg staff and one of its resource organizations had in-depth conversations with numerous national leaders in multiple sectors,⁵ in many cases representing membership organizations whose constituencies

⁵ The organizations engaged in this process served a broad range of constituencies, including Head Start and other early childhood education providers; public school system superintendents, elementary school principals, K-12 teachers, school board members and Title I administrators; elected officials at the local and state levels; businesses; parents; chief state school officers; social-service entities; philanthropies; advocacy groups; and early childhood education thought leaders.

are essential to the development of ready schools on a significant scale.

These discussions revealed substantial national interest in the development of “ready schools” – a core component of the systems SPARK was seeking to create. Leaders did not view creating ready schools as a cause unto itself, but instead as a key component of the cause of ensuring the educational success of young children. They found the vision articulated by SPARK leaders to be compelling, and they agreed with a ready school definition that includes strong community connection, recognizing that external support – support of individuals and institutions outside of schools themselves – is essential to create ready schools at full scale. Overwhelmingly, these leaders agreed that more work needed to be done to strengthen the role of schools in order to advance the school-readiness movement, and they welcomed Kellogg’s leadership in this regard.

When Kellogg and its resource organization reported this interest back to SPARK grantees, it had a tangible effect. They derived confidence from this strong national support and were motivated to envision their ready-schools work as a major contribution to the advancement of early childhood education. They were able to tackle such highly charged issues as preschool teacher training and certification, the re-ordering of Title 1 funding, and the shared responsibility of schools in making sure that both children and schools are ready for student success starting at kindergarten.

The foundation then tried to move the discussion to the next logical step among a select group of these national leaders. The hope was to develop a platform for federal and state policy change that would advance the new framework for early education that SPARK represented: a comprehensive approach that sought to align the entire early-learning continuum, from preschool right into the early grades. Toward that end, Kellogg convened three meetings. Unfortunately they were unable to chart a shared path forward, so Kellogg decided to set its own course.

Kellogg staff, together with members of its resource organizations, formed a team to develop a plan to translate the community-based lessons learned from SPARK into policy change at the state and federal levels. The plan focused on advancing two concepts central to the SPARK framework: *transition* – ensuring that children have continuous success in learning and moving from one phase of progress to the next, from birth through the early grades; and *alignment* – ensuring that the systems that serve young children are capable and effective in assisting that smooth progress.

The SPARK team's in-depth analysis of state policies indicated that while no state had a comprehensive policy on transition and alignment, several were primed to develop one. Further, Head Start reauthorizing legislation was under way, which was prompting states to think about this policy area. In each of these states, however, there were only disjointed discussions and no unifying way of talking about policies and practices. Thus, the team's goals were to:

1. connect experts on transition and alignment policy and practices to the governors and key state education policymakers at the forefront of early childhood education;
2. provide information that could deepen and accelerate their ongoing work;
3. motivate governors to prioritize Transitions from Early Learning to Early Grades and the alignment of curricula between the two in both their early learning and education agendas;
4. create a cadre of governors who could champion this area of policy as a key component of early learning and education policies to other governors and to federal policymakers; and
5. position Transition and Policy Alignment as a key component of emerging discussion on P-16 education framework.

The Kellogg Foundation engaged state governors to conduct transition and alignment forums in five states: Arizona, Connecticut, Mississippi, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. These forums proved effective.

Kellogg staff, together with members of its resource organizations, formed a team to develop a plan to translate the community-based lessons learned from SPARK into policy change at the state and federal levels.

Overall, the planning process for these forums helped state leaders crystallize their purpose and goals in advancing early childhood education. It also led states to develop conceptual frameworks on transition and alignment where none had been articulated before. The policy insights from the governors' forums were captured in a Kellogg publication, with the Educational Commission of the States, entitled *Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools*, which serves as a resource for other states looking to formally link the preschool and early education systems.

At the national level, Kellogg Vice President Greg Taylor provided testimony on SPARK to the full U.S. Senate Finance Committee as part of hearings on "Realizing Competitive Education: Identifying Needs, Partnerships, and Resources." In addition, the Kellogg Foundation joined with the Education Commission of the States, Voices for America's Children, the Children's Leadership Council, and select members of the Learning First Alliance in conducting a national forum in Washington, D.C., on *Linking Ready Kids to Ready Schools* for members of Congress, their staffs, and other leaders.

The effect of Kellogg's leadership was to create a new climate for dialogue, breaking down

ingrained attitudes and practices and opening minds. As one grantee put it, “Changing minds has been the biggest job.” Prior to SPARK, there was no real outside pressure for educators, communities, and parents to talk about, or understand, the value of ready schools. The theory of change insisted on making those connections and having those conversations. One grantee reported that the Kellogg “name effect” was extremely important to drawing in outside partners and allies. Strategies like the governors’ forums underscored SPARK values and brought a sense of urgency to the work. Importantly, the forums and Kellogg’s congressional testimony elevated the grantees and their allies. “Five years ago, the governor wouldn’t give us the time of day,” one grantee said. “Now we’re on the inside.”

SPARK also offers important lessons for philanthropic institutions dedicated to social change on a national scale. Perhaps the most important lesson is that success can depend upon their ability to lead – to clearly define an end result and to take responsibility for its achievement.

That kind of success notwithstanding, one grantee commented that “there is an unfinished feeling to the national policy piece”; other participants shared similar views. There is a sense that Kellogg could have used its influence to more actively engage high-level state education policymakers and leaders from the SPARK states to give them an appreciation of the scope of the ready-schools work and nascent ready-schools movement. Grantees, resource organizations, and the foundation alike were disappointed that links between the national organizations engaged in school readiness and ready schools issues and the grant-

ees did not flourish. The concept of a national advocacy partnership had tremendous appeal, but implementing it proved difficult.

Summary

The view among grantees and their partners and allies is that SPARK will go down as a “game changer” in school readiness. The initiative raised the national consciousness, and the willingness to act, on ensuring that children are ready for school and schools are ready for them. SPARK sites will be the vanguard for that movement.

But SPARK also offers important lessons for philanthropic institutions dedicated to social change on a national scale. Perhaps the most important lesson is that success can depend upon their ability to *lead* – to clearly define an end result and to take responsibility for its achievement. While giving primacy to the role of grantees in creating approaches that suit their communities, foundations must recognize and respect their own role as well: Grantees want foundations’ guidance, especially in taking their efforts to a level they have never before attempted. They want the benefit of knowledge and resources foundations have developed by working on a national scale. And they need the active influence of these foundations in creating a more supportive environment for their work.

Foundations must be flexible in their approaches while remaining committed to achieving tangible progress. Social change is by nature a process of discovery, so there will always be a need to change tactics and even strategies when they aren’t working. But this must be done with a relentless focus on an end result. The Kellogg Foundation, like its grantees, often struggled during the SPARK initiative. But because it shared their determination to succeed, the struggle paid off.

Perhaps a final lesson is that success requires patience and persistence. SPARK was a seven-year initiative. During that time, grantees and the Kellogg Foundation itself found their way through the highly complex work of building new systems of early childhood education and arrived at a level of clarity that allowed them to influence progress on a large scale.

References

- ANDERSON SIMONS, K., & FRIEDMAN, R. H. (2008). Seven systemwide solutions. Alexandria, VA: *Educational Leadership*, 65(7), 64-68.
- BOGARD, K. (1999). *Selected longitudinal studies that inform preK-3*. New York: Foundation for Child Development.
- COMMITTEE FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT. (2002). *Preschool for all*. Washington, DC.
- COMMUNICATIONS CONSORTIUM MEDIA CENTER, (Eds.). (2009). *Linking ready kids to ready schools*. Washington, DC: The Governors' Forum.
- CRUTCHFIELD, L., & MCLEOD GRANT, H. (2008). *Forces for good: Six practices of high-impact nonprofits*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES. (2001). The progress of education reform 1999-2001. *Early Care and Education*, 2(6).
- GALINSKY, E. (2006). *The economic benefits of high-quality early childhood programs: What makes the difference?* Washington, DC: Committee for Economic Development.
- HECKMAN, J. (2006, January 10). Catch 'em young. *The Wall Street Journal*.
- NATIONAL GOVERNORS ASSOCIATION. (2005). *Building the foundation for bright futures*. Washington, DC.
- SHONKOFF, J. P., & PHILLIPS, D. A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- WALTER R. McDONALD ASSOCIATES. (2008). *WKKF resource organizations impact survey*. Rockville, MD.
- WALTER R. McDONALD ASSOCIATES. (2009). *SPARK initiative evaluation report*. Rockville, MD.

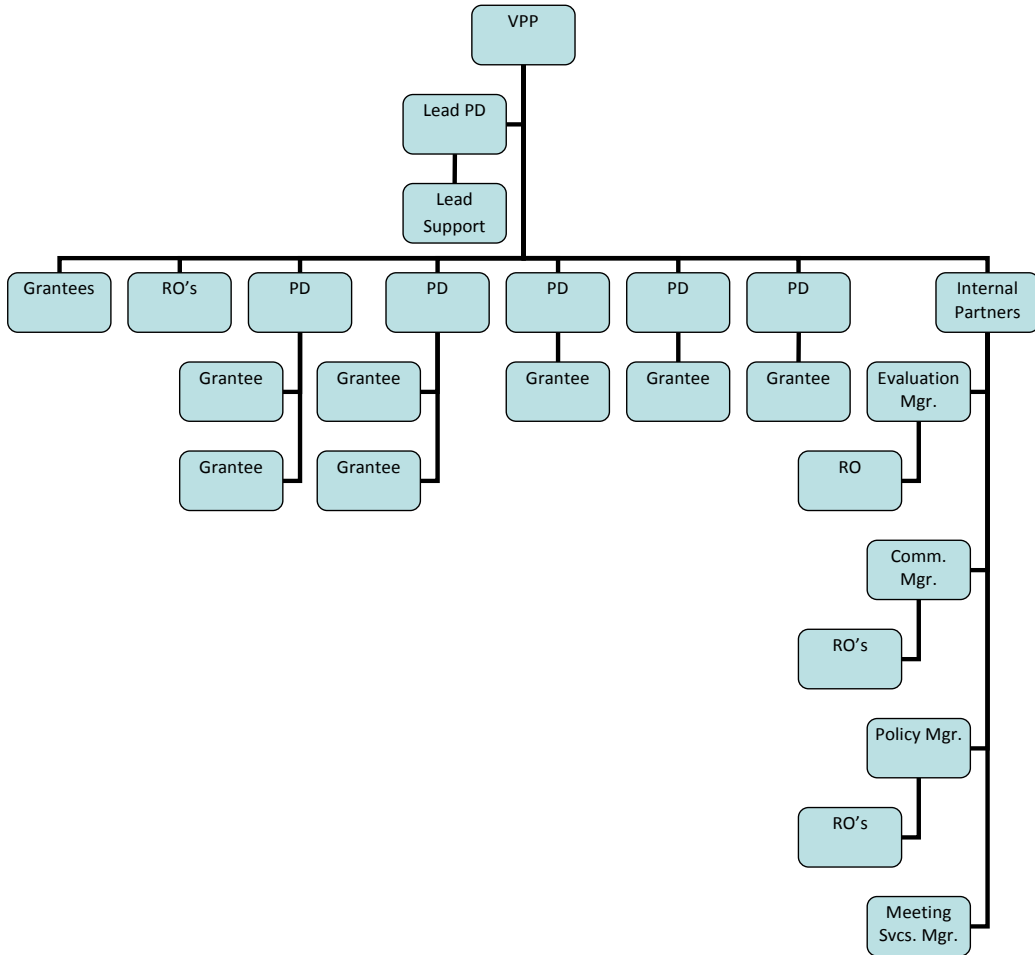
Stephen Greeley, M.S., is president of DCA, Inc., a Boston-based consulting firm founded in 1991 that is dedicated to helping clients achieve large-scale social progress. DCA's practice areas included early childhood education, literacy, work force development, dropout prevention and recovery, and domestic and international health initiatives. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Stephen Greeley, DCA, Inc., 9 Vernon Street, Framingham, MA 01701 (email: sgreeley@dcaboston.com).

Beth Greeley, M.S., is an associate at DCA, Inc., and provides project support, research, and client communications. Her background includes publications writing for all of Boston's major hospitals and other educational and cultural institutions, as well as management positions in the public relations business.

APPENDIX A SPARK Management Structure Evolution

SPARK Phase II: Basic management structure (initial implementation)

(Internal Partners have primary reporting relationship to a different VP)



VPP = Vice President for Programs
 PD = Program Director
 RO/RO's = Resource Organization(s)
 Mgr. = Manager
 Comm. = Communications
 Meeting Svcs. Mgr. = Meeting Services Manager

APPENDIX B SPARK Management Structure Evolution

SPARK Phase II/III: Basic management structure (revised)

(Internal Partners have primary reporting relationship to a different VP)

