

PRINCIPALS LEAD THE WAY FOR PK-3:
 Early Investment
 Strong Alignment
 Better Results

A P R I L 2 0 0 6

SPARK Sites: Bridging Schools and Communities For Better Results

<p>Laguna Elementary School Laguna, New Mexico Brenda Kofahl, Principal</p> <p>PROFILE</p> <p>Grades: K-5 School Enrollment: 283 District Enrollment: 3,700 Community: Rural Percentages of students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African-American: 0 • Asian: 0 • Hispanic: 1 • Native-American: 99 • White: 0 • Other: 0 <p>Poverty rate*: 86 percent English language learners: 85 percent PK program location: Community PK program funding: Head Start</p>	<p>Mary Ann Binford Elementary School Albuquerque, New Mexico Bernadette Nevarez, Principal</p> <p>PROFILE</p> <p>Grades: K-5 School Enrollment: 860 District Enrollment: 87,000 Community: Urban Percentages of students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African-American: 3 • Asian: 0 • Hispanic: 88 • Native-American: 2 • White: 6 • Other: 1 <p>Poverty rate*: 86 percent English language learners: 35 percent PK program location: School PK program funding: Head Start</p>	<p>Sunrise Elementary School Chapparral, New Mexico Cecilia Doran, Principal</p> <p>PROFILE</p> <p>Grades: K-6 School Enrollment: 283 District Enrollment: 13,400 Community: Rural Percentages of students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • African-American: 0 • Asian: 0 • Hispanic: 1 • Native-American: 99 • White: 0 • Other: 0 <p>Poverty rate*: 97 percent English language learners: 80 percent PK program location: School PK program funding: Head Start</p>
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**Poverty rate determined by percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch*

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- SPARK initiative provides a coordinated approach to early childhood education by building strong school and community partnerships.
- SPARK is a model program that allows flexibility for communities and schools to adapt the model to their needs and priorities:
 - Laguna Elementary teachers and Head Start staff meet regularly to strengthen alignment.
 - Students at Mary Ann Binford Elementary benefit from staying with the same teachers for two years.
 - Sunrise Elementary provides an isolated rural area with citizenship classes for undocumented immigrants and a community library.

SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

BUILDING BROAD-BASED SUPPORT FOR EARLY LEARNING

Each year, millions of children enter schools unprepared to learn. They struggle to grasp skills that provide a strong foundation for academic success. Poor alignment between prekindergarten and early elementary school, researchers and education policy analysts have found, leave the most at-risk children even more vulnerable. Inconsistent standards and expectations between community and school-based PK programs often hamper efforts to help all children achieve.

In 2003, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation launched a national initiative to address these concerns and help schools and communities work together to find pragmatic solutions for children and families. The Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids (SPARK) program seeks to create both “ready children” and “ready schools.” Key goals of the initiative include creating seamless transitions into school for 3- to 6-year-olds; increasing collaboration between school- and community-based early child care facilities; bridging institutional barriers that create fragmented early childhood delivery systems; and strengthening relationships between schools and families. Seven states and the District of Columbia are using the SPARK model as a centerpiece for building more effective approaches to school- and community-based early childhood education.

SPARK sites at three New Mexico elementary schools—Laguna, Mary Ann Binford and Sunrise—demonstrate that the program can be successful in diverse settings. The New Mexico Community Foundation oversees SPARK sites in New Mexico’s urban, suburban and rural areas throughout Albuquerque, Dona Ana County, Espanola, Hobbs, Laguna and San Juan County. While all sites maintain the core aspects of the national initiative’s programmatic goals, each SPARK location adapts these goals to fit individual needs and challenges in its own community.

Laguna Elementary is a K-5 school in Laguna, NM. Located on an Indian reservation operated by the Laguna Tribe, the Pueblo of Laguna Department of Education has administered the education system since it gained sovereignty from the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1992. Laguna tribal leaders have focused on building a coordinated system of early childhood education that includes a Head Start PK program, an early Head Start program for infants- to 3-year-olds, a special services program for children with developmental disabilities, and a child care center that provides wrap-around services to children 6 weeks to 12 years old. The early childhood division established the Laguna Interagency Coordinating Council for Young Children to help ensure effective coordination between the different programs.

Laguna Elementary reflects the school system’s emphasis on creating seamless learning connections for young children. Principal Brenda Kofahl brings experience as the education coordinator for a Head Start program in Laguna. She also served as the system’s director of early education, overseeing Head Start through third grade. Under Kofahl’s leadership, the elementary school is working closely with a Head Start program to align expectations for early learning and school readiness. Teachers meet with Head Start staff to improve alignment and build a shared understanding of key learning principles. Family advocates help parents navigate a web of social service agencies. These strategies have all helped the school reach a student population that is largely low-income and speaks English as a second language.

Mary Ann Binford Elementary, a K-5 school in Albuquerque, includes a Head Start program on site. A high percentage of students come from Mexican families and speak Spanish at home. The school became a SPARK site three years ago because the school shared SPARK's program goals of integrating community and school resources to better serve low-income young children and their families. Head Start paraprofessionals and elementary school teachers share space for activities and exchange learning standards to encourage fluid transitions for children. Elementary school students stay with the same teacher two consecutive years to foster learning continuity. SPARK facilitators periodically convene parent and community workshops for members that help school leaders build more cohesive support systems for early education.

Sunrise Elementary is located in Chapparal, NM, an isolated rural community on the edge of the desert. Its proximity to Mexico has made it a haven for undocumented workers seeking jobs and a better life for their families. When Sunrise opened in 2003, Cecilia Doran, principal of the K-6 school, made it a priority to reach out to the largely Hispanic community. She envisioned the new school becoming a hub of community life in an area where access to books, technology and other educational resources were limited. A SPARK representative was present one afternoon when Doran pitched her vision at a community meeting, and a dialogue began that led to Sunrise becoming a SPARK site. As a member of the SPARK network, teachers at the school have received professional development on effective reading strategies for students who speak English as a second language. The school library, the only one in the community, is stocked with books SPARK has helped purchase over the years. Classes at the school are helping undocumented immigrants become U.S. citizens.

PK-3 ALIGNMENT

A COMMON VISION FOR SUCCESS

All three elementary schools are working to create strong alignment in early education. At Laguna Elementary, for example, building a set of shared expectations starts with inviting parents of Head Start children to conversations about kindergarten learning standards. In the spring, Head Start children begin visiting elementary school classrooms and meeting teachers as a way of acclimating to the new building. The Head Start center also shares developmental evaluations with elementary school teachers, so they can assess gaps and build on what children have learned.

"I really want the children to see moving to elementary school as a small step, not a huge step," Kofahl says. "We want to see curriculum aligned so it's not such a shock for children and families when they come here." While Kofahl says some of this is happening already, she would like even more integration between Head Start and the early elementary grades, including discussions about standards-based activities that are developmentally appropriate.

At Mary Ann Binford Elementary, the principal also encourages K-3 teachers to share resources and meet with the Head Start staff. Occupying the same physical space encourages a coordinated approach. "We try and be very inclusionary," Nevarez says. "There are not separate spaces or feelings that it's us and them." By the second semester, Head Start children join kindergartners for literacy activities in the library. Head Start and kindergarten teachers meet several times throughout the year, including a day when SPARK pays for substitutes to cover classes. K-3 teachers have common planning time for two hours every other week. During these times, Nevarez structures the school day so school begins at 10 a.m. and teachers meet for plan-

ning at 7 a.m. By allowing students and teachers to stay together for two years, teachers better understand alignment across different grades and can create a more coherent learning environment for students.

Teachers at Sunrise Elementary have worked hard to understand the state's learning standards and how to strengthen alignment across grades. "After a while it becomes very natural and embedded in what they're teaching," the principal says. "We talk about what the expectations are for learning, and I encourage teachers to visit each others' classrooms." Copies of the standards are made for all teachers, and their contents are consistently integrated into classroom instruction. Nevarez believes that sound alignment and seamless learning connections are even more critical than learning standards for the largely low-income students in her school. "Our district is one of the poorest in the state. I have families who live in trailers with no running water. These children don't have opportunities at home. We know from early childhood literature that there is a small window of opportunity when children are most actively developing," she says.

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY ADVOCATES

While each principal at the SPARK sites has a different leadership style and professional background, they all share a common belief that children are best served by expanded networks of school and community supports.

For years, Kofahl saw the divide between community-based Head Start programs and school-based early childhood experiences. She believed children deserved something more. "We had teachers who were in their school buildings for 20 or 30 years and many were resistant to working with Head Start," the Laguna principal says. "They really thought they knew best." Kofahl's experience as a Head Start education coordinator helped shape her sensibility that these barriers did a disservice to young people and their families. As a principal, she has emphasized collaborative partnerships and instilling among her staff a sense of respect for the developmental learning that takes place in Head Start programs.

Nevarez has been a passionate advocate for creating strong, well-aligned systems of early childhood education during the 15 years she has been a principal. Nevarez has lobbied the state legislature for increasing PK and kindergarten opportunities throughout New Mexico. "The more time and energy you put into early childhood education, the less time you will spend on the other end with remediation," she says.

For Doran, being a leader of an isolated rural school means having to think about expanding support systems for low-income students and families. She does this by providing a literacy-rich environment, making immigrant parents with little formal education feel welcome at school, and tapping into the SPARK network for professional resources that will help her teachers. Engaging immigrant parents, she believes, involves providing informal opportunities for them to meet with teachers and staff in a relaxed setting.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT A FOCUS ON IMPROVEMENT

Providing teachers with opportunities to improve their instruction and classroom leadership is a hallmark of all three SPARK sites. When the Laguna Tribe took control of the school system from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, for example, paraprofessionals in the school system's Head Start program could take professional development classes through the University of New Mexico. In an effort to deepen alignment between Head

Start and the elementary school, that training was extended to elementary school teachers as well. At Mary Ann Binford, on-site professional development is embedded in biweekly meetings, when the principal restructures the school day to begin at 10 a.m., so teachers have a chance to meet for common planning.

The school has also partnered with other schools in its district cluster to help pay for the salary of a math specialist. This person helps math teachers throughout the cluster area implement the district's new math curriculum that stresses more critical analysis and problem solving. Doran has offered Sunrise Elementary teachers workshops on improving reading instruction for students who speak English as a second language. SPARK staff members invited a Boise State professor, an expert in teaching reading to English language learners, to visit the school for a week and offer professional development. Furthering this exchange, he continues to communicate with staff through e-mail.

RESULTS

MEETING CHALLENGES WITH PERSISTENCE

A focus on PK-3 alignment and deepening connections between schools and communities has brought a more systematic approach to early childhood education in the SPARK sites. At Laguna Elementary, Kofahl sees more young children from poor families coming to school ready to learn now that barriers between Head Start and school-based early childhood are breaking down. After years of focusing on their particular grade, teachers have a more unified vision for making seamless learning connections for children. While Laguna is not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under No Child Left Behind in math, it is making progress, as the school has met AYP in reading. Teachers and school leaders remain committed to continual improvement.

At Mary Ann Binford, principal Nevarez points to the school's strong partnership with an on-site Head Start program and creative approaches to professional development as central to school improvement efforts. While the school is not meeting AYP, it has shown progress in math and reading. In the 2002-03 school year, only 48 percent of students met proficiency standards in math; however, in the 2003-04 school year, 72 percent met the standards. In reading, 35 percent of students met the proficiency standards in the 2002-03 school year, while 48 percent met standards the next year.

A progress board at Sunrise Elementary tracks the reading level of every student in the school. When the school opened in 2003, about 90 percent of students were reading below grade level. Today, about 60 percent are reading proficiently. These improvements helped the school meet AYP in 2005. Doran also notes that parents are becoming more engaged in their children's learning. Over 90 percent attended a parent-teacher conference in fall 2005.