



The SPARK Initiative's Theory of Change

By Anthony Berkley, Manager, Innovation and Design, W.K. Kellogg Foundation

SPARK unites communities so that all children can be successful before and after they enter school. The community partnerships in the eight SPARK sites are the vehicle for achieving change in terms of ready children, ready schools, and ready communities.

How do the sites get there over the five-year implementation phase? To serve as a guide for how the change will be achieved, the Kellogg Foundation and the SPARK grantees developed a “theory of change.” This road map is designed to keep the Foundation management team and grantee sites pointed in the same direction and pulling toward the same goals.

The theory of change is a tool for team learning, strategic management, evaluation, and program improvement. It is well suited for long-term, complex initiatives such as SPARK in which design and implementation will evolve over the life course of the program. SPARK is best thought of not as a novel intervention, but as a new way to coordinate, strengthen, leverage, and scale up existing interventions to smooth the transition from early learning settings to school.

Complexity is one of the major challenges faced by SPARK grantee communities, project directors, and project- and initiative-level evaluators. Each project of the eight grantees is characterized by different definitions of readiness, service delivery tactics, partnerships, and pathways to scalability and sustainability. The theory of change diagram identifies common strategic pathways.

SPARK's theory of change can be boiled down to this essence: *Strong partnerships among families, providers, community organizations, and ready schools ensure that children succeed in learning.*

SPARK Evaluation

The theory of change is just that—a theory to be corroborated or disconfirmed, revised and extended through effective feedback. Evaluation's job is assessing theory against reality and contributing credible data and analysis to help grantees and the Foundation program team improve their work.

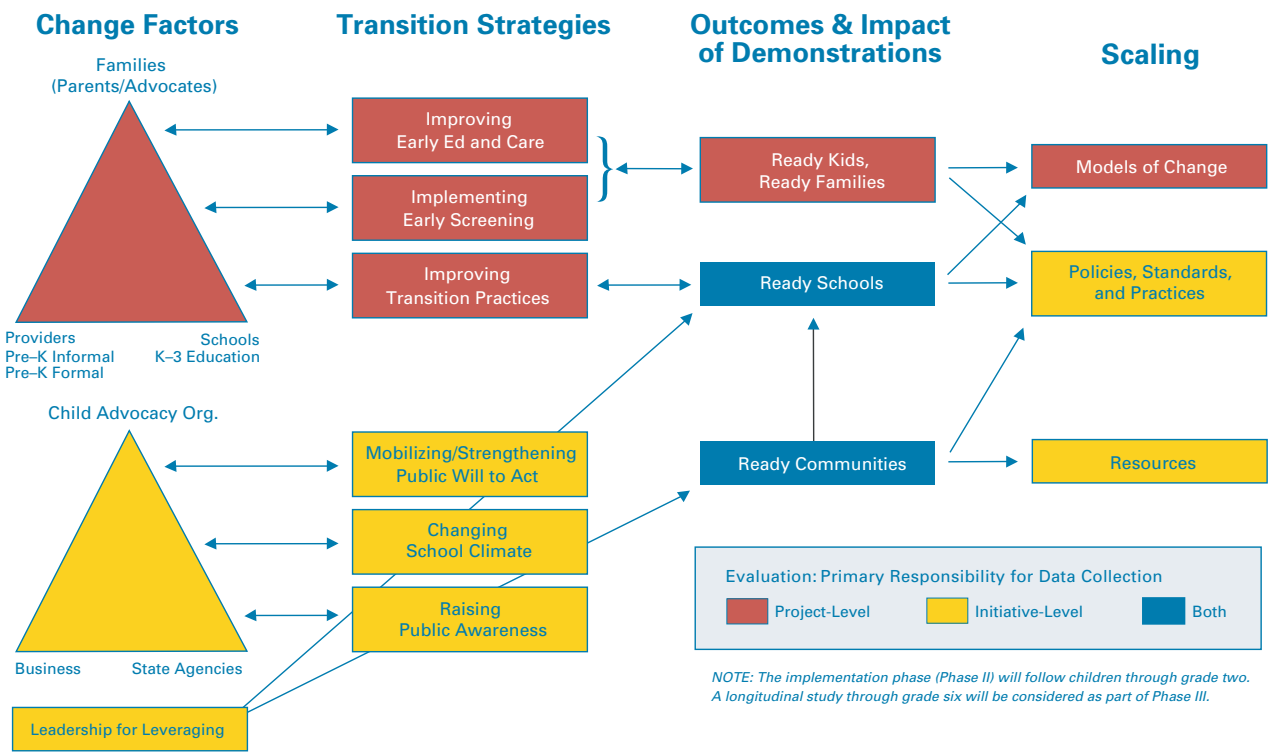
Evaluation data collection, questions, and communication of findings will all be in the context of the theory of change.

The theory of change is a communications and learning tool, as well as a programming and strategy tool. It provides a common framework and a language in which to discuss and negotiate SPARK as it unfolds. It helps the Foundation and grantee partners strategically connect the pieces and integrate participants into a learning community. The theory of change unleashes a spirit of inquiry to be bold, learn from mistakes, and celebrate successes.

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SPARK Theory of Change Diagram



The four columns answer basic who-what-where-when-how questions about SPARK. "Change Factors" describes two broad-based coalitions that are central to implementation, identifying key leaders who will drive "Transition Strategies" at the local community and school level, as well as at the state level. The arrows from distinct strategies lead to agreed-upon results. The "Outcomes & Impact of Demonstrations" ultimately reveal the specific outcomes, who is responsible for them, and how they will be achieved. Finally, in the "Scaling" column, there is a reminder that SPARK is intended to have long-term impacts that benefit future children. Reading from right to left succinctly narrates the pathways through which SPARK will achieve local, state, and national impact.

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