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Igniting a SPARK for early learning

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Young children learn more, do better in school and, ultimately, in the workplace when they move seamlessly from home to child care to preschool to the early grades. Unfortunately, far too few children experience such seamlessness, thanks to a herky-jerky educational system that moves them from one place and grade to the next with no sense of continuity.

A number of communities large and small are hard at work to change that - in places ranging from Philadelphia, Miami and Atlanta to Edgecombe and Nash Counties in eastern North Carolina. These communities have launched and expanded promising early learning initiatives through a project called SPARK, Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids.

Sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, SPARK works to smooth those crucial transitions from home, child care and preschool to elementary school.

The goal: to make sure that children are ready for school and that schools are ready for them.

In North Carolina, the Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC) has worked for over 16 years to build a strong foundation for children and families by advocating and supporting high quality early care and education and a coordinated system of community resources. As one of the SPARK initiative sites, DEPC created a model of services designed to ensure that all children in Edgecombe and Nash counties in eastern North Carolina are healthy and ready for Kindergarten and are launched as successful learners by the end of third grade.

To help share the lessons learned through SPARK's early learning initiatives, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation partnered with IDEO, a renowned design and innovation consulting firm, to help communities improve their learning systems. Instead of relying on outside experts - the usual method for reforming schools - these communities are looking inward, tapping parents, teachers, business and faith leaders, and even students to help generate solutions that work for them.

The best programs, we continue to learn, link parents, teachers, and students and create strong connections between classrooms and communities, building an educational continuum.

Communities, school districts, and policymakers are creating new ways to teach and nurture children from age 3 through third grade. National leaders are taking notice and, more important, taking steps to replicate successful programs across the map.

We have the chance, thanks to these dynamics, to revolutionize learning and set our children on a path to long-term success.

Communities such as Edgecombe and Nash counties are already creating new pathways that support early learning and success in school. Such groundbreaking strategies can help shape federal and state policies. In turn, federal and state governments must allow communities the flexibility to implement policies that help their children learn best.

This kind of thinking - the creation and championing of innovative programs that communities throughout America can adapt - may well turn this time of economic crisis into one of meaningful and lasting education reform.

The painful economic meltdown has forced school districts across the nation to cut spending - even, in some cases, for core teachers and staff. But we do have, amid these depressing cutbacks, a bit of surprising good news on the education front.

The federal government is promoting real, meaningful reform, the kind that hasn't occurred in decades. And it's putting up some real, meaningful money to help pay for it.

The President is asking states and communities with innovative ideas to help reshape American education. To propel these innovative ideas, two new federal funds for innovation will provide a total of \$5 billion, enough to launch what Education Secretary Arne Duncan has described as "education reform's moon shot." These funds aim to do nothing less than inspire communities to shake up the

education landscape.

The best ideas for education, we've long known, bubble up from the community level. Now the stars seem aligned to give this type of bottom-up innovation serious consideration.

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