

Lighting a 'SPARK' for Early Childhood Education

“On your mark, get set, ready, go!” In the language of childhood, these words are an exciting invitation—and a signal that it’s time to be at the starting line and prepared to take off in order to sprint to success. But what happens when children aren’t ready for the most important race of their lives? Every year, four million children in America enter kindergarten, but as many as one in three won’t be ready for school—and many of them will never catch up. Supporting Partnerships to Assure Ready Kids, or SPARK, a national initiative of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, was designed to get children at the starting line and ready to go. Seeking “ready children,” “ready communities,” and “ready schools,” SPARK worked for over five years in seven states and Washington, D.C., to help communities unite resources to better prepare children for school and smooth the transition between pre-school and elementary school settings. The Children’s Defense Fund’s Southern Regional Office (CDF-SRO) was honored to be the grantee for SPARK Mississippi (SPARK-MS), a \$5 million initiative that has improved school readiness for more than 800 Mississippi children ages three to



CHILD WATCH

Marian Wright Edelman

eight—a concrete example of what’s working to improve children’s chances.

In Mississippi, as in many states, the early care and education “family” is bound by the common belief that all children should be well prepared to enter kinder-

school districts. At the core of every SPARK-MS site is the creation of a Local Children’s Partnership. As Ellen Collins, Executive Director of SPARK-MS, explains, “These partnerships are made up of community members representing early education, local school districts, business leaders, parents, health providers, SPARK staff, and other stakeholders who realize that the success of their community and ultimately the state rests upon meaningful investments in its children... They understand their community’s livelihood is based on the children being ready for kindergarten, and they are working to address any

visitation, and coordinating transition activities between early learning settings and public schools. Every site employs Learning Advocates who work with families on a one-to-one basis, serving as case managers, tutors, and friends. This unique aspect of SPARK provides a parent training track, and the families whose children participate in SPARK consider their Learning Advocates part of their own family. “She’s like the preacher, the teacher, the mama, the counselor, the husband, the wife, all in one,” grandparent Tena McNair said of her grandson Tamarius’s Learning Advocate. “To me, she’s everything.” Tamarius started with SPARK at age three and is now a successful fifth grader. As she raises her grandson alone, Mrs. McNair is especially grateful for the assistance SPARK employees provide. “They are always just a phone call or a ride away. If it wasn’t for them, I don’t know what I would do sometimes.”

Satoya Payne, whose son Ricky was one of the first SPARK participants in his school district, shares similar gratitude: “When he was in first grade, struggling with his speech, I didn’t know what to do. Then SPARK came in, and it was a big turnaround.” Learning Advocates petitioned the school

district in order for Ricky to receive speech and language services and individualized tutoring, and equipped his parents with behavior management tools. Today, Ricky is a fifth grade honor roll student who wants to be a firefighter when he grows up.

The first cohort of SPARK-MS students began taking statewide standardized tests in spring 2009, and the encouraging results echo the positive impact we’ve already seen in children like Tamarius and Ricky. SPARK students who took the Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT2) outperformed non-SPARK students from a comparable school district in both Language Arts and Mathematics. We have also seen more parents involved in their children’s academic process and more community members taking an active role in advocating for changes to strengthen the early childhood development and learning system. With a proven track record and measurable results, SPARK-MS is now moving into the next phase. “We know the model works; now we want to focus on improving the system,” says Ellen Collins.

Using the SPARK-MS model, work is being done to align early childhood education with the K-12 education system in 10 targeted school districts

garten. But, too often child care providers, Head Start centers, and even public schools are preparing children for the race on their own without working together. Using the SPARK-MS model, work is being done to align early childhood education with the K-12 education system in 10 targeted

gap or service need in their community and advocate for increased quality and access.”

SPARK-MS’s interventions include professional development and technical assistance for early learning center staff, resource fairs and cultural awareness activities for children and families, home

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Across America, Labor Unions Fight for Survival

The showdown between public unions and the governor of Wisconsin is drama likely to be replayed in other budget-challenged states during the next few months and may determine whether American unions rebound or become a fading fixture of the past.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 44 states and Puerto Rico have introduced legislation governing labor unions and collective bargaining.

Because so much is at stake, both pro- and anti-labor groups around the nation have sent protesters to Wisconsin during the past week to support their cause. Thousands of protesters, including teachers, rallied in Madison, the state capital, to voice their concerns. Anti-labor protesters have also marched in the streets to express their support for a proposed measure to strip public unions of much of their power.

At the center of the debate is Governor Scott Walker’s proposal to save \$330 million through mid-2013. Under the plan, government workers will have to pay more than half the costs of their pensions and at least 12.6 percent of their healthcare premiums. Unions would still be allowed to represent workers, but could not seek pay increases above the Consumer Price Index unless approved by a public referendum. Firefighters, police officers, and state troopers would be exempted under the new

THE CURRY REPORT

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plan.

Labor officials say they are willing to compromise on pension and healthcare benefits, but not their ability to freely negotiate on behalf of government workers. At the national level, the budget battles feature organize labor, a key base of Democrats, and fiscally conservative Republicans, the key to GOP election gains last November.

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The Associated Press reported on Feb. 1, that a “new analysis

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released Monday showed that Wisconsin’s budget could be between \$79 and \$340 million short by June 30, 2013, due largely to anticipated Medicaid expenses and a court-ordered repayment

to a fund that was raided four years ago.”

Wisconsin is obligated to pay Minnesota \$58.7 million after the end of a tax-reciprocity agreement between the two neighboring states. The state is under court order to pay \$200 million that was illegally transferred in 2007 from a state medical malpractice fund, according to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

Further complicating matters, Governor Walker pushed through tax cuts in his first month in office that are estimated to bring in \$117 million less in projected state taxes during the next two years. Another \$72 million drop is a result of lower than expected tax revenues.

Like his federal counterparts, Walker argued that the lower tax cuts will create economic growth. This is the same argument that President George W. Bush used in getting two federal tax reductions through Congress. But, the promised economic growth never materialized.

In Wisconsin, organized labor is losing the public relations battle as anti-labor Republicans enjoy a larger share of state houses and governors’ mansions.

According to a survey conducted earlier this month by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, “The favorability ratings for labor unions remain at nearly their lowest level

in a quarter century with 45 percent expressing a positive view. Yet the public expresses similar opinions about business corporations – 47 percent have a favorable impression – and this rating is also near a historic low.”

The Pew report observes: “Americans express mixed views

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of the impact of labor unions on salaries and working conditions, international competitiveness, job availability and productivity. About half (53 percent) say unions have had a positive effect on the salaries and benefits of union workers, while just 17 percent say they have had a negative effect. Views are similar about the impact of unions on working conditions for all workers (51 percent positive, 17 percent negative).”

It is ironic that the debate over the role of unions is being played out in Wisconsin, the first state to enact of major collective bargaining law in 1959. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees was founded in 1936 in Madison.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the union membership rate of public sector

workers (36.2 percent) is more than five times the private rate of 6.9 percent. Within the public sector, union membership was highest among local government workers such as police officers, fire fighters, and teachers.

A Labor Department survey in 2010 showed that African-Americans were more likely to be union members (13.7 percent) than Whites (11.7 percent), Asians (10.9 percent) or Hispanics (10 percent).

Unionized full-time wage and salary workers had a median weekly income of \$917 in 2010. Workers not represented by unions earned \$717 — \$200

less than union wages.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 11.9 percent of all wage and salary workers in the U.S. belonged to unions in 2010, down from 20.1 percent in 1983.

By all accounts, labor unions were primarily responsible for creating the American middle class in the bygone era when manufacturing was king. In an era of economic belt-tightening and rising Republican influence in politics, however, they are serving as convenient scapegoats for pro-business voices that wanted to get rid of them all along.

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