2018-2019 Spark Grants Program – Request for Proposals

A. Overview

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center (JGCC) at Sesame Workshop is pleased to announce the **Families Learning Across Boundaries (FamLAB) Spark Grants Program**. The goal of the grants program is to identify, support, and promote innovative approaches to help children and youth ages 3 through 12 learn more deeply across home, community, and school settings.

With support from the Heising-Simons Foundation, the Bezos Family Foundation, and the Oath Foundation, the initial phase of the program will provide grants to US-based non-profit organizations and educational institutions to undertake innovative research and development (R&D) work, design capacity-building tools, and lead community engagement projects. These one-year grants are intended to spur knowledge development and experimentation, including the launch of a network of leaders who will exchange best practices and plan future activities.

The **FamLAB Spark Grants Program** is an important element of the national FamLAB Initiative, which is led by a consortium of education, communications, and policy experts from the JGCC, Stanford University's Technology for Equity in Learning Opportunities (TELOS) Initiative, the Steinhardt School of Education at New York University, the FrameWorks Institute, and PBS KIDS. More information about the FamLAB Initiative can be found here.

B. Background

The overarching goal of FamLAB is to create an ecosystem that enables and encourages children's learning across settings, especially children from underserved and underrepresented populations. It draws upon evidence that the most adaptive and effective learning programs promote individual interest, prolonged periods of engagement, and social supports. Too many children, however, do not have access to the people, resources, or time afforded by non-school settings to deepen and sustain their interests.

Fortunately, with backing by government and philanthropic sources, public media stations, libraries, afterschool programs, and museums are encouraging *connected* or *interest-driven* learning approaches. These institutions are employing a combination of human and technological supports to spark and guide the development of children's interests across time and place.[1] Thousands of schools nationwide have adopted close relationships with these community-based organizations (CBOs), and are together providing extended learning as well as social and health supports to children and their families. However, most of these efforts are driven by local initiatives. There is a need to develop more systemic and sustainable models that will power learning for children from all backgrounds and regions of the US.

Promoting deeper learning across boundaries for *all* children will require the efforts of a wide array of key stakeholders—including researchers, educators, policymakers, librarians, parents, community leaders, technology developers, etc.—to *together* identify the most urgent needs, useful questions to investigate, rigorous research, and practical strategies for implementation. To initiate progress on these collaborative endeavors, FamLAB hosted an Innovation LAB at Stanford University in November 2017. The workshop brought together seven regional multi-sector leadership teams to generate new ideas to bridge learning across settings within their own communities. Innovation LAB participants helped identify a set of challenges for the broader field to address, which have informed the development of the FamLAB Spark Grants Program.

C. Spark Grants Program Priorities

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center is seeking to fund projects aimed at strengthening the ecosystem that enables and encourages 3 to 12-year-old children's learning across settings, especially children from underserved and underrepresented populations. The FamLAB Spark Grants Program aims to activate a cross-sectoral community of researchers, practitioners, and developers to explore new ideas, with a special emphasis on the potential of media and technology to facilitate learning across boundaries.

Grants will be awarded to cross-sectoral teams to begin work in September 2018.

The grants program priorities draw from the experiences of strong local community initiatives such as Remake Learning in Pittsburgh, HIVE New York City, and HIVE Chicago. It is dedicated to advancing the following key priorities:

- **To connect where children live, learn, and play**, including schools, libraries, museums, parks, clubs, community centers, centers of faith, home, and online.
- **To foster science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) learning**, critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration skills and competencies that children need to thrive in an increasingly connected and technology-driven world.
- **To inspire learners to pursue their passions and interests** using various tools and technologies.
- **To strengthen learners' connections to their own communities** and help them develop a wider cultural lens that will unlock opportunities both within and beyond these communities.

Project proposals should address at least one of the following two challenges:

Challenge 1: Promoting STEM Learning Trajectories

In the 2017 report STEM Starts Early, the Joan Ganz Cooney Center and New America conclude that the potential for greater mastery of science, technology, engineering, and math rests on a much greater societal commitment to supporting children's active discovery beginning in the preschool years. The report provides a series of recommendations for launching children on effective learning trajectories that will require new investments in research, professional practice reforms, and community mobilization efforts. The report also cites the FrameWorks Institute's research on the need to create better public understanding of *where* and *when* STEM learning can occur and among what types of children. Furthermore, FrameWorks uses the analogy of "charging stations" to describe environments with STEM learning opportunities: How can we design and build better charging systems so that all students, no matter where they are—at home, school, or in the community—have high-quality opportunities to engage with STEM subjects?

Suggested Strategies

Projects may address the development of STEM trajectories among 3–12-year-olds through any of the following strategies:

- Build community planning and capacity-building to deliver more connected programs, services, and supports that promote STEM learning.
- Advance knowledge, build community capacity, and drive needed reforms through new R&D or the evaluation of existing projects.
- Advance public engagement and strategic communications capabilities around STEM learning.
- Develop, prototype, or pilot educational media content or tools that advance STEM learning.
- Spur schools, libraries, museums, and other educational institutions to foster deeper family engagement, especially among underserved or underrepresented populations.
- Design new methods of professional and leadership development that build the capacity of the people, institutions, and systems that are needed to advance STEM learning across settings.

Challenge 2: Leveraging Public Media Assets

Public media producers and PBS member stations are natural allies and leaders in accelerating bridging efforts. They produce and distribute a vast number and variety of video, print, and digital resources that have been intentionally designed for children and their caregivers to use at home, school, and in community-based settings. Public media practitioners have created highly effective methods to engage a wide community of stakeholders in supporting learning across boundaries, including national projects such as the CPB-PBS Ready To Learn Initiative in which PBS stations are leveraging evidence-based media and engagement models and partnering with local community organizations to help the adults in children's learning ecosystem support their school readiness.

Parents, classroom teachers, and community educators (e.g., libraries, museums, afterschool centers, churches, sports leagues, etc.) all aspire to foster children's learning, but many are unaware of the untapped media assets available to support their efforts. For example, findings from a new national study from the Education Development Center and SRI International commissioned by the CPB-PBS Ready To Learn Initiative indicate that, regardless of income level, parents want their kids to have a strong start in the sciences but are largely unaware of concrete supports and activities that would help them engage their children in science exploration. Increasing awareness, understanding, and access to developmentally appropriate media for children that can be used to model, spark interest in, and provide pathways for exploration and learning is critical.

Public media is dedicated to linking learning opportunities in an ecosystem that often isolates practitioners from one another, and welcomes bold ideas for how pubic media resources get used to their fullest potential to bridge children's learning across time and place.

Suggested Strategies

Projects that aim to more effectively deploy publicly supported, widely available media may consider employing any of the following strategies:

- Help public media leaders connect to other key stakeholders in the local communities they serve.
- Position public media organizations to coordinate and connect learning opportunities for underrepresented and underserved families.
- Design professional and leadership development programs, tools, or other resources to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and experiences among various stakeholder groups within local communities.
- Make public media resources more available to underserved populations by employing technological solutions and encouraging national distribution partnerships.
- Develop and evaluate local content and engagement methods to address priority regional needs through a cross-boundary approach.
- Leverage the power of public media as trusted organizations with broad reach into communities to inform and influence public opinion about learning across boundaries.

D. Suggested Grant Activities

Grants are intended to encourage cross-sector teams to support expanded learning opportunities to benefit children ages 3 through 12. Project initiatives should target one or more of the following categories:

1. **Planning and mobilization**: Creation of community-wide plans to link learning across settings. This might also include a special emphasis on documenting public media assets and community engagement activities such as the creation of parent materials, educator guides, and online professional and parent leadership activities.

2. **Research and development (R&D)**: Respond to the key challenges listed in this RFP through empirical research and/or proof-of concept studies that design and examine new tools, technologies, or programs.
3. **Program evaluation**: Respond to the key challenges listed in this RFP through evaluation research that tests and improves existing tools, technologies, or programs.
4. **Professional/Leadership development**: Design of programs for ongoing professional development (e.g., in-person or online trainings), parent/family engagement (e.g., family learning events), and leadership opportunities for adults and youth (e.g., fellowships, internships).
5. **Partnership development**: Partnering with communities, companies, other non-profit organizations, and/or thought leaders.
6. **Scaling**: Creation of tangible partnerships with national organizations and resources that may help an existing innovation scale reach and impact (funders, tech partners, producers of content).
7. **Public engagement**: Development of public engagement strategies to drive coordinated messaging on the benefits of learning across boundaries, early STEM learning, etc.

E. Spark Grants Program Key Dates

- March 26, 2018: Announce request for proposals
- May 22, 2018: Applications due
- July 15, 2018: Announce winners
- September 1, 2018 - August 31, 2019: Grant period

F. Grant Amounts

Spark grants are intended to provide seed funding for new initiatives or to provide complementary funds for existing projects. Depending on the number and quality of proposals, we expect to present between four and six grants of between $15,000 and $25,000 during the 2018-2019 grant period. The grantee must provide a match for funds requested, with at least 50% of the proposed budget being supplemented by cash or in-kind support[2] from the grantee's organization.

G. Network Building

A program of ongoing assistance and support will be made available to the grantees, focused on research, strategic communications, and leadership development. Grantee project directors will meet via videoconference and in person before the completion of their grant periods in 2019.

H. Evaluation Criteria

All applications must:

- Aim to improve cross-setting learning for children ages 3 through 12. Proposals may target narrower age bands within this range.
- Address at least one of the two challenges (see C. Spark Grant Program Priorities, above).
- Involve partners from at least two different sectors, e.g., research, practice, community, policy, technology/media. The project lead must be from a non-profit organization, but partners may be from the for-profit sector (e.g., tech/media firms).
- Target two or more stakeholder groups in the ecosystem of children's learning, e.g., parents, educators, CBO providers, policymakers, technology/media developers.

Projects will be evaluated on the following criteria:

- Clear design: The proposed project is based on a compelling problem statement, derived from best practices and existing research literature, and presented clearly. Timeline and budget are also clearly articulated.
- Innovation: Outcomes of the project have the potential to directly or indirectly facilitate children's learning across settings in novel and important ways.
- Feasibility: The intervention can be conducted within the one-year program timeline and the proposed budget is appropriate for the scope of work.
- Team experience: The project team should be well-suited to successfully carry out the project, and involve partnerships with industry, schools, or other community organizations.
- Equity: The project aims to equalize learning opportunities across all populations.

Special consideration will be given to projects that:

- Include participants of the FamLAB Innovation LAB held in November 2017.
- Engage and involve families and children from underserved (e.g., low income, ethnic minority) or underrepresented (e.g., girls, rural communities) populations.
- Demonstrate potential for scaling.
- Enlist the support/resources of other funders.
- Respond to critical opportunities and needs as surfaced by FamLAB project research.

I. Submission Guidelines

Proposals must include:

1. Cover sheet: Please use the attached form as a cover sheet.
2. Project title and abstract: Note the challenge(s) the project will address.
3. Rationale and background: A clear statement of the need for the project, including target audience(s) or benefactors.
4. Goals, objectives, and outcomes: *Goals* provide a general statement of the program's purpose, *objectives* are more concrete and specific in how the goal will be achieved, and *outcomes* should reflect the expected resulted at the end of the project period.
5. Program description: Description of the program or research study, including references to relevant literature. Where applicable, please indicate how the proposed activities or initiative builds on or ties to existing activities in the community.
6. Documentation of impact: A plan to document how project outcomes will be measured.
7. Timeline: A detailed description of how the project will be carried out including main activities and a timeline.
8. Deliverables: Products or programs to be developed and the form they will take to share with the Cooney Center upon completion.
9. Personnel and partners: List of key team members and brief biosketches, including information regarding the capacity of the lead organization and any partner organizations to address it.
10. Budget and budget narrative: A line-item budget including projected expenses and other sources of financial or in-kind support. List the spending categories by personnel and non-personnel costs in line items and provide totals for each category and for the full project ($25,000 maximum). Indicate sources of supplementary funding and matching resources, including in-kind and cash contributions. Provide a narrative to describe each category and its relevance to the proposed project.

Proposals must not exceed 12 double-spaced pages, including attachments.

J. Grantee Commitments

- Project-specific deliverables as outlined in grantee's proposal.
- A web-friendly summary of the project.
- Participation in two virtual FamLAB grantee meetings.
- Presentation of project at one FamLAB community convening. Travel funding will be provided.
- Final written report of project outcomes and lessons learned.

K. Other

All Grantees agree to grant a perpetual, worldwide, royalty-free license to the Cooney Center for the use, distribution, and publication of all intellectual property, deliverables, works, and other materials produced, created, and/or acquired by Grantee as a part or result of the Spark Grants Program.

University-based applicants should be aware of their Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Sponsored Projects guidelines.

Proposals should be submitted by a non-profit organization or other tax-exempt educational institution or government agency. Applicants should submit:

- A letter of tax-exempt status from the Internal Revenue Service
- A list of members of the organizations' governing board
- The most recent financial statement (audited where available)

Please submit all proposal materials no later than 8:00 PM EST on May 22, 2018 to cooney.center@sesame.org with the subject line "FamLAB Spark Grants Program." Please direct any questions about the program to the same address.

Endnotes

[1] Ito, M., Gutiérrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K., Schor, J., Sefton-Green, J., & Watkins, S. C. (2013). Connected learning: an agenda for research and design. Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.

[2] In-kind contributions are typically services or goods other than cash grants. Examples of in-kind contributions include **services** like project management, meeting space, communications services (telephone, copies) , and administrative support; **expertise** like legal, tax, or business advice, marketing and website development; or **goods** like computers, software, furniture, and office equipment for use by your organization. If you have questions about this requirement, email cooney.center@sesame.org.

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