



ANNUAL REPORT: July 2003 – June 2004

MISSION

Research for Action (RFA) has been working for over ten years with public schools districts, educational institutions, and community organizations to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for those traditionally disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, gender, language/cultural difference, and ability/disability. RFA is committed to enriching the public dialogue about school reform by sharing research and evaluation findings and bringing together parents, teachers, students, administrators, community members, and policy makers to strategize about school reform.

YEAR AT A GLANCE

Between July 2003 and June 2004, Research for Action significantly forwarded its mission of integrating research and action for the improvement of public schools. Additionally, it continued to manage growth and expand leadership in ways that ensure the continued high quality of its services. Some highlights:

FIRST, this year RFA publicly **launched a mixed method policy study**, *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform*, a project which combines original research and public awareness activities about the processes and outcomes of the state takeover and private sector involvement in the city's school system. With RFA in the lead role, the project brings together a multidisciplinary collaborative of regional scholars to analyze Philadelphia school reform. At the launch event, the project's first major report, *Once and for All, Placing a Highly Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom* was released. The products of *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform* project are intended to inform public dialogue and action and influence policy decisions.

SECOND, RFA successfully **expanded our action research projects with youth** into three new arenas. These include collaboration with student organizing campaigns for new small high schools, leading a summer research camp for Philadelphia teens, and publication of *A Guide to Facilitating Action Research for Youth*, for adults working with youth.

THIRD, RFA **expanded our formative evaluation work** in the areas of mathematics and science. At the same time, RFA continued other evaluation projects, providing high quality research to organizations so that they can make the mid-course programmatic corrections that often cement the success of their initiatives and effectively communicate their accomplishments to a wide variety of stakeholders.



ANNUAL REPORT: July 2003 – June 2004

FOURTH, RFA **strengthened our financial and leadership capacities** in ways that advance the quality of our research and evaluation services. RFA has planned for and managed steady financial growth in the past two years, again finishing the year with a surplus. We established a senior staff leadership group that brings a greater diversity of perspectives to bear on charting the strategic direction of the organization and day-to-day operations. RFA's Board of Directors identified a leadership group that will focus on clarifying and strengthening board governance as RFA transitions from a founder-driven organization to an organization with "second-generation" leadership that can creatively build on the original mission and goals.

Below we discuss each of these areas in greater depth.

POLICY STUDIES

RFA's large-scale, multi-year policy studies have contributed to national dialogue on school reform issues, including community organizing for school reform, standards-based reforms and high school restructuring. Two of RFA's research efforts garnered significant attention when they appeared in widely distributed national publications. Four years of RFA research on community organizing for school reform informed a commentary piece in *Education Week*, "Public Accountability: School Improvement Efforts Need the Active Involvement of Communities to Succeed" January 14, 2004. And RFA's five year, multi-method study of systemic reform in Philadelphia culminated in "A Philadelphia Story: Civic Engagement and Ambitious Systemwide Reform" published in *The Kappan*, November 2003.

Currently, RFA is working on two large-scale, mixed method policy studies: one focused on the evolution and impact of the unprecedented involvement of the private sector in Philadelphia's public school system under state takeover; the second focused on the contribution of local education funds to building civic and district capacity for the improvement of public schools.

ONE: RFA is spearheading *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform*, a multi-disciplinary collaboration of researchers that is documenting whether changes in the Philadelphia school district are positively affecting the quality of teaching and learning, student achievement, and public engagement in the city schools. This kind of independent, outside research is crucial; its aim is to help neighborhood organizations, educators, policymakers, and civic leaders understand what the changes in the district are and mean and to inform these stakeholders about what further changes may be necessary. A second goal is to provide nuanced empirical analyses of the impact of private sector involvement in public education on all levels of the system and the extent to which this public/private paradigm is a means to effectively address the persistent challenges of urban school districts.



ANNUAL REPORT: July 2003 – June 2004

There is already evidence of the important role that research findings can play in supporting civic engagement in school reform. The study's first major report, *Once and For All, Placing a Highly Qualified Teacher in Every Philadelphia Classroom* spurred a citywide Teacher Equity Campaign to pressure the district to address practices that concentrated the least qualified and experienced teachers in the lowest performing schools. This report and the research on teacher hiring and placement and on retention of new teachers that followed are being widely used. The research has supported and helped to sustain the momentum of the activist and civic communities. It has informed reporting on this issue at a crucial junction: during negotiations between the district and the union. The district has reported that this body of work is also informing its policies and practices as it makes plans to put in place support structures and professional development activities for new teachers and new initiatives in the areas of recruitment and retention.

A selection of publications authored by *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform* researchers follows:

Research for Action

Once & For All: Placing a Highly Qualified Teacher in Every Philadelphia Classroom – September 2003 + Executive Summary

State Takeover in Philadelphia: Where We Are and How We Got Here – November 2003

Philadelphia's Teacher Hiring and School Assignment Practices: Comparisons with Other Districts – April 2004 + Executive Summary

Contracting Out Schools: The First Year of the Philadelphia Diverse Provider Model – May 2004

Philadelphia Public School Notebook:

“Characteristics of Schools under Diverse Providers 2002-2003” – Summer 2003

“Supports and challenges in the multiple provider model: Principals offer mixed perspectives on first year of takeover” – Summer 2003

“Why Philadelphia loses promising teachers and what is being done about it” – Winter 2003-2004; *English and Spanish*

“Access to certified, experienced teachers is not equal for all” – Winter 2003-04

Philadelphia Inquirer

“The yet-untried ways to fix Phila.'s schools” – Commentary, March 2004



ANNUAL REPORT: July 2003 – June 2004

RFA staff has also presented research from the project at the following national research conferences: Economic Policy Institute, National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, Urban Affairs Association, American Educational Research Association, and the National Writing Project.

TWO: With support and leadership from the Public Education Network (PEN), local education funds (LEFs) have worked for two decades to 1) educate and mobilize their communities so that citizen voices are influential in education policy discussions; and 2) support effective partnerships between school district insiders and outsiders to improve the quality of children's education. At their request, Research for Action is developing a conceptual framework for: 1) understanding the role and work of LEFs and the many factors that influence what they do and how they do it; and 2) assessing their contributions to public education. This framework will be used to guide future empirical research on LEFs and to develop tools that LEFs themselves can use in a process of self-assessment.

Research for Action White Paper

Locating Local Education Funds: A Conceptual Framework for Describing LEF's Contribution to Public Education – October 2003

ACTION RESEARCH AND YOUTH ORGANIZING

In 1997 Research for Action piloted Sisters Together in Action Research (STAR), a leadership development and literacy enhancement program for low-income, African-American adolescent girls. Since then, we have been working with students to build leadership and literacy skills so that they can participate in positive change in their schools and communities. Our newest projects include:

Research Camp: Philadelphia Safe and Sound, the local arm of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's nationwide Urban Health Initiative, asked Research for Action to put together a Research Camp for Philadelphia-area teens involved in social action/justice projects in their own communities. Participating youth reported that they learned valuable skills in research design, data analysis, and presentation and that they took away fresh resolve to make a difference in their home communities. Philadelphia Safe and Sound and Research for Action are seeking funding to continue and expand the camp for next year.

Guidebook for Facilitating Action Research with Youth: RFA developed a practical guide to provide adults who work with youth help in understanding and navigating action research projects. The Guidebook describes each major stage of action research and offers exercises and activities to develop knowledge and skills at each step of the process. Appendices include additional tools to assist students in



ANNUAL REPORT: July 2003 – June 2004

reading critically, writing, and conducting on-line research and identifying materials and sources for continued learning.

STAR Curriculum Resource Guide: Between 1997 and 2004, the STAR program provided a girl-centered program in which African-American girls and young women engaged in an ongoing exchange of ideas and information in response to issues impacting on girls' social, cultural, and economic lives. During the past year, STAR staff and girls began assembling a curriculum resource guide based on seven years of girls' literacy and action research activities. The curriculum guide provides highlights from the STAR curriculum, examples of research and writing produced by STAR participants, and strategies that have made intergenerational learning and leadership successful.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION

During the past year, RFA has collaborated with school districts, non-profit service providers, universities, and philanthropic organizations to evaluate their efforts at strengthening public education. With each of these collaborations RFA has gained a richer appreciation of the complexity of evaluation research and of the relationships necessary to making evaluations credible and useful.

During the past year, RFA continued as the evaluation partner for the School District of Philadelphia's GEAR UP program, the School District of Trenton's LEAD initiative (Leadership for Education Achievement), the National School and Community Corps' in-school and after school programming, and the Philadelphia Education Fund's Reduced Class Size/Balanced Literacy Initiative. Through these evaluation projects, Research for Action was able to provide clients with information about the processes and outcomes of activities designed to increase college aspirations in comprehensive high schools (GEAR UP), to support teacher and principal leadership capacity (LEAD), to provide high quality after school programs for elementary school students (NSCC), and to enhance literacy instruction (Reduced Class Size/Balanced Literacy).

RFA has embarked on evaluation activities in several **new arenas**, including two math/science programs, a cultural participation program, and a sponsorship and academic intervention program.

MetroMath is a partnership among Rutgers, University of Pennsylvania, and City University of New York, funded by the National Science Foundation, with the goal of developing a new generation of leaders in mathematics education for urban schools. The **New Jersey Graduate K12 Partnership** is designed to link graduate students in mathematics and science with middle school students and teachers. RFA has been able to provide valuable formative feedback to these two programs about building partnerships and to contextualize their work within the broader field of mathematics and science reform.



ANNUAL REPORT: July 2003 – June 2004

The Philadelphia Cultural Participation Benchmark Project goal is developing reliable information on the breadth and depth of cultural participation in North Philadelphia and Camden. In the spring of 2004, Research for Action conducted a series of focus groups to gain a fuller understanding of the meanings cultural participation holds for residents of the neighborhoods and the factors that encourage or inhibit participation. Following additional research by other organizations, the research team will present findings to local cultural leaders to provide a set of grounded conclusions about expanding engagement in the arts and strengthening communities through cultural participation.

Say Yes to Education provides students from low-income neighborhoods the support they need to attend college or other post-secondary training. Research for Action has collaborated with the Say Yes staff to evaluate their program at Bryant Elementary School, which currently involves 40 families and their school-aged children. This program provides college scholarships to students and ongoing support to students and their families from kindergarten through college graduation. At the request of Say Yes staff, RFA is focusing on parents in order to learn more about what enables families to take full advantage of the program and about the barriers to participation. RFA is also looking at the academic and social outcomes of participation in the program for the focal children.

Selected Evaluation Reports:

Year 4 of Philadelphia Gear UP: A Snapshot of Participation and Impact at the High School Level
– December 2003

Meanings of Cultural Participation at the Neighborhood Level: A Focus Group Analysis – May
2004

Impact of the Change to a Split Day Literacy Intern Teacher Model: Key Findings from Spring 2004
Interviews with Literacy Intern Teachers and Partner Teachers – June 2004

Brief Historical Overview: Reduced Class Size/Balanced Literacy Program – June 2004

The research from the youth and evaluation projects has been presented at the following national conferences: Urban Affairs Association, American Anthropological Association, American Educational Research Association (annual meeting), American Educational Research Association (Women in Education Special Interest Group), and American Evaluation Association.



ANNUAL REPORT: July 2003 – June 2004

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

Research for Action has pursued several strategies to ensure the **financial health** of the organization. Currently, the organization has a diverse funding base that is a mix of fee-for-service evaluation projects and grant-funded research. With the support of a challenge grant from the William Penn Foundation, RFA has build its development and communications capacity and successfully garnered an equal amount of financial support for the *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform* project from other public and private sources, including The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Carnegie Corporation, the Surdna Foundation, and other foundations. RFA's projects cut across a diverse range of research areas and include a balanced mix of local, regional, and national foci. The organization has been disciplined in keeping its administrative costs to a minimum and has strategically used recent surpluses to forward strategic goals, including investment in technology and research dissemination.

Rigorous and useable research in K-12 education demands an effective integration of a range of knowledge, expertise and experience across a range of fields, including educational leadership, curriculum, pedagogy, organizational development, politics, policy analysis, finance and economics. Research for Action has built an internal staff that brings expertise in a range of these areas, as well as in project management. Our most recent searches for **highly-qualified research staff** have yielded an excellent pool of candidates, and new hires have expanded the racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of the organization. *Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform* involves a collaboration of researchers from RFA, area universities, and other research organizations, many of whom have tracked school reform efforts in Philadelphia for many years. Additionally, RFA has developed a board whose members broaden the organization's range of research skills and its understanding of education issues. Research for Action has evolved from being a provider of educational research built on its own staff working in collaboration with clients, to being a leader in the integration of knowledge and experience across a vibrant network of groups and individuals.

RFA's **Board of Directors** identified a leadership group that will focus on clarifying and strengthening board governance as RFA begins a new five year strategic planning cycle. RFA's Board of Directors elected Judy Buchanan as Chair of the Board and established an Executive Committee of Judy Buchanan, David Paul, Rochelle Nichols-Solomon, Jolley Christman, and Eva Gold.



ANNUAL REPORT: July 2003 – June 2004

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