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### **NEW STUDY SHOWS SMALL HIGH SCHOOLS CAN HELP STUDENTS AND TEACHERS SUCCEED, BUT NOT WITHOUT SUPPORT**

PHILADELPHIA, PA August 18, 2009 – A new study by Philadelphia-based Research for Action (RFA) has put small high schools under a microscope and recorded two observations critical to planning the future of Philadelphia’s schools. First, small high schools can clearly contribute to student success, particularly among students with the greatest academic needs. Second, small schools tend to foster a positive school environment, an attribute that research shows can support and retain teachers, a feature which dovetails with the Obama administration’s drive for teacher quality and accountability. However, though small high schools’ size may be part of the solution, they cannot succeed on size alone. As prominent education reformer Mike Klonsky says, “Small schools are the launch pad, not the rocket ship.”

*Going Small: Progress and Challenges of Philadelphia’s Small High Schools* is timely, appearing as the School District and City have joined forces to reduce the dropout rate and better prepare students for post-secondary success, and as the District begins to implement its new strategic plan and its priorities for high school reform.

The new study finds reduced school size is a condition that can facilitate improved teaching, learning, student achievement, and safety in schools. However, the research also indicates a need for sufficient planning time, flexibility with regard to District policies around curriculum and hiring, and sustained partner relations and funding. *Going Small* examines the success and challenges in the start-up and early implementation of the small schools initiative begun by the Philadelphia School District in 2003. Between 2003-2007, the District created 25 new small high schools – both brand new schools and conversions – in the three admission categories: neighborhood open admission schools, and citywide and special admission schools, which both have admission criteria. While these schools all launched without the infusion of outside foundation funding experienced by other cities developing small schools, the brand new schools initially received more support and resources than the conversion schools.

The study confirms the notion that small schools are a promising strategy for fostering student success, especially for students who face the most significant challenges. “This type of learning environment, where students are not anonymous, can better meet the needs of students who are least prepared for high school,” explains Tracey Hartmann, a senior RFA researcher on *Going Small*, “but it remains crucial that these schools are provided adequate support and resources.” Students with the greatest academic needs tend to be concentrated at Philadelphia’s neighborhood high schools.

RFA’s analysis by the three admission categories is unique and yields more detail about how school structure – beyond size alone – can affect different measures of success. While the research highlights

higher algebra passage and lower suspension rates and more positive teacher perceptions of safety in small high schools across the three admission categories, the data also reveal more mixed results on other outcomes such as absenteeism and tardiness. The positive differences were greatest for the small open admission neighborhood schools.

*Going Small* is part of a multi-year study, which began in 2006. Funding for the project came from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

## ***Going Small: Progress and Challenges of Philadelphia's Small High Schools***

### ***Methodology***

The qualitative data featured in this report comes from school observations, and from interviews conducted with teachers, students, administrators, parents, and District leaders from 2006-2008. The quantitative data was collected from teachers' responses to the School District's annual survey, application and enrollment data, and student outcomes data for all first-time 9<sup>th</sup> graders in 2006-2007. Because the admissions categories of Philadelphia's high schools are very related to student achievement outcomes, the study looked at some outcomes within admissions categories (neighborhood, citywide and special admission high schools).

### ***Findings***

- Student achievement data shows that students in small high schools were more likely to pass algebra than in large high schools. These schools also reported lower suspension rates. However, with the exception of small citywide high schools, small high schools did no better, and in some cases worse, than large high schools in the area of absenteeism and tardiness.
- Safety is one challenge confronting many of Philadelphia's high schools. RFA interviews with teachers and students, as well as results from the teacher survey, show that students and teachers feel a greater sense of safety at small schools, especially small *neighborhood* schools compared with their large counterparts. This sense of safety contributes to a strong school community.
- In interviews, students in small schools describe caring and supportive teacher-student relationships that personalize the way students and teachers interact, helping to establish a "family" environment within the school.
- Increased rigor has an impact on teaching, learning, and overall student outcomes in small high schools. Principals and teachers interviewed for this study identified four key strategies that support increased rigor: building a shared school culture; developing strong leadership; providing opportunities for teacher collaboration; and allowing flexibility and teacher influence in areas such as hiring, curriculum, and the schedule of the school day. Most respondents said more needs to be done to increase rigor at their high school.
- The study highlights the ways in which initial supports and structural flexibility given to small schools were not equitable or consistent across school types. Brand new schools received more support than conversion schools, especially in their initial stages.

*Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based, nonprofit organization engaged in education research and evaluation. Founded in 1992, RFA works with public school districts, educational institutions, and community organizations to improve the educational opportunities for those traditionally disadvantaged by race/ethnicity, class, gender, language/cultural difference, and ability/disability.*