

Beyond Basic Training

Twists and Turns in the Journey: Youth Activists' Use of Research in Their Campaigns for Small Schools

Kristine Lewis shares Research for Action's experience with training youth to use social science research methods in their campaigns to improve their local high schools.¹

In the spring of 2005, youth activists with Youth United for Change (YUC) and the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) held a public action—an event at which a public official is asked to make a pledge of support in front of constituents—attended by over 200 students, parents, school officials, and community leaders. Four African American youth activists took center stage. Holding colorful poster boards that visually depicted their organizations' campaigns over the previous year, they explained the role that social science research had played in their pursuit of small high schools. Soon afterwards the Chief Academic Officer of the Philadelphia school district made a commitment to community participation by transforming three large neighborhood high schools into several smaller, autonomous schools.

During the 2004–2005 school year and the summer of 2005, we at Research for Action—a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that engages in educational research and evaluation—trained a dozen youth activists, including those who spoke at the action, to improve their research skills. Youth learned to merge their activism with research to highlight the importance of small class sizes, safe learning environments, meaningful relationships with teachers, and a sense of community in their schools. While advancing YUC and PSU's campaigns to transform schools, we sought to better understand the contributions that youth make to social change as part of a larger study on civic engagement in Philadelphia school reform.

Involvement with our research project expanded the research skills of YUC and PSU's youth activists, who have a long history of working diligently to improve education in Philadelphia. At the beginning of their push for small schools, prior to their training with us, youth conducted "listening campaigns" and surveyed high school students about their ideas for the design of new high schools. They read literature about small schools, traveled to small schools in Oakland, Chicago, Providence, and New York City, and developed proposals for the future of their high schools.

Our staff began the youth activists' training by offering a day-long program that included team-building exercises and an introduction to qualitative research methods. Next, youth researchers started observing meetings with school officials and community leaders and writing field notes. They convened monthly with our staff to engage in ongoing analysis of their field notes and to discuss developments in their campaigns. During these meetings, youth supported one another and offered strategies for

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approaching their respective campaigns. Youth researchers also kept journals to record their reflections on their experiences as researchers and activists. They continued to hone their skills through our 1-week summer research camp.

After developing skills for formal field note taking, youth approached their participation in the small schools campaign through the lenses of both activist and researcher. Their newly developed ability to closely observe meetings with school officials and community leaders made them keenly aware of political relationships, power dynamics, and other patterns that had previously been hidden to them. In addition, many of the youth noticed that their research training was producing an unexpected change in their writing skills. Several youth researchers shared that their teachers had noted improvements in their writing. Youth attributed this to their involvement in the research project, remarking that they had never before written as much or as frequently.

One important product of the youth researchers' activities was a road map illustrating the evolution of their small schools campaigns. Leaders from YUC and PSU used this road map to support their presentations at the public action. In preparation for the public action, our staff also coached youth activists on their presentation skills, encouraging students to tell stories from their experiences and to draw on data highlighted on their road maps to engage the audience and bolster their case for small schools. The youth activists' work succeeded in earning them a pledge of support from the Chief Academic Officer of the Philadelphia school district.

Meanwhile, we learned several important lessons in its work with youth. First, we learned the importance of creating youth-centered contexts in which youth can reflect on their own experiences, explore research questions important to their efforts to create change, and forge alliances with other youth committed to social change. Second, we (re)learned the importance of ongoing support for the acquisition of new skills—in this case the skills of research and reporting. This ongoing support takes shape in the form of strong relationships and trust between adults and youth and among youth themselves. Our staff members hope that the continued fusion of research and activism will help youth mobilize a power base and infuse their voices into decision-making processes that impact their future.

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