

# RFA Briefs

Spring 2000



*The Newsletter of Research for Action*

## **STAR Shines!** **RFA's Sisters Together in Action Research** **From Research to Action: The Birth of STAR**

In 1994 Research for Action was commissioned by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) to study how adults in middle schools could support the development of girls' self-confidence and leadership skills as well as strengthen their academic success. Earlier AAUW research had found that schools were often "shortchanging" girls, and as a result, girls' belief in their competence, particularly with regard to math and science, dropped precipitously during the middle school years. RFA researchers visited six middle schools across the country to explore how schools could enhance girls' school achievement. From extensive interviews and observations, they discovered factors that supported - and hampered - girls' willingness to take on academic and other challenges.

The results of this study were published in *Girls in the Middle: Working to Succeed in School*, a report which drew national recognition for its findings. *Girls in the Middle* recom-

mended that programs identify girls' strengths and support them in addressing obstacles to their personal and academic success. Ideal programs would have mentors to work with girls on strengthening inquiry and communication skills. Programs would also foster leadership skills to bolster girls' sense of efficacy and increase their positive influence on schools and communities. Based on its findings, Research for Action developed Sisters Together in Action Research (STAR), a school-based program designed to build leadership skills and address the issues that have traditionally hampered girls' school achievement during the adolescent years.

Participants in STAR are middle and high school girls from 11 through 18 years old who meet together one afternoon a week. These students are recruited by the school staff, past participants, and parents with the goal of involving a broad, inclusive range of girls. The STAR program involves girls with diverse learning styles, strengths, academic skills,

How do girls and women use writing to take on new roles in their schools and communities? How do they use writing to take power and create change? How do they forge new roles and relationships with each other through the shared practice of writing? In this issue of RFA Briefs we explore these questions.

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and life experiences. A core group of 70 girls from Gillespie Middle School and 15 girls from Gratz High School in North Philadelphia currently participate in the program. Starting this spring, the program will also involve 25 girls from neighborhood elementary schools.

Many girls enter the STAR program at a time when they feel vulnerable to social pressures. STAR provides girls with a safe place to discuss their concerns and goals and to work with each other and adult mentors on problem solving. We believe it is critical that adults listen to girls, learn from them, and then coach them in the skills they need to voice their concerns and act on them.

STAR girls are constantly writing, reflecting, researching,

analyzing, and discussing questions important to them. These processes help them refine and strengthen their literacy, communication, and advocacy skills. As they gain proficiency and confidence, participants typically assume more roles and responsibilities in the program. Older STAR participants act as mentors to newer participants and reach out to other students in the school who may be facing academic and/or social challenges. By developing opportunities for girls to work on issues collectively, STAR reduces the isolation and stress that girls experience during adolescence.

STAR is one of 14 programs nationwide supported by the Ms. Foundation to support girls' healthy development. During the past year, teams of STAR girls

have participated in several regional forums to identify the individual, social network, community and institutional factors that contribute to girls' achievement. STAR girls attended and presented at conferences in Chicago, New York and Atlanta. These meetings gave STAR participants' opportunities to meet with girls from other Ms. Foundation-funded programs.

In addition to the Ms. Foundation, STAR is supported by grants from:

- *Dolfinger-McMahon Foundation*
- *Samuel S. Fels Fund*
- *Knight Foundation*
- *William Penn Foundation*
- *The Philadelphia Foundation*
- *Phoebe Valentine Foundation.*

STAR



## Creating a Culture of Literacy and Leadership

Last year STAR girls spearheaded the creation of a book club that was open to students throughout the school. They chose books that explored issues of collective concern, such as the stresses of puberty, and the experiences of urban girls of color. When STAR participants met initial resistance from school administrators over the choice of one book, they organized a meeting with the principal. STAR girls carefully prepared for the meeting and presented persuasive arguments for selecting the book for discussion. They were successful in their advocacy, and several weeks later, these girls and their adult mentor held a lively, thoughtful discussion of *Flyy Girl*, a book that realistically depicts

the challenges many girls had experienced.

STAR girls also created a lending library to make books easily accessible to one another, and shared written synopses of books they had read. Program mentors also purchased fiction, non-fiction, poetry and periodicals for STAR participants to read and review together. Following their discussions, girls identified the works they found most powerful, and recommended purchasing additional books for distribution to other students. STAR girls then publicized the availability of these books, interviewed and selected girls who responded to the offer, and developed a written summary of what had engaged other students about the books.

During the past year, a separate STAR program was created for girls who had recently entered Gratz High School. These girls had participated in STAR while at Gillespie Middle School, and were interested in continuing with research and advocacy projects, while helping to mentor middle school students. Under the guidance of adult mentors, these older girls conducted focus groups with younger students at Gillespie, helping the middle school girls to identify and explore areas of concern. The older STAR girls then led discussions around the issues of greatest interest, including educational experiences, recreational opportunities, health concerns and community resources. ■



## An Intergenerational Experience: Sharing the Leadership

By Diane Brown, STAR Director

Enter the STAR space at Gillespie Middle School, and you will observe several generations of females sharing the leadership. Equally earning the title "Ms." (an African American cultural expression of respect and affection) before their first names are three high school leaders, three college leaders, and three adult leaders. Additionally, every weekly session features middle school girls serving as roving leaders or exhibiting leadership that emerges as a need presents itself. With 70 middle school girls participating in STAR this year, the sharing of leadership has been crucial.



Sharing the leadership and governance of STAR across generations centers on two key themes: relationships and respect. When asked to share their thoughts on leadership in STAR, Tara and

Marva almost in unison declared: "When you respect us as young adults, then we respect you as adults." Marva notes: "It's good for the middle school girls to see us in this position as leaders. They live in our neighborhoods, they talk to us, and they tell us things they can not always say to the adults." Tara adds: "We've always been their big sisters; now because of STAR, we have moved into being 'role models'. They see that even though we have graduated and left the middle school level, we are staying active with them. We want to spend time with them, and this helps them to feel important."

Rhonda M. Phillips, STAR Program Facilitator, described a dynamic leadership moment involving two of the high school peer leaders, Tara and Sharita, during their facilitation of the Young Women's Action Team training session: Tara recruited 15 girls who attended on a Thursday afternoon, the day after STAR's regular meeting time. She attended to every detail, including designing permission letters and creating posters and a teaching script. She expertly led the group from a whole group discussion of research methodology to the girls' self-selection of small groups matched to their interests and skills. Clearly her hard work and careful preparation earned the

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## In the Eyes of the STARS

By Tiera Bush, Tynesha Pearsall,  
Sharita Stinson, and Sheree Vinson

*Editor's note: This article was written by middle school and high school STAR participants and was featured in a recent issue of the Gillespie Gram, a school publication.*

Sisters Together in Action Research (STAR) is a unique program where the girls are in charge. The program provides Gillespie young women with a place to talk about female issues, like puberty, boys, and family. Girls here are comfortable to express their thoughts and feelings as they learn how to "research" their issues and concerns.

Last summer the STAR girls had the opportunity to complete a summer literacy packet. An eighth grader, Tiera Bush, says, "This project meant a lot to me and I worked hard on it." For the project, the girls researched different topics in their lives, like double dutch, family, and their neighborhoods. Tiera learned some good and some bad things about her neighborhood. "I learned that my neighborhood has a trash problem. One good thing about my neighborhood is that they have built more shelters for the homeless." The girls earned points for their work and they used their points to "shop" for gear from Warner Brothers and for back to school supplies.

The STAR program, facilitated by adult leaders Diane Brown, Pat Brown, and Rhonda M. Phillips, started off the year with a bang.

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*In the Eyes of the Stars continued*

Almost 60 girls, both old and new STAR members, attended the STAR kick-off. Sharita, a former Gillespie student and now a paid high school girl leader, says, "It felt good to be around my peers." The day was filled with fun activities. The girls got to see old friends, write in their journals, play double dutch, and, of course, eat pizza! One of the greatest things about STAR is the friends you make. Sheree Vinson says, "I really enjoy the wonderful people, bright smiles, and positive and confident attitudes of the STAR girls." Every week we work on literacy and leadership skills. Lots of girls come back to STAR year after year. Sharita has been coming to STAR for three years. "I think I've grown up as a STAR girl. I joined STAR in seventh grade, and now that I am in high school I am still in contact with STAR."

All Gillespie girls (Grades 6, 7, 8) are welcome to join in on the fun and learning. Although we have a huge group, everyone at STAR would love to see even more new members this year. Tynesha Pearsal, a new STAR girl, thinks that "STAR is a good program for all Gillespie girls. Instead of going home and sitting around watching TV, you can be participating in a very interesting program. I guarantee you that STAR will enrich your mind!" ■

## Friendship, Sexuality, and Power: Girls in Adolescence

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By Liz Blair

Adolescence is a tumultuous time for girls. Many of the challenges girls face during this time relate to peer relationships, social hierarchy, and developing romantic relationships. Sukey Blanc, researcher at RFA, looks at girls' peer relationships from a new direction in her dissertation, *She Thinks She's Bad*. She notes that girls' social relationships take on sexual overtones in adolescence, not just in relationships with romantic potential but also in girls' friendships. Girls' erotic energies, and discomfort with their own sexuality, are likely to be at the base of the unexpected mix of aggression and affiliation that typically characterizes the peer culture of young adolescent girls. While girls seem extremely attracted to and excited by developing friendships with girls who use their bodies in sexual ways and interact with boys flirtatiously, this emerging sexual power is also viewed as strange and wrong. Often these girls are regarded as popular and powerful but at the same time are ostracized and criticized for the power they derive from their bodies and their developing sexuality.

Blanc saw these patterns developing as she followed the experiences of Marisa, one of several girls she observed and interviewed over a two year research project which was part of a larger ethnographic study. Marisa was a popular, self-confident, and gifted African American adolescent who attended a multiracial parochial school in the Philadelphia area. Her struggle moving through her seventh and eighth grade years draws out many aspects key to the formation of peer groups for girls and the ways that these groups, as well as other influences like parents and teachers, can have a significant impact on how girls view themselves and the choices they make. Marisa must balance the varied roles in her life from being academically successful, to being feminine, to being a part of African American culture. Juggling these roles is one of the most difficult aspects of her life, sometimes putting her in conflicting situations. Marisa's physical and sexual presence,

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her comfort with her body, and her ability to attract both male and female friends made her a central and powerful figure in her peer group but also created deep discomfort among her female peers.

Marisa organized a dance group for the school talent show and invited only popular, beautiful, or skillful girls to take part. While participation in the talent show recreated a social hierarchy in the class, it was also a forum in which girls took leadership, used their bodies, and elaborated their racial identity. The girls used their bodies as expressive tools while at the same time conveying messages of their sexuality, desire, and aggressive stance in their dance. Marisa experienced intense ostracism and rejection despite her seemingly high position in the social hierarchy. The other girls seemed to choose her sexuality as a primary "flaw" to attack. This choice shows not only the threat Marisa seemed to pose with her sexual expression but also the contested status of female sexuality in general. Girls complained about Marisa being too conceited and being a teacher's pet; they also began making fun of the way she wore her hair and the way she walked and complained that she acted too old and was too sexual. Marisa's peers were impressed by her sexual attractiveness and power to interest boys, yet they were at the same time threatened by this power, especially because Marisa exhibited her sexuality in ways that often stood in clear opposition to traditional conceptions of femininity.

**In order to help girls navigate friendships during adolescence, we need to encourage them to talk and think explicitly about the expectations they have for themselves and others.**

Negotiating peer relationships can be extremely difficult for girls at this age. Peers often take on the role of policing each other and maintaining conventional gender roles, yet at the same time the sexual use of the body is often represented in our society as highly alluring and exciting. Sexuality is portrayed as being extremely dangerous for girls. Other researchers have identified girls' desire to be in touch with their sexuality, while at the same time experiencing deep feelings of doubt and disgust for sexuality. Michelle Fine observes: "The adolescent woman herself assumes a dual consciousness - at once taken with the excitement of actual/anticipated sexuality and consumed with anxiety and worry."\* Perhaps the complicated dimensions of friendships are directly related to these ambivalent conceptions of sexuality. In order to help girls navigate friendships during adolescence, we need

to encourage them to talk and think explicitly about the expectations they have for themselves and others. Mentoring and leadership programs like STAR (Sisters Together in Action Research) can help girls negotiate this difficult time. ■

\* "Sexuality, schooling and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire." *Harvard Educational Review* 58 (1):29-53. 1998.

## Women Writing and Working for Change in Schools

The Conversations We Crave  
A Force to be Reckoned With  
Where Do I Want to Stand?

By Rachel Martin

"Power is the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action - and the right to have one's part matter." (Carolyn Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman's Life*)

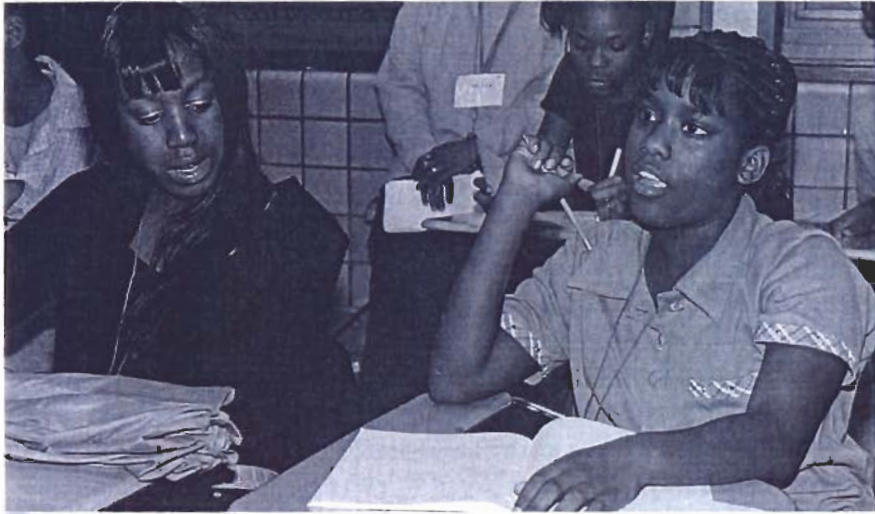
Writing plays a key role in the lives of many women and girls working actively to change the Philadelphia public schools. In journals and notes passed during

faculty meetings, on chart paper hung in the women's bathrooms and flyers for a public action created collaboratively by the parents involved - women and girls use writing to record what's happening, to understand what's happening, and ultimately, to create change. In these writings, the boundaries between the "personal" and the "professional"

blur, challenging traditional discourses about what counts as official knowledge.

Often, the writing provides a chance to juxtapose the daily routines of school life with underlying questions. After an episode at school in which she had to play conflicting and conflicted roles, inserting herself between girls, police, parents, her own ethics,





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and an external code of procedures, principal Arlene Holtz asks in her journal, "What was this whole day about?" Sharing her journal with the other women principals with whom she meets to write and talk, she begins to look for an answer.

Ultimately, it is power to which all of the writing speaks. David Morley and Ken Warpole encourage the publication of "community and worker writers" in England. As they put it, "The questions of who is to speak, who is to be listened to, and what kinds of voices and ways of writing are to be valued are always questions of political power." Each of the groups of writers described below can be seen as a model for the kind of activist ethnographic work RFA has begun to do and wants to develop further. As we move from a method in which an authoritative outsider writes the insider's story, to one in which communities tell their own stories, members of those communities will define their own strategies for change.

\* *The Republic of Letters: Working Class Writing and Local Publishing*. London: undated.

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respect of girls. Not one participant wanted to leave as the clock struck five and darkness descended.

The college volunteers have helped design curriculum and lead sessions for STAR. Jessica Bass, a Bryn Mawr College volunteer, designed a highly interactive STAR session that covered the important themes of body image and self-esteem. She showed respect for the young women in STAR by selecting culturally relevant literature written by African American authors. While the adult leaders hosted a site visit from the Ms. Foundation, Jessica led the STAR session, assisted by two Temple University volunteers, Jessica Miller and Luekisha Jones.

Two recent reflections from girls model the potency of STAR's intergenerational levels. Middle school girls who participated during the Ms. Foundation site visit reported back to the group; they were very proud of how they had represented the program. When asked a question as to what

guided their actions with the adult visitors, the girls replied: "We asked ourselves how Tara, Marva, and Sharita would act, and that's how we acted." After observing the college volunteers present a STAR session, the high school girl leaders came to the adult leadership with a request: "We know we lead groups and help out, but we would like an opportunity to design and lead an entire STAR session from start to finish."

Carol Gilligan observes that "Women teaching girls, then, are faced with a series of intricate problems of relationship. Girls must learn the traditions that frame and structure the world they are entering, and they must hold on to their own ways of hearing and seeing. How can women stay with girls and teach cultural traditions? How can girls stay with women and also with themselves?"\* In STAR, we are learning ways to be together and share the leadership. The process commands us to be respectful enablers of each other. Early evidence recommends the importance of connecting from one level to the next: adult educators connecting with college volunteers, college volunteers modeling for high school adolescents, and high school adolescents reaching back the short distance to the middle schoolers they themselves were just a few months ago. ■

\* *Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race, and Gender in the United States Schools*. Lois Weis and Michelle Fine, editors, 1993.

## The Conversations We Crave

Marsha Sable teaches math at a comprehensive Philadelphia high school. Valerie Gowen is a special education teacher at the same school. Valerie is a member of the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP). For four years, they have written to each other in a "dialogue journal." They often write on the fly. Marsha passes notes to Valerie in faculty meetings and then staples them to the journal. She writes at 5:00 in the morning, before making lunch for her kids and feeding the dog. Valerie wrote in the car as her family took her son to college in Baltimore, and she jotted down thoughts while vacationing in Myrtle Beach.

Marsha explains, "We use the journal on a lot of different levels. One piece of it is to deal with some of the outrageous conditions, talking about the door locks that don't work, and the fires that were in the building with no alarms, drug deals in the halls, and students getting beat up." Valerie says that in the face of things that go on in school, the journal "helps keep me grounded." Though they have an intense need to express the horrors they confront, they also write to hold onto victories. Both teachers believe that the strongest thing they may have to offer their students are the relationships they build with them. As Valerie notes, "The journal seems to provide a forum for expressing our humanity - almost apologetically - as if we want someone to know we would be more impactful if this world were not so crazy and dysfunctional." Marsha and Valerie have daughters the same age, and they write not only about what happens in the classroom but about who they are outside, and the connections between them. This bond they have, sustained by the journal, allows them to take risks with each other.

A few years ago, Marsha and Valerie would sometimes arrive at school as early as 7:00 a.m. Running into the women's bathrooms, they hung large pieces of chart paper with markers on a string. On each were provocative statements they had written about a meeting that all had attended, or a theme - such as class observations, school to career programs, school climate, or small learning communities - inviting response. Valerie explains they wanted to broaden the conversations they were having and create a new, and also light-hearted, forum for speaking. "Without something like this, you wouldn't know what people were thinking. You could tell from private conversations, but there wasn't a public one."

Valerie and Marsha asked not to have their real names or the name of their school used for this article. Their fears, along with those of other teachers, reveal the ways in which many feel vulnerable to those who hold power over them. As a step toward speaking out, they hope to pull together the writings of teachers in their cluster and publish them. In part, they want to inform the thinking of those outside of schools who negatively judge teachers. They also hope to create a new discourse about what stands in the way of teaching and learning and what moves it forward. They believe other teachers share their need to express what they're seeing and what they're doing - and that they have the same craving for the conversation to become public.

## Connections

*Girls in the Middle: Working to Succeed in School* (1996) is available from the American Association of University Women at 202-728-7602. The report was researched and written by Research for Action staff Jody Cohen and Sukey Blanc with Jolley Christman, Diane Brown, and Michele Sims.

The Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP), a site of the National Writing Project, is an urban teacher collaborative and school/university partnership linking the School District of Philadelphia, the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, and the Philadelphia Education Fund. Currently over 400 K-12 Teacher Consultants participate in the project, working in a variety of ways with teachers and other educators to explore literacy, writing, teaching, and learning in their own classrooms, small learning communities, and schools. Many of the ideas developed in STAR (Sisters Together in Action Research) and in the principals' writing group were generated and refined in conversations with PhilWP leadership.

PhilWP: 215-898-1919

[www.upenn.edu/gse/PhilWP](http://www.upenn.edu/gse/PhilWP)



## A Force to be Reckoned With

The Alliance Organizing Project (AOP) is an organization of parents with children in public schools throughout Philadelphia. Its goal is for parents to become partners with teachers and administrators in creating the kinds of schools their communities need. The following is the scene of an AOP parent team meeting at a high school.

The community organizer asked parents what should be on the agenda for a public action on safety issues. The agenda would also provide the text for their flyer announcing the event. As she listened, she wrote suggestions on the board, erasing and rewriting until the group agreed. With a lot of discussion, in both Spanish and English, the group made decisions regarding what the agenda items should be, their order, how they were worded, and whether they were conveying their message clearly.

In her dissertation, *Community Organizing at a Neighborhood High School: Promises and Dilemmas in Building Parent-Educator Partnerships and Collaborations*, RFA researcher Eva Gold writes that literacy practices of low-income urban families often go unrecognized in school settings, adding to parents' marginalization. Eva observed that sometimes the writing is collaborative, such as when several people record notes of a meeting or interviews with school officials and then jointly create a document. Other times, the roles of speaker, writer, editor, documenter and recorder are blurred and everyone is an active participant, leading to the ability to take joint action.

As in the example of the AOP parent meeting described above, writing can play a vital role in creating a sense of a strong, shared purpose. The literacy practices of parents such as these open up often unexplored areas for collaboration between educators and parents.

Even before joining the parent team, Caroline Hopkins

**The literacy practices of parents such as these open up often unexplored areas for collaboration between educators and parents.**

had worked hard to get the services her son needed to make it through his years of schooling with a disability. At IEP meetings where instructional plans for students in special education were developed, Caroline often found that agreed-upon commitments were never acted on once the meeting was over. So she started taking notes. "Sometimes people would be intimidated when I'd write down names and dates. They don't expect parents to take

notes; they expect parents to do what they say." Simply sitting with a note pad, she says, "gave me power."

Lorraine Flippin, another member of the team, documented her experiences and those of her nephew in their struggle to get his needs met within special education. That documentation became a tool in her lawsuit against the Board of Education on his behalf. She had to challenge school board policy further when her daughter became pregnant. Her research into school policy armed her with the knowledge she needed. "It was dictated to me that she was to return to school four weeks after her baby was born. I said, 'A teacher is given more than four weeks, why shouldn't students? Show me in the student handbook where it says differently.'" Lorraine carried the tool of writing into her job as a crossing guard shop steward. Again, with research into policy backing her up, she worked her way through channels to establish the right to send notes to union members with their paychecks, reminding them of upcoming union meetings and filling them in on agendas. Many of the guards were themselves parents and grandparents of children in the school, and union meetings were an opportunity to share stories and resources as well as get the work of the union done.

Both Caroline and Lorraine were using writing in their lives before they became active in AOP. Each keeps a journal. Caroline has boxes of them in her bedroom; Lorraine writes from 9:00 to 10:00 p.m. each night. As



# Project Updates

Lorraine says, "That's my time. I didn't always do that; I established that years ago out of a traumatic situation (when) I needed to find a way to release what I was feeling...This was a positive way for me to do that, without smoking, or drinking." For both women, the writing they do in their personal lives and for their advocacy work often overlap. The AOP parent team took this further, creating the possibility for collective writing and action.

Caroline and Lorraine have vivid memories of their participation on the AOP team. The parents got much of what they wanted to increase their children's safety at school; security cameras were installed; the gates to the parking lot were locked at appropriate times; overcrowding was reduced in the lunchroom. They wrote an article about their victories for the Philadelphia Public School Notebook. Lorraine points out that the contrast between AOP parent team meetings and the meetings at the school eventually became less sharp: "Through the knowledge of school policies, we were able to sit with teachers and administrators and make changes for our children together." Of the parent team Caroline says, "We were something. We were a force to be reckoned with."



■ This spring, thanks to a recent grant from the William Penn Foundation, STAR (Sisters Together in Action Research) will be expanding its program to include fourth and fifth grade students at the Cleveland and Steel Elementary Schools in the Gratz Cluster.

■ The Spencer Foundation has awarded RFA a planning grant under its Research on School Reform Initiatives for "Students, Teachers and High Standards Reforms: Negotiating Education Policy, Classroom Practice and Student Outcomes in Philadelphia Middle Schools." This multi-year, multi-method study will examine eighth grade students' school experiences and achievement as they encounter higher level mathematics courses, increased course requirements, and a newly mandated independent learning project. A crucial premise of high standards reform is that faced with clearer expectations and a more challenging curriculum, students will do what is necessary to succeed; documenting how students understand and engage with the curriculum and with their teachers and schools during an era of high standards reforms is a critical task of research and reform.

■ RFA has begun a three-year evaluation of MicroSociety, a program in which teachers, students, parents, and community partners work together to build a functioning miniature society. As they build their society, young people discover the rules of justice and the functions of money, markets, and property. Schools

across the country are adopting MicroSociety as a way to improve student achievement and help students see connections between school and their future lives. RFA will examine the impact of the project as a comprehensive school reform model.

■ RFA is conducting a two-year evaluation of the White-Williams Scholars program, which awards grants to Philadelphia public high school students of limited financial resources for the purpose of supporting high academic achievement. Scholars are provided financial assistance, incentives and rewards, and support services. RFA will assess the nature and effectiveness of the program's implementation in four schools, the effectiveness of the grants in motivating and supporting students, and the value of the program's individual student support format.

■ GEAR UP is a national five-year initiative whose major goal is to increase significantly the proportion of students successfully continuing their education at institutions of higher education. RFA is working in partnership with the School District of Philadelphia, colleges and universities, and community-based organizations to assist, document, describe and assess efforts to encourage middle school students towards this goal. Enhancing academic support, increasing college awareness, and encouraging family and community involvement are major activity focus areas.



## Where Do I Want to Stand?

"Today I am confronted with the utter madness of dealing with the aftermath of a senseless murder. I never knew the victim. The killers were my seven year olds - two of them. At least they were seven when I saw them last. Now they are grown men of 20 or so. Where did I fail? A day like today is endless. 'The group' will understand. Do male principals need or want a group of their own?"

Rita Spelkoman is a member of a group of women principals who have been meeting for nine years. Her words above come from an entry she shared with her journal group. Their writings reveal the complex and contradictory demands of the principalship; the support of the group helps them act on their feminist values.

One of the themes that emerges most strongly in their journal entries is the constant need to negotiate and re-negotiate their identities. Group member and RFA researcher Jolley Christman writes, "There are many voices within each of us. 'Can we be feminist principals? Can we exercise the power and authority of our positions as principals within a context of connection to and care for the other?' Significantly, the 'other' to whom she refers is someone the principals acknowledge exists 'within us.' In their journals, they are continuously asking - as Arlene Holtz does when confronted with a girl who brings a knife to school, and the police from whom she wants to offer the student protection - "What is it that matters? Who do I want to be? Where do I want to stand?"

The group works both to understand the forces that make it hard to be a feminist principal

and to change them. Some are carrying the process of journal writing into their schools where, as Jolley puts it, "the stakes are high and relationships are complicated by the hierarchy and by a school culture which discourages speaking up and out." One principal is facilitating dialogue journals with her faculty about classroom practice; another uses journals as a way to focus faculty meetings. The principals have published an article about their journals and their group, highlighting the themes that have emerged. They've presented their work together at professional conferences. In so doing, they're changing what counts as knowledge and challenging traditional principal discourse. As Jolley says, the latter often masks the reality of school life, requiring principals to "keep a stiff upper lip, and respond to all inquiries with a smile, a slap on the back, and a retort that things are going great."

The principals frequently refer to "the mask," a theme that emerged in their writing. One explained, "We wear them [masks] for protection, survival, showing feelings, hiding feelings, making sure everything works out, not letting go, letting go, trusting, being vulnerable, not being seen, and fearing rejection." Writes another, "(My mask) signals the masks that others can put on to protect themselves... Children watching me in the 'boss' mask can put on their 'aggrieved' mask... These masks keep us disconnected from the people we really are, and from one another." "Perhaps our deepest insight," says a third, "is that the process of writing about the mask is the process of taking it off." ■

### Learn more about parents organizing for school change and the principals' writing group through these RFA publications:

*Report to the Alliance Organizing Project on its Work with Parents* by Eva Gold and Diane Brown (1998). Documents the experience of parents as they form parent leadership teams at their local schools and build relationships with administrators and teachers.

*"Doing Eve's Work: Women Principals Write about Their Practice"* by Jolley Bruce Christman, Joan Ruth Hirshman, Arlene Holtz, Holly Perry, Rita Spelkoman, and Mollie Williams. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, Volume 26, Number 2 (June 1995). Describes the work of five Philadelphia elementary and middle school principals and an education ethnographer who use journal writing to reflect about their professional practice.

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# Staff Notes

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**RFA at Triple A** - Several RFA researchers presented papers at the November 1999 meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Thea Abu-El Haj presented a paper titled "Rationalizing Privilege, 'Relationalizing' Power: Students' Discursive Strategies for Undoing Gender Privilege." Elaine Simon and Eva Gold participated in a session titled "Culture: What's Missing from Systemic Reform Theory." Elaine chaired the session as well as serving as discussant; Eva presented a paper examining an effort to forge parent-educator partnerships at school sites, a component of systemic reform in Philadelphia. Former RFA researcher Nikki Edgecombe also presented at the Anthropology conference; Nikki's paper, "Re-Defining Parents as Change Agents," was based on research conducted with Research for Action and the Alliance Organizing Project.



**Welcome!** - Rachel Martin and Marcine Pickron-Davis joined the RFA staff as researchers this past fall.

Rachel's most recent work is in the area of community writing and publishing, writing workshop facilitation, and book and newspaper production for youth welfare activists and residents of urban neighborhoods. She recently completed doctoral studies in Language, Literacy and Cultural Studies at the University of New Mexico and currently teaches Adult Literacy at the University of Pennsylvania.

Marcine's experience as an educator in the field of human relations includes the design and implementation of training programs in leadership development, conflict resolution, cultural sensitivity, and organizational

development. She is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania where she received her Ph.D in Educational Leadership and taught courses in group dynamics and cross-cultural awareness. She currently serves on the Board of Directors of Training for Change.

## **Goodbye and thanks -**

Guadalupe Rivera recently left RFA after serving three years as a Research Assistant. Lupe presented a paper on "Empowerment Models Used to Train Indigenous Leaders in School Reform" at a graduate symposium held at Temple University this past fall during Latino Heritage Month. The paper included a case study based on RFA's work with the Alliance Organizing Project.

## **RFA at Ethnography Forum**

- RFA's Culture of Learning Collaborative presented at the Urban Ethnography in Education Forum held at the University of Pennsylvania in March. Research Assistants Rob Ballenger, Rhonda Mordecai-Phillips, and Hitomi Yoshida and former research assistant Guadalupe Rivera discussed how the "team concept" is implemented at Research for Action and how the organization supports its members to create a culture of individual and team learning.

## New Board Members

RFA welcomes new Board members Christie Balka, Judy Buchanan, and Mary Ramirez.

Christie Balka is the Executive Director of Bread and Roses and previously served as Executive Program Officer of the Pennsylvania Humanities Council. She has worked for several grassroots social change organizations and has been active in struggles for reproductive freedom and lesbian and gay liberation.

Judy Buchanan is the Co-Director of the National Writing Project and previously served as Deputy Director of the Philadelphia Education Fund, where she

helped shape the organization's partnership with the School District to promote school reform efforts. She taught in public schools for many years and co-directed the Philadelphia Writing Project.

Mary Ramirez is the Director of the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Language Equity Issues and is active in language equity issues on a city, state and national level. She has served as a team leader on the Standards Writing Team of the Pennsylvania Department of Education and is a member of the editorial board for the Pennsylvania Journal of Teacher Leadership. ■

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