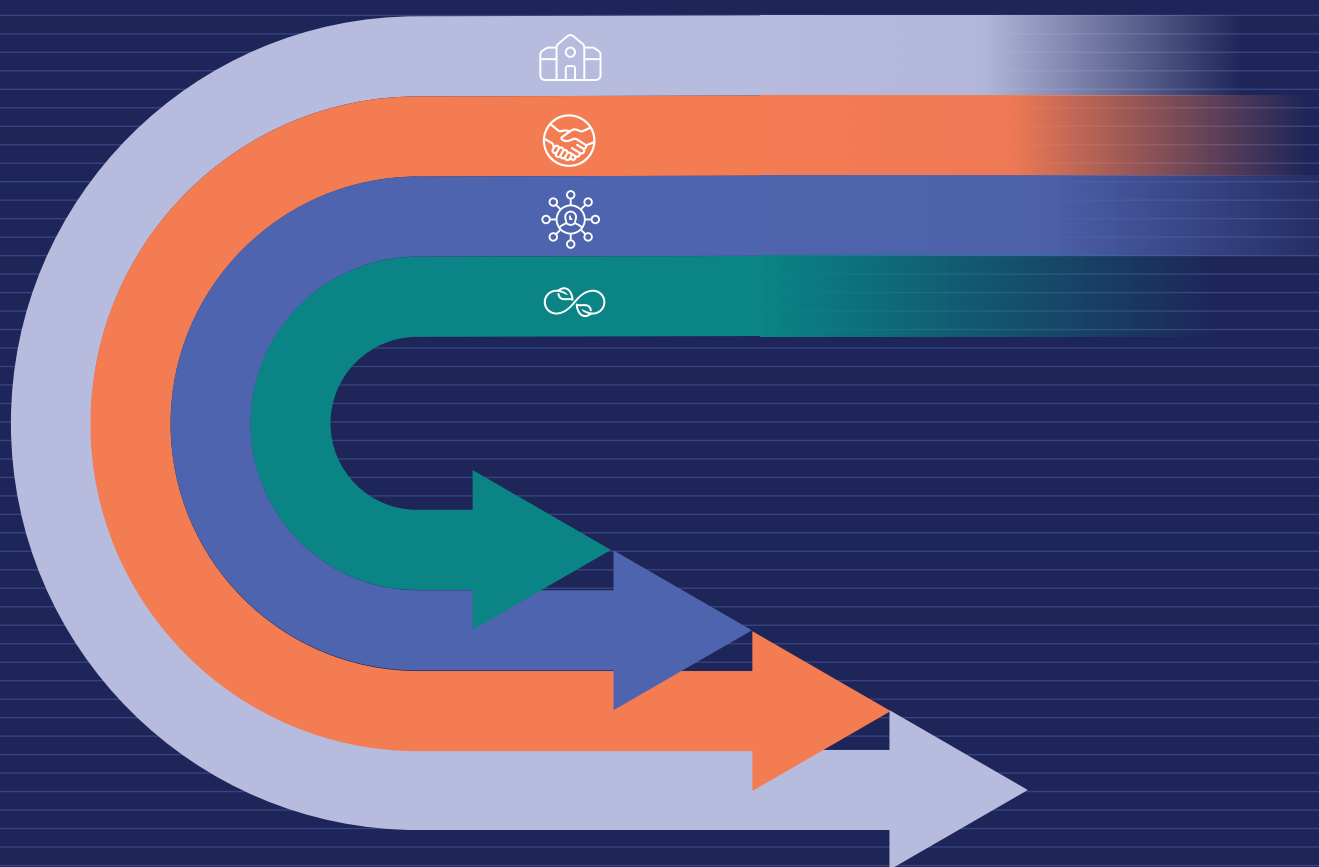
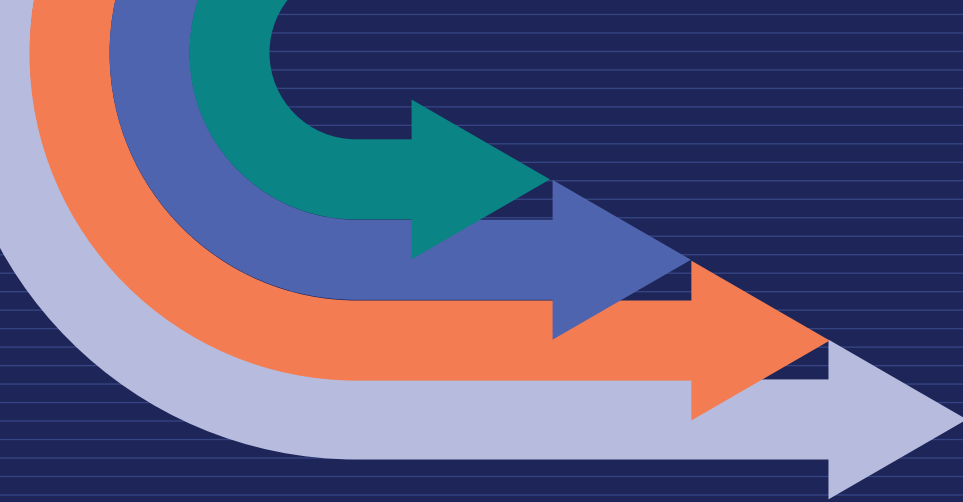


STRATEGIC PLAN OVERVIEW



 **RESEARCH
FOR ACTION**

2025 



How to Engage with RFA on the Strategic Plan

We consider the strategic plan as an opportunity for continuous learning and improvement, in partnership with our clients, staff, Board, and colleagues in the field.

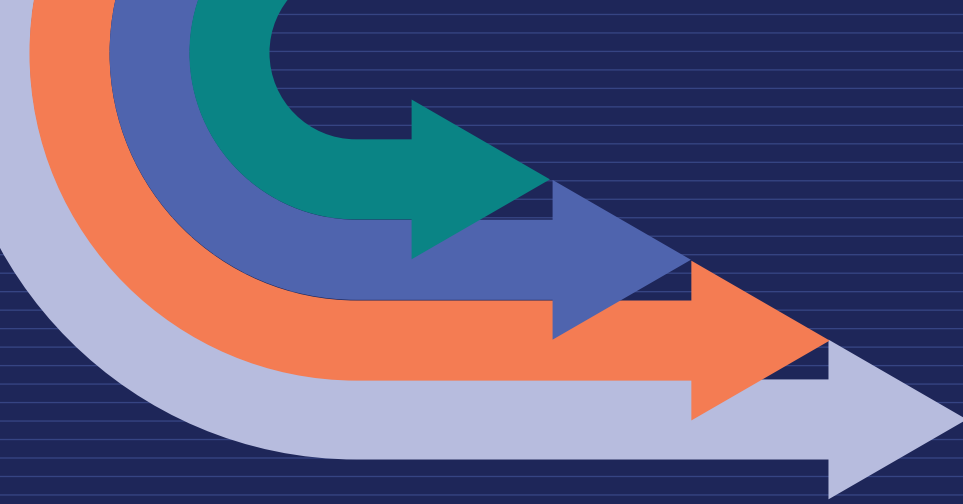
We invite you to engage with RFA as we implement the plan, as we value your knowledge, perspectives, and questions.

There are a number of ways to collaborate with RFA, and here are just a few:

- 1** Partner with us to explore research and business development opportunities in education.
- 2** Join us to co-develop thought leadership publications and activities.
- 3** Offer your feedback on the strategic plan, along with your ideas for strengthening our objectives and actions.
- 4** Exchange insights on trends in the philanthropic, research and evaluation, and education sectors.

To start the conversation, you can reach out to Kate Callahan, RFA Executive Director, at kcallahan@researchforaction.org.

We look forward to hearing from you!



The goal of RFA’s new strategic plan is simple and clear: We will build on our more than 30 years of actionable research and insights to create a just education system where every learner can thrive.

Who is Research for Action?

Research for Action (RFA) was launched in 1992, with roots in addressing education issues in the Philadelphia region. Over the past 30 years, RFA has applied actionable knowledge from a national portfolio of research and evaluation projects, across the pre-Kindergarten through postsecondary continuum, to help transform educational systems throughout the United States.

We have partnered with educators, system leaders, policymakers, advocates, philanthropy, media, communities, students, and families—drawing from our expertise on topics such as early childhood education, K-12 education and juvenile justice, postsecondary education and workforce, and out-of-school time.

Learn more about us at
www.researchforaction.org.

A New Strategic Plan: Building on What Makes RFA Distinct

After 30 years in the field, it became clear that **traditional research approaches too often fail to address the concerns and perspectives of students, families, teachers, and other community members**. This disconnect became even more untenable as the COVID-19 pandemic, along with significant national education funding constraints, placed immense pressure on communities and education systems and exposed many vulnerabilities in whom they were designed to serve.

Guided by the five-year plan launched in 2025, **RFA will build on and sharpen what has made us distinct:**

- We believe that **community-engaged research and evaluation**—co-creating knowledge with community members at every stage of the research process—is central to helping our partners promote social justice and transform systems.
- We bring to our partners **extensive knowledge and experience in the education sector**—regionally and nationally—combined with **expertise in rigorous qualitative and quantitative research methods with a focus on action**.
- We practice **human-centered design to strengthen organizational culture**—helping us model community building and collaboration for our partners and other external audiences.
- We build the **skills and knowledge of education change agents**, strengthening how they use evidence-based research and data to advance their own programs and advocate for policy and systems change.
- We apply a **systems-thinking approach**—focusing on how components of the education system, along with other systems (e.g., health care, workforce development), interconnect to improve the lives of young people.

If you agree that these distinctions are relevant for your work, consider partnering with RFA as we implement our plan.

Our New Mission

RFA's new mission underscores the **blend of rigor, analysis, systems thinking, and community engagement that has characterized RFA's reputation over the past 30 years**. At the same time, the mission positions us to continue to learn and grow, and to anticipate and act on trends in the sectors in which we work.

RFA partners with education change agents on research, evaluation, and skill-sharing projects that yield empirical insights and aligned actions to catalyze the advancement of a just education system.

action
learning systems thinking
community engagement



The Four Pillars of our Strategic Plan

Our new strategic plan is structured around four pillars:

1. Transform Research for Education Systems Change
2. Partner with Change Agents to Put Research into Action
3. Operate as a Human-centered Organization
4. Strengthen Organizational Capacity and Sustainability for Long-term Impact

While each pillar represents a distinct goal of our strategic plan and brings our mission to life through specific activities and indicators, they are not mutually exclusive.

For our plan to be successful, we know that:

- Our research, learning, systems thinking, and thought leadership initiatives will be elevated by a strong and vibrant workplace culture that emphasizes equity, collaboration, and respect for lived experience.
- A sharp, sustained focus on our mission, via partnership and community engagement locally and nationally, will establish RFA as a financially strong organization that is well-positioned for continued growth.

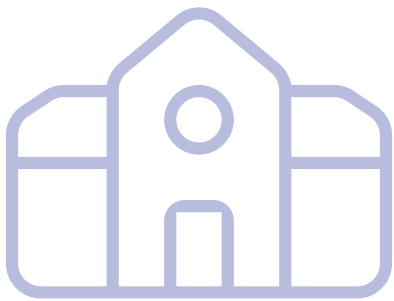
In the next section, we share each pillar and its objectives. We also offer several examples of what success looks like for each pillar.

Partnering with change agents to create a just education system, where every learner can thrive, is central to our strategic plan.

But who are change agents? What do they do?

We consider a change agent as **an individual or entity that can catalyze change within an organization, community, or system. They are at all levels of an organization—from those who have authority to enact changes, to grassroots participants who advocate for change from within.** Change agents can work for schools, education systems, philanthropies, government, businesses, community-based nonprofits, intermediaries, and the media, among other entities.

In short, change agents **promote research-based solutions, challenge the status quo, and lead efforts towards sustainable improvements.**



Pillar

1

Transform Research for Education Systems Change

- Objective 1A:** Adopt and articulate an expanded definition for rigorous, equity-centered, systems change research to advance a just education system.
- Objective 1B:** Design and embed community engagement structures that support authentic partnership with communities in every research stage, across all projects—ensuring that knowledge produced is accurate, equitable, and benefits rather than harms.
- Objective 1C:** Redistribute power in determining data-driven solutions to underserved communities through facilitating skill-sharing and participation in research production.
- Objective 1D:** Develop staff expertise in designing and conducting rigorous, equity-centered, and transformative research—addressing researcher bias, and implementing culturally responsive, community-engaged, and systems-change-oriented methodologies.
- Objective 1E:** Produce action-oriented findings and insights that target systemic change—sharing research in formats useful to change agents implementing and advocating for shifts to policies and practices that promote a just education system.

What Does Success Look Like?—Selected Examples:

- By 2029, **75%** of projects have embedded community engagement structures in one or more phases of the research process.
- By 2029, among those meaningfully engaged, **80%** of community partners and advisory committee members report satisfaction with their engagement and involvement.



Pillar

2

Partner with Change Agents to Put Research into Action

- Objective 2A:** Expand and deepen—through research-informed action—strategic partnerships with change agents committed to advancing a just education system.
- Objective 2B:** Co-create policy and practice tools with change agents to increase adoption and use of research findings to transform education systems.
- Objective 2C:** Track and promote field/change agent adoption of RFA-recommended education practices and policies to assess our impact on advancing a just education system.
- Objective 2D:** Elevate learning and thought leadership from across our portfolio to broaden impact and advance systems change.

What Does Success Look Like?—Selected Examples:

- By 2027, secure **at least five multi-year formal partnerships with frontline change agents** (e.g., community organizations, EdTech firms, municipal agencies, schools and districts; and **at least five multi-year formal partnerships with philanthropic/social investment change agents** (e.g., funder collaboratives/foundations that invest in front-line change agents to pilot and scale innovative, research-based solutions).
- By 2029, **80%** of surveyed change agent partners indicate “high” on RFA’s products informing their work.



Pillar

3

Operate as a Human-centered Organization

- Objective 3A:** Foster an inclusive and equitable workplace culture that models equity, collaboration, and respect for lived experience; supports staff well-being; and ensures that organizational practices align with our social justice commitments.
- Objective 3B:** Prioritize staff growth, well-being, and retention to ensure staff have opportunities to develop and thrive.
- Objective 3C:** Practice continuous learning and reflection to respond to community needs, adapt to evolving contexts, and foster a culture of openness and innovation.

What Does Success Look Like?—Selected Examples:

- In 2026 and each year thereafter, establish baseline and achieve and maintain **at least 80%** agreement on staff surveys measuring well-being and belonging.
- From 2026 through 2029, RFA makes **an increasing annual investment** in professional development to grow and retain staff.

Pillar 4



Strengthen Organizational Capacity and Sustainability for Long-term Impact

- Objective 4A:** Secure a diverse portfolio of innovative, mission-aligned projects that transform education research, drive systems change, and strengthen our long-term impact and financial sustainability.
- Objective 4B:** Strengthen our long-term financial resilience by broadening revenue streams, growing unrestricted reserves, and adopting board-supported budgeting practices that keep annual fundraising within sustainable limits.
- Objective 4C:** Adopt and implement sustainable governance and accountability structures to ensure RFA is positioned to meet its mission in the long term.
- Objective 4D:** Modernize operations, build systems infrastructure, and grow capacity to amplify impact and position the organization for long-term sustainability.

What Does Success Look Like?—Selected Example:

- By 2027, **100%** of RFA's project proposals are budgeted to increase thought leadership and research utilization; and support community engaged approaches and human-centered operations.