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Dear Friend of RFA,

Happy New Year!

On his first day in office, Mayor Michael Nutter vowed to cut Philadelphia's 45% dropout rate in half over the next five to seven years. If Philadelphia is to meet this ambitious goal, our high schools must do a better job of making school a place where adolescents want to be and of bringing students who have already dropped out back into school.

Nationally, small high schools have gained favor in many urban school districts as a strategy for reducing the dropout rate. In this eNews, we present some preliminary findings from RFA's two year study, [Going Small: Public/Private Collaboration in Restructuring High School Education in Philadelphia](#). Going Small examines Philadelphia's approach to creating and supporting small high schools, how the district works with partners in this effort, the perspectives of teachers, parents, and students on small high schools, and small schools' impact on student enrollment and performance. We also highlight recent research on small schools from other cities.

Jolley Bruce Christman, Ph.D. and Eva Gold, Ph.D. - Founders and Principals

RFA looks at Small High Schools

Since 2002, 26 small Philadelphia high schools have been newly created or significantly changed (see [Small High Schools Map](#)). These high schools are the focus of *Going Small*. RFA conducted case studies of 5 small high schools, our findings suggest that small high schools can eliminate the anonymity that often characterizes students' experience in large high schools and has been linked to high dropout rates. RFA's early research indicates that though the district has achieved a lot over the last 6 years, it is unclear whether the district will acquire adequate resources and develop the organizational flexibility to fully implement small high schools. ([link to latest research brief](#))

Additionally, in the most recent phase of research, RFA examined Philadelphia high school application trends. These trends show the enormity of the task of providing all students in Philadelphia with high quality high schools that they want to attend. In 2006, almost three quarters of eighth graders (73%) applied to at least one high school outside of their neighborhood. Of those, over half (56%) applied to a small high school, which suggests great interest in these schools. However, half of the eighth grade students (51%) who submitted a high school application were not admitted to any high school to which they applied. Only 28% of those who applied to any school were accepted to a small high school.

In effect, the majority of eighth students *do not* have a choice of high schools, therefore creating high quality neighborhood high

schools is critical. Some neighborhood high schools have been converted to small high schools - RFA will continue to follow whether small neighborhood high schools are a promising reform for chronically underperforming schools.

Research on Small High Schools

Other recent studies on small schools across the country indicate that if provided adequate flexibility, resources, and district support, small schools may help improve high school student outcomes. Small schools in New York City, Boston, and Baltimore are evaluated in three recent reports.

- [Policy Studies Associates'](#) evaluation of 75 small New Century High Schools in New York City found that they graduated 20% more students than New York City High schools generally.
- [The Center for Collaborative Education](#) concluded that Boston Pilot High Schools, which have autonomy over budget, curriculum, and staffing, have higher graduation rates and state assessment scores when compared to other non-exam Boston High Schools.
- In Baltimore, [The Urban Institute](#) found that new small "innovation" schools, which partnered with outside operators and chose their staff and curriculum, had better attendance and state assessment outcomes than neighborhood small schools (created from large high schools) and large comprehensive high schools.

Editor's Note

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