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Dear Friends of RFA,

Between 2005 and 2007, the Philadelphia School District created 25 new small high schools. As the district and the city prepare major education initiatives, Research for Action (RFA) seeks to contribute to the discussion by releasing a new study that analyzes Philadelphia's experiences with small schools and evaluates their potential to continue to boost student achievement.

Going Small: Progress and Challenges of Philadelphia's Small High Schools, and the executive summary, presents two major 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.



However, although 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." Our research 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 goes beyond other studies of small schools by comparing data across the three admissions categories for Philadelphia public schools: neighborhood open admission schools, and citywide and special admission schools, both of which have admissions criteria. This comparison yields more detail about how school structure - beyond size alone - can affect different measures of success. While the research highlights higher algebra passage, 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, which, along with large neighborhood schools, have the greatest number of students.

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 9th 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).

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

Research on Small High Schools

2009 has seen several other studies released that consider the benefits and complexities of using small schools as a tool for educational improvement. We recommend:

- The [Ontario Institute for Studies in Education](#) reviewed 57 empirical studies of school size effects and found strong evidence for the advantages of small schools. These effects were most powerful for "students who traditionally struggle at school and students from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds."
- An article published by [Voices in Urban Education](#) argues that central offices play a huge role in determining the success of small schools reforms, and that the next wave of research must focus on the ways in which central office administrators can better enable these reforms.
- A report by the [Consortium on Chicago School Research](#) describes the practices and characteristics of small high schools with better than expected freshman-year course performance. Three factors found common among these schools were: strong teacher professional communities, deep principal leadership, and strong teacher influence.
- An analysis by [West Ed](#) delves into data concerning the inaugural graduating classes at 14 of New York City's new small high schools. Attendance and 9th grade promotion rates were high at these schools and the majority of students were graduating. The report also identifies issues that would need to be addressed for New York's small school strategy to be scaled up and become sustainable.

Coming Soon from RFA

RFA continues its focus on Philadelphia high schools. Research shows that student success early in high school is one of the strongest indicators of being "on track" to graduate. In its upcoming report, *Transition to High School*, RFA takes an in-depth look at this crucial transition period by tackling three major topics:

- The process by which students are selected for admission at various high schools, and its implications for access and equity;
- The interventions that Philadelphia public high schools make available to students to support them during their ninth grade year;
- The elements of the Philadelphia system which particularly disadvantage ninth graders in large neighborhood high schools.

Editor's Note

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Editor
Jesse Gottschalk

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