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Dear Friends of RFA,

Neighborhood high schools are the lynchpin to Philadelphia's efforts to reduce dropout and improve graduation rates. But they operate in the context of school district policies that make it difficult for them to improve.

Our latest policy brief, [Context, Conditions, and Consequences: Freshman Year Transition in Philadelphia](#), shows that Philadelphia's high school admissions process exacerbates challenges faced by neighborhood high schools. It succinctly lays out some of the major flaws of the system, as well as the complex ways in which it specifically burdens neighborhood high schools. Key details from the report are below.



Reflecting our commitment to provide actionable research and recommendations to support real improvements in public education, our report delivers concrete, practical solutions - many of which can be completed in time for the 2010/11 school year.

We are excited about changes that the district is already considering in this area, but reform is a long process, and we intend to continue to provide the kind of research and recommendations needed to enact reforms to improve the education opportunities and outcomes of Philadelphia's youth.

Kate Shaw, Ph.D.
Executive Director

[Context, Conditions, and Consequences: Freshman Year Transition in Philadelphia](#)

RFA's [latest policy brief](#) identifies key challenges of Philadelphia's high school admissions process. The brief argues that this system places a direct burden on neighborhood high schools in ways that are often overlooked. Factors such as fluctuating student population, lack of student data for teachers and support staff, and low retention of faculty - all of which are already major problems for neighborhood high schools - are directly exacerbated by the slow admissions cycle and other factors of the selection process in Philadelphia.

The brief also raises questions about how much "choice" exists in a system where a majority of applicants are unlikely to be enrolled in *any* of their schools of choice, and it points out inequities in access to information about high school options which contribute to increased stratification among students attending schools in different admissions categories.

[Context, Conditions, and Consequences](#), which can be downloaded or ordered on our website, calls on the School District of Philadelphia to implement specific changes, many of which can be completed in time for the 2010/2011 school year. These recommendations include:

- Shorten the school choice and admissions timeline so that students and families know which schools they will be attending earlier.
- Ensure that student performance data arrives at neighborhood high schools well before school begins.
- Secure student and teacher stability so that leveling and rescheduling are avoided.
- Make neighborhood high schools more appealing and supportive work environments and create incentives to attract and retain high quality teachers in the 9th grade.
- Increase information available about Philadelphia high schools and the choice process.
- Maintain a focus on ways in which greater personalization can be incorporated into the ninth grade transition.

[Context, Conditions, and Consequences: Freshman Year Transition in Philadelphia](#) is the first in a series of briefs based on RFA's upcoming major report, *Transition to High School: School "Choice" and Freshman Year in Philadelphia*.

In the News

[Context, Conditions, and Consequences](#) was spotlighted in the online edition of the Philadelphia Public School Notebook ([Report: High school choice an illusion](#)).

The Philadelphia Inquirer featured an interview with School District of Philadelphia interim chief academic officer Pamela Brown on the District's response ([Study finds high school choice 'an illusion'](#)).

Editor's Note

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