

Highlight on: Research for Action

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Introduction

Frederick Douglass once said, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress." The same could be said for Research for Action (RFA), which in the past year has undergone significant changes in its governance, organization structure and strategic priorities. When RFA was conceived in 1992, its two founders, Eva Gold and Jolley Bruce Christman, envisioned an organization that would fill a void in the debate about long-term school reform efforts. These advocates-turned-PhDs saw the need for an organization that could conduct high-quality, relevant research that added expertise, built capacity and fostered collaboration among educators, students, community leaders and policymakers at the local, state and national levels. For 18 years, Gold and Christman nurtured and grew their organization through their dual management and research roles, and expanded the organization's internal capacity to conduct policy studies, formative evaluations and action research projects with youth organizing groups and others.

But after nearly two decades at the helm of RFA, Gold and

Christman saw an opportunity to bring about a new direction for the organization. They set into motion a deliberate and thoughtful succession plan that would span more than a year, that would engage the board of directors at a high level, and that embarked upon a national search for a leadership replacement. As it turned out, RFA didn't have to look far for that replacement. Kate Shaw, a former deputy secretary of postsecondary education at the Pennsylvania State Department of Education and professor at Temple University, was hired as RFA's first executive director in the fall of 2009.

Just 18 months have passed since Shaw assumed the leadership of RFA, yet the organization has undergone significant change and experienced remarkable progress. Shaw ushered in new strategic goals, doubled the organizational budget and shifted the structure of the organization. Shaw's leadership has launched RFA in a new direction, but what will it take to sustain, and even grow, the progress made? This article will examine the history, mission and strengths of RFA, outline the internal and external changes undertaken, and propose strategies to ensure that RFA has the sustainability to continue to impact education policy and practice in Philadelphia and nationwide.

Leadership Transition and Organizational Structure

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Organizational Structure

When in 2009 founders Gold and Christman stepped back from their leadership role at RFA and worked with the board of directors to create a more formal management structure for the organization, their thoughtful and organized succession plan culminated in a year-long search by the board for a new executive director. In addition to the board's high-level involvement, senior staff at RFA were engaged in the process of selecting their new leader. One senior member of the research staff sat on the search committee, while other senior staff members had the opportunity to meet two finalists during the interview process.

According to board member Debra Weiner, Shaw's appointment to RFA "was the most thoughtful succession planning that I have ever witnessed, and I have been in education for 41 years in many nonprofits and several government agencies." Shaw echoed this sentiment by explaining that she too was committed to ensuring that RFA was the right fit for her. She approached the interview and selection process with the mindset that she was not just being interviewed for the position, but that she was also interviewing RFA to ensure that her vision aligned with that of the board. That vision consisted of two main goals: increasing the amount of quantitative work that RFA produced to meet the market demand, and increasing the visibility of the work of RFA.

In the fall of 2009, Shaw was selected, based in part on her unique hybrid of skills and experiences in academia, research and the policy worlds, and the alignment of her vision with that of the board. According to Weiner, the deliberate transition plan resulted in Shaw being “the perfect person for the job.” It also ensured that Shaw would begin her new role with a strong relationship with RFA’s board, as they were fully invested and well versed in her vision for the future direction of the organization.

Based on our interviews, it is clear that Shaw has maintained a strong working relationship with RFA’s board. The board has recently appointed a new board chair: Constancia Warren, senior program director of the Academy for Educational Development. Warren’s professional role, as well as her role on the board, will help RFA position itself nationally and ultimately increase its visibility. In addition to Warren, there are 13 other members of the board of directors of RFA, whose positions span the gamut of the education field and who provide valuable experience and expertise to the strategic goals of the organization. RFA is in the process of expanding and diversifying its board membership to bring more perspectives and experiences to the leadership of the organization.

One change that Shaw and Warren have instituted is the creation of standing committees composed of members of the board. The committees, which include communications, marketing, finance and development,

are designed to engage the board at a strategic level and create buy-in and support as they assist with the attainment of RFA's strategic goals. Shaw has also created a set of key strategic goals for RFA and the board, which the group contemplated at a retreat in late February.

Shaw's role as the executive director is a departure from the first two decades of leadership at RFA. Her hiring, as well as the new, more hierarchical structure of the organization, implied a mandate for change within the organization. Christman and Gold historically took on dual roles—both serving as the principal managers of day-to-day operations of RFA, and leading projects in a research capacity. Shaw, on the other hand, focuses primarily on management of staff and projects, acts as the public face of the organization, and ensures that all organizational activity is in alignment with strategic goals. Her oversight includes a staff of 22 full-time employees, 17 of whom are members of the research staff. Gold continues to work full time as a senior research fellow, while Christman is semi-retired but still leads the occasional research projects for RFA. In addition, RFA contracts with consultants on project-by-project basis, and partners with local colleges and universities to provide undergraduate, graduate and doctorate-level students with internship and fellowship opportunities.

In her day-to-day management of operations, Shaw abides by the guiding principle that RFA can have a greater impact in K–16 educational reform, locally and at

the national level, if its research findings are made more accessible to policymakers, school districts and the general public. With that frame in mind, Shaw has instituted several changes in staffing and direction at RFA:

- **Staff development:**RFA is well known for its long-term qualitative studies, especially its ongoing inquiry into the reform efforts of the School District of Philadelphia. To complement RFA's deep roots in qualitative research, Shaw has increased RFA's ability to conduct mixed-method and quantitative research by hiring researchers with expertise in this discipline. It is Shaw's judgment that clients and funders are increasingly focusing on quantitative student outcomes as a means to better evaluate the effectiveness of educational policy and practice, so the ability to conduct these studies in-house will help the organization to stay relevant and in demand. She has also dramatically increased the size of the administrative staff with the addition of a full-time CFO, communications director, human resources manager and office manager. All of the administrative functions of the organization are designed to increase the professionalism and efficiency of RFA and to support the research staff.

During our interview, Shaw spoke frankly about her goals to continue to professionalize staff, expectations and functions of the organization.

- **Professional expectations:** To attract and retain talent within the organization, Shaw has increased salaries across the board. Additionally, she instituted a formal performance review system to rate all employees on their targets from the previous year, to note growth and to identify measurable goals for the coming year, with the intention of distributing merit raises in the summer to reward high-performing employees. In conjunction with the new performance review system, Shaw has encouraged all staff members to seek opportunities to develop their expertise in particular content areas with the goal of developing portfolios of work on some of the most critical education issues.

Shaw's goal of moving the organization toward a more formal, professional culture has not been met without resistance. One current RFA employee stated that prior to Shaw's arrival, RFA had a very family-oriented feel, and that Shaw does not necessarily fit in with that family culture.

Despite the occasional resistance, Shaw remains committed to her charge from the board: moving the organization forward by strengthening infrastructure, creating new policies, and holding employees to a professional set of expectations, always with the goal of impacting the field of education through research. In this regard, Shaw has laid a solid foundation by carving out a strong leadership role, setting high yet fair expectations

for all employees, demanding accountability and productivity, and ultimately rewarding staff for their efforts through pay raises and opportunities to further their expertise and professional goals.

Strategic Goals

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As RFA moves forward under Shaw's leadership, her strategic goals are in lockstep with the changes she has implemented at the organizational level.

Increasing RFA's profile through communications

Increasing the visibility of RFA and its work is a priority for both Shaw and the board. Shaw has clearly stated that RFA should not "produce research for research's sake," but should find ways to ensure that its body of work directly impacts policy. For Shaw, this goal is personal: She recalls several instances during her time as a deputy secretary when she had five minutes before a meeting to make decisions about which policies and changes to support. She believes that those five minutes could have been better spent if, for example, she had had a three-page brief from RFA that outlined the research and recommendations on a particular issue. Shaw has instituted the expectation that every report—regardless of length—be accompanied by a short executive summary. In

addition, RFA publishes occasional papers to brief lawmakers on emerging education issues. A recent publication, "Educational vouchers: Facts, figures and a summary of the research," examined vouchers as a school reform tool by compiling and translating existing research on the topic.

In November 2010, RFA launched a new and improved website. Visitors to the site can quickly learn more about RFA's activities and services, core research areas, and projects and publications. They can also find an updated mission statement that reflects the organization's goals to reach broader audiences and increase its national profile. Another critical component of the new website is the interactive blog, which features frequent postings of newspaper articles, announcements, and publications related to education, and invites users to share their thoughts on the issues. The blog is an important tool that RFA can use to keep readers engaged and to encourage visitors to frequent the site. Additionally, RFA has developed a social networking presence, with Facebook and Twitter pages and active followers. Finally, RFA publishes a regular e-newsletter distributed to several thousand contacts. The e-newsletter updates readers about upcoming presentations and publications, and the latest news from RFA. These journeys into new media are aimed at expanding RFA's presence and influence into previously unreached audiences, such as youth and students, parents, and advocates, as well as the more

traditional RFA audiences of academics and education policymakers and practitioners.

RFA has developed working relationships with members of the local and state media, and is regularly sought for comment on issues of school reform. One of the goals of RFA is to expand its reach through media to state- and nationwide media outlets, and to leverage that exposure to build the organization's reputation, reach and client base.

Broadening, diversifying and sustaining RFA's finances and development opportunities

Increasing RFA's profile goes hand-in-hand with increasing RFA's budget. According to Shaw, as the organization becomes more visible, it has the potential to attract more clients and funders. Considering the nature of the research, it has been difficult for RFA to maintain homogenous assets during a long period of time. The organization has grown and contracted at various points throughout its 20-year history. Right-sizing, in terms of both staff size and expertise as well as in funding sources, consists of what Shaw considers her three-pronged approach to building RFA's finance and development opportunities.

- **Attracting national-level funders:**RFA has received generous support from organizations with a mission

to improve urban education, such as the Annenberg Foundation, [Samuel S. Fels Fund](#), [Communities for Public Education Reform](#), Donors' Education Collaborative, [Ford Foundation](#), [Edward W. Hazen Foundation](#), [John S. & James L. Knight Foundation](#), [Charles Stewart Mott Foundation](#), [William Penn Foundation](#), [Surdna Foundation](#) and others. In 2010, RFA secured a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to "conduct research on the utility of a new set of educational assessments in math and literacy that are aligned to the Common Core State Standards and are being piloted across the country," explained Shaw. Continuing to grow and sustain national-level work like that of the Gates Foundation will help RFA to translate its experience to the national level, while still preserving its deep roots and expertise in the Philadelphia area.

- **Retooling the business model to include a robust quantitative research department:** Qualitative research—especially the long-term inquiries that tell the story of education reform in Philadelphia—has been the hallmark of RFA's work. But as Shaw identified in her strategic staffing decisions, there is an increasing emphasis in the worlds of research and academia on quantitative student outcomes. Funders, too, are increasingly seeking quantitative data to support research recommendations. To meet

that need, Shaw and her CFO are continuing to examine the current capabilities of staff as well as the budget to determine the most sustainable business model for RFA. Shaw does not rule out adding additional quantitative staff members in the future, if RFA's portfolio of projects requiring this research discipline continues to grow. Shaw emphasized that RFA will remain true, at least in part, to its roots of conducting detailed qualitative studies, which allows the organization to uncover nuance and context that quantitative research often can't detect, but she feels that RFA must adapt to the changing times and demands if its goal is to stay relevant and impactful.

- **Moving toward sustainability:**As RFA grows during this period of expansion, the capacity of staff has increased, and RFA is able to take on additional projects. Shaw continues to work to determine the best and most sustainable size of the organization and to develop the right structure to support it. For example, she has doubled the organizational budget and closed a \$350,000 deficit from the beginning of the fiscal year. Continuing to create financial stability and sustainability will be one of Shaw's greatest challenges going forward, as much of RFA's funding is restricted to specific projects. Additionally, RFA receives general operating support from funders. Balancing the mix of restricted and unrestricted funds will be one key to RFA's future sustainability.

Shaw has clearly signaled that finance and development are among her top priorities, and these critical areas of the organizational life of RFA have a firm place in her strategic goals. One of her strategies is to engage both the board of directors and all staff members in helping with development efforts. As part of the performance review process, each staff member at RFA was required to include a development goal for this year, and Shaw plans to hold each accountable to assist in bringing in work to the organization. Likewise, both by including finance and development as a standing committee of the board and including it as part of her strategic goals for consideration at the retreat, Shaw has made a statement that board membership should imply a certain level of responsibility for the health and well-being of the organization.

By adhering to its strategic goals and always acting in alignment with them, RFA is well- positioned to make an impact in the future. But how exactly can that impact be effectively measured?

Measurement of Social Impact

According to Shaw, measuring the social impact of RFA and the effectiveness of its research is often complicated. RFA collects a vast array of data to help it quantify the impact of its research. For example, the organization tracks how often it is cited in newspapers or journal articles, and it tracks the conferences and seminars where RFA researchers present their work. Moreover, it conducts

periodic surveys of its funders and clients to obtain their opinion on the impact of RFA, and recently, the organization has begun tracking web and blog traffic, as well as instances when RFA's language is being used to frame debates and discussions. Finally, according to Shaw, RFA notes when particular policies or practices are adjusted as a result of its research.

The results of RFA's data collection have often been published in its annual report, but are often shown as qualitative, rather than quantitative data. For example, RFA mentions that it was cited in newspapers, but not how many times. Collecting quantitative data about each report or research project would help RFA to measure its social impact. For example, the organization could list all the reports and provide the number of times that each one was cited in a newspaper or presented at a conference or seminar. By doing so, RFA would know which reports or topics get more attention, and from there, the organization could set new strategic goals: to allocate more communication resources to the research findings that are rarely cited, or perhaps to increase the number of projects and allot more funding to the topics that garner most attention.

Conclusion and Key Recommendations

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Overall, RFA has endured the test of time and has proven to be a strong and sustainable organization that has produced meaningful work over 18 years. RFA has successfully identified its niche market and is continually making changes and trying new things in order to remain a relevant contributor in the education field. However, the organization's recent change in leadership has proven to be an important opportunity for the organization to face its weaknesses and find proactive solutions to overcome them.

To continue this momentum, RFA needs a plan for growth. Under Shaw's leadership, we believe that RFA can find new successes and become a nationally recognized leader in using research to improve the city's, state's and nation's public education systems. Below, we highlight some key recommendations for RFA to consider in order to continue meeting its goals and experiencing long-term successes.

- **Diversify the board of directors:** Shaw currently maintains a strong relationship with RFA's board and is confident that they will help the organization reach the goals it has outlined. However, as RFA continues to grow and ultimately reach a national audience, the organization must better represent its local, state and national interests. As the current board members phase out of their allotted three- to six-year appointments, Shaw and the board chair should work to recruit board members with high profiles and

expertise in not only education, but also in communications, marketing, finance and development.

- **Continue to develop a strategic plan:** One of RFA's greatest successes has been its thoughtful succession planning process, which resulted in the hiring of a strong and motivated executive director. The same thoroughness and thoughtfulness should be applied to RFA's future planning. When asked about RFA's lack of a strategic plan, board member Debra Weiner said that sometimes writing plans is like "admiring a problem and not actually doing anything about it." While this may be true, given the changing nature of the research and policy worlds, Shaw's strategic goals, deliberated by the board at the retreat in February, will help to provide some context for RFA's future direction and help to forecast further changes in budgets and staffing plans.
- **Continue to increase visibility:** By hiring a communications director, improving its website, and increasing the accessibility of its research and policy briefs, RFA has moved in a positive direction in its goal to generate public interest. We suggest that RFA continue to raise its profile by looking for more opportunities to partner with nationally recognized organizations, as it did with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Developing partnerships with organizations such as Teach For America and KIPP

Charter Schools would allow RFA to attach its name to national projects and gain more attention. RFA should also continue to develop policy briefs and statements that are timely, relevant and accessible to policymakers. However, RFA must also ensure that its research is not only accessible, but impactful. We recommend that RFA develop an advocacy strategy to translate its research into actionable policy strategies.

- **Effectively measure impact:** During the course of our research, a recurring question was how RFA measures impact and success. Is impact measured by the amount of work RFA produces or how many contracts it secures? It is also helpful to track the number of media and journal mentions. RFA should also use data to make a stronger case that its work has significantly impacted education reform efforts. For example, RFA has begun to collect website and blog traffic and can quantify statistics about website activity. This type of data should be expanded to further reveal impact.
- **Diversify funding sources:** RFA has reached a place of fiscal stability in 2011, and should continue to build and develop existing relationships with key funders, as well as cultivate new development leads. As Shaw is well aware, relying on development alone is dangerous for the organization's growth and sustainability. With its new marketing strategy and

updated website, RFA should begin a fundraising campaign to receive unrestricted donations. This could be facilitated through its current website using PayPal, and would allow RFA to capitalize on its increased web traffic.

- **Further strengthen infrastructure:**With more visibility, more funds and more demand for services, RFA will need to continue to build and expand its infrastructure. Shaw seems up to the challenge, but it will be her role to motivate her board and her staff to follow suit. As Shaw continues to raise the bar for the staff, she needs to continue to find ways to build incentive, breed healthy competition and raise compensation..

With a strong organizational foundation, significant talent and expertise on staff, and a history of rigorous, high-quality research products, RFA seems to have the necessary tools to take advantage of important opportunities and to weather impending challenges. Shaw, too, is an important ingredient for RFA's future success. In her second full year at the helm, she has already ushered in dramatic changes and set a high bar for new expectations. Her relentless focus on sustainability—in both fiscal and human resources—and her focus on communications as a necessary component of the research and organizational prominence seem to be sound strategies for bolstering RFA's profile and contribution to the field of education. While RFA may

struggle to achieve a new balance under this new leadership structure and with the changing demands of the research community, it is clear that the struggle is in the pursuit of progress.

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