

## WRITING TO BE HEARD

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# Parents Speak Up and Out about Parents' Participation in Urban Public High Schools



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*A project of Research for Action in cooperation with Philadelphia Student Union  
as part of the Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform research and public  
awareness initiative.*



**RESEARCH for ACTION**

**November 2006**

## **Foreword**

*Research for Action (RFA) has worked with student members of Youth United for Change (YUC) and Philadelphia Student Union (PSU) for the past two and half years. Over that time, these young people have committed themselves to learning social science research methods and conducted a study of their changing schools. We think you will find their reports compelling; they give voice to students' lived experience at their high schools.*

*The motivation of these young people to be youth researchers stems from their activist commitment to make their high schools better places for all students. As youth researchers, their research is intended to support the YUC and PSU small schools campaigns at Kensington, Olney, and West Philadelphia High Schools.*

*Some of the achievements of these youth researchers are their willingness to do the hard work of learning new skills and completing the entire research process, including creating outstanding research products. Throughout, the youth researchers have developed their presentation skills as they spoke about their work in a range of settings, including a public action for their small schools campaigns, presentations to Teach for America teachers, a panel discussion for Bryn Mawr College education students, and a seminar with RFA research staff and board.*

*During the first year of the project (December 2004-May 2005), the youth researchers learned the skills of participant-observation and taking fieldnotes, and keeping reflective journals. Their fieldnotes and journals became the data for their first product, a graphic road map that illustrated the course of their small schools campaigns that year (see Appendix A). The youth researchers then attended the RFA Youth in Action summer research camp where they learned how to conduct interviews, focus groups and surveys, as well as do document searches using the internet. In the second year of the project, the youth researchers applied their new research skills to questions they posed about their changing schools. From September 2005 to May 2006, they read about small schools (see the Bibliography) and they gathered data (see Appendix B for the research*

*instruments that guided their data collection). In addition, they kept reflective journals. In August 2006 the youth researchers attended an RFA Writing to be Heard Institute, where they worked as an interpretive community, analyzing their data individually, in school teams and across teams, and turning their research into written products. Fall 2006 was devoted to revision, and finalizing their reports.*

*RFA staff served as guides, teachers and mentors throughout this project. Marsha Pincus, a Philadelphia Writing Project Teacher-Consultant and high school English teacher, helped design and lead the Writing to be Heard summer institute. The principals of the three new small Kensington schools, Olney 705 and West Philadelphia welcomed the students as researchers. The teachers at the Kensington small schools and Olney 705 were generous in their support of the data collection. Parents of PSU members openly shared their experiences and beliefs with the youth researchers. The adult chapter organizers worked with the youth researchers and RFA to determine important audiences for the youth research and to help formulate recommendations based upon the research findings.*

*As school reformers, there is much to learn from young people about their learning environments. We believe these reports demonstrate the powerful contributions young people can make to their high school communities when they engage in rigorous and systematic investigations of their schools and are surrounded by a community of caring and concerned adults committed to urban youth and school improvement. The findings in these reports are the conclusions of the youth researchers themselves. They are now fully ready for the next phase of their work-- sharing their research findings with a wide range of audiences concerned about the future of urban public high schools. We welcome these youth researchers to the broader research community concerned with social justice and high school transformation.*

*— Eva Gold, Kristine Lewis, Gretchen Suess,  
Cheryl Jones-Walker, Sonia Rosen*

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Research for Action Youth Researcher WRITING TO BE HEARD Report Series:

- *Building Respectful Communities—Kensington Students Examine Adult-Student Relationships in their New Small Schools*
- *What Olney Teachers Say about Their Students and School*
- *Parents Speak Up and Out About Parent Participation in Urban Public High Schools*

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## **SCHOOL BACKGROUND**

**W**est Philadelphia High school is located on the 4700 block of Walnut Street. The school was built in 1911 for co-educational learning although it was divided into two parts. One side was for boys and the other was for girls including separate gymnasiums, auditoriums, and lunch rooms -- these two sides

*The cost of an urban  
public high school  
uniform in  
Philadelphia - \$60.*

*The cost of neces-  
sary supplies needed  
to plan for success  
via learning with  
books, paper, pen-  
cils, and pens - \$25.*

*The pride and joy you  
feel as you watch  
your child cross the  
stage at graduation  
- priceless.*

were connected by a bridge. Today, West is co-ed and the total enrollment for the school in the 2005-2006 school year was 1,070 students with 98% Black, 1% Hispanic, .5% White, .5% Asian and .2% of other racial backgrounds. Eighty percent of the student body is from low-income families.<sup>1</sup>

Given that the school is almost 100 years old the facilities of the high school look worn out. West is in need of the brand new building that has been promised by the School District. Currently, the preferred plan is to split the high school into multiple small schools. The themes that have been decided on by the Sustainability Circle (a group of parents, community leaders, academics, teachers and students who have met together for one year) are Urban Studies, Business and Technology, Auto, and Creative and Performing Arts. These themes are still being debated upon by the community and School District of Philadelphia. The larger school goal is to create a community where everybody knows each other; this personal-

ization will be best for the learning process. Many of the current teachers at West have been teaching there for many years but do not really know the students or their families.

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the schools comes from: *the School District of Philadelphia School Profiles, 2005-2006.*

West has had many different projects and organizations working inside of the school, including the Philadelphia Student Union (PSU). PSU, a youth-led organization, is committed to making changes in the school and communities of its members.

### **THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND DATA COLLECTION**

When four PSU students from West Philadelphia High School joined a non-profit organization called Research for Action, they came together and started a project which they thought could really help to improve urban public high schools and parent participation. Although the project had started off with four students learning to take field notes, all of the students were not able to complete the project to the end. However, they were graced with the help of another youth who was dedicated to helping complete the project when the others could not stay to the end. With the help of all we were able to collect good data that was an important part of this research. The work of all was greatly appreciated!

The data we gathered is about what parents think good parent participation should look like. We conducted lengthy surveys with thirteen parents of high school students from two of the PSU chapters in West Philadelphia. We also interviewed seven of those parents in order to learn more about their responses. We collected our data from April- May 2006. We conducted our surveys and interviews on the phone at the Research for Action offices and from our homes throughout the week during various times of the day.

Specifically, we asked parents what their own participation looked like and what prevented them from participating. We did this research so people can see how schools treat parents and how parents participate and why sometimes things can get in the way. Also, when we ask questions about parent participation, we can use the findings to help us understand the barriers and make parent participation in urban high schools much better.

We chose parents from PSU because we had the easiest access to them. Also, we chose them because we wanted to talk to parents that had children who are active in a school-based organization. We received contact information for the parents of 27 students of PSU. From the parents surveyed, we were able to conduct in-depth interviews with only 7 parents for several reasons. Coordinating our schedules was the main barrier. Sometimes, we would call a parent and they were not there or were busy. We would reschedule and still would not get in contact. Some parents did not want to be interviewed

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Our research with parents of high school students in West Philadelphia helped us to gain insight into the ways in which some parents feel about what good parent participation looks like in an urban public high school. The majority of the parents would like to be more involved in their child's public high school; however, sometimes there were things that kept them from doing so. Many people assume that if parents don't come to a meeting or a sports game that they do not care about their child, but this, in most cases, is completely wrong. If parents do not participate in this manner, there are four possible reasons why: 1) parents do not receive information far enough in advance to adjust their schedules; 2) parents do not have the time to do some activities or meetings because they have multiple responsibilities; 3) possible cultural barriers make it difficult for some parents to be involved; and 4) parent participation looks different in high school than in elementary and middle schools.

Firstly, even if parents believe that high school students need their parents to be involved in their school lives, they cannot be if they do not receive information from the school. We found in our surveys and interviews with parents that some of them were irritated when they received information a day or two before an event was going to happen. Parents described

two types of information that they receive: general and important. General information is information that involves a class or an event in the school. Important information is information that involves the individual child.

For example, one concerned father described receiving general information about a party, trip, or a meeting the day before the event, which made it difficult for him to participate or attend because he had no time to think about it and/or get his finances together. In addition, he related that he had not heard about other crucial meetings concerning the school.

More importantly, this father was not informed about something serious that happened to his daughter while at school. He told this following story:

*There was an instance in her classroom. This guy was fooling on her, one of the students in there, right? And I didn't hear about this until weeks later from her. It could have really gotten out of hand. I said, you should have been told me this. I would been on the bust from the beginning, from the start. And then, she says the teacher knew about it. She told the teacher and she wound up having to fight this guy in the class because it happened more than once. So he {the teacher} never even told the principal. He never even said nothing to the guy. He never even called me about it, so I don't know if the teachers are cuckoo as the students. You know what I mean? But see if I go up there, I'm not going with a smile on my face.*

*When something happened to his daughter this father was not informed about this important information, so when he does go up to the school, he will have negative feelings about the school.*

When something happened to his daughter this father was not informed about this important information, so when he does go up to the school, he will have negative feelings about the school.



Secondly, scheduling conflicts also create a barrier that reduces some parents' participation in their child's school. The parents we spoke to indicated that they had multiple responsibilities such as work, church events, and coaching that decreased the amount of involvement in their high school students' school lives. For instance, a mother of a junior told us that she participates as her schedule and time will allow. She would like to do more, but has a 9 to 5 job and is often out of town. Another mother of a sophomore also works and is active in her church, which takes up a lot of her spare time and limits her participation.

Thirdly, another issue that was a barrier to good parent participation was differences in cultures between families and schools. A concerned parent reported:

*What I would like to see... one school and teacher and my child to cooperate and to be patient with them, especially with we who are African. The culture is different and yours is different and ours is different celebration. Sometimes a student and the teacher, they can't take consideration because of the language barrier. Sometimes when they speak, they mock at them so they can be a problem. The student or the teacher consider it a problem because we are African.*

And lastly, just because a parent misses a meeting or two, does not mean that they do not participate in their children's schooling in other ways as some people may assume. When asked if parent participation looks different, or should be different, between elementary, middle, and high school, two parents had different thoughts but both believed it does look different. Two parents shared that when children get into higher grades that students are faced with more difficult and serious issues. One said,

*Once the child gets into a higher grade... it {parent participation} probably becomes more important because they're facing more difficulties in the schools and their*

*subjects, where they may have a problem.... And, naturally as children get older there are different types of concerns and problems that they themselves as teenagers might have, which should make you want to be more involved and active in your child's participation in school.*

Similarly, another parent responded,

*Of course I think {parent participation} should be different because {the students are} at different ages. Um...when kids are little and everything, they're fun and learning. When they're older, you have to be more serious, talk more about serious things and self-responsibility, and um, stuff like that.*

The majority of the parents that we surveyed felt as though they know where and what their child(ren) are doing in their everyday school life. Nine of 13 parents said they regularly ask their child(ren) about their school day. About 2/3 of the parents surveyed (8 out of 13) felt they know when their children are doing what they are supposed to, or not supposed to, in their high school classes.

Our research asserts that parents want to participate in meaningful ways. However, there are barriers that sometimes prevent them from participating formally in the things that go on in the school itself. Even though parents want to be involved in their child's school, some are not in any formal way. They may, however, be involved through informal conversations or discussions in the home. Eleven of 13 parents agreed or strongly agreed that parents should be regularly involved in their high school's Home & School Association, but only five stated that they are actually very involved. Less than half of the 13 parents said they regularly attend high school events such as Report Card Days, talent shows, public meetings about the school, Home & School events, etc. Only 1 of the 13 parents involved in this research 'strongly agreed', and only 6 'agreed', that they regularly attend these types of high school

events. However, the majority of the parents (10 of 13) wish they were MORE involved in their child's school. One said,

*I like participating in those things {like Report Card Night, etc.} at my child's school... It gives me insight on what's going on and makes me feel better when I'm not there or not, you know, it makes me worry less about what the surroundings are.*

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asserts that  
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ways.*

Teachers, their children, and even other parents need to be aware of parents' multiple responsibilities so they do not assume that parents do not care. Most of the parents we surveyed think students should learn to be independent in high school, but they also believe students need parents involved in their lives. Twelve out of the 13 parents agreed or strongly agreed that high school students should learn to be independent and 10 answered that students need their parents to be involved. Schools should also be more flexible in their scheduling to accommodate parents' various responsibilities and rethink how parents can be involved in their children's schooling and education outside of the formal school events. One parent made the following recommendation that takes both information and their work schedules into consideration:

*I think everything is really a matter of timing and also communication. I think that parents need to given enough time to so that they can make their schedules built around their particular Home and School Association meeting or parent-teacher meeting. If they had enough time to be able to schedule, I think that might help make more parents {participate}.*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

<b>Recommendations to:</b>	<b>The Recommendations</b>
<b>THE DISTRICT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ten parents agree or strongly agree that parents should have a say in what decisions are made about their public high school. The District should allow the high school to make a site council that involves parents in decision-making.</li><li>• The District should have professional development on how to treat parents with respect.</li><li>• The District should seek input/feedback from parents, teachers, and students on how parents are treated and see when parents are available for meetings.</li><li>• The District should reduce class/school size, so teachers and staff can get to know students and families better.</li><li>• The District should enable teachers to see fewer students so that teachers have time to get important information to the parents. Two solutions to this are to add more teachers or go back to block rosters. Concerns about the block rosters are classes not being interesting and issues about credits. These concerns should be addressed if the block roster is to happen.</li></ul>
<b>SCHOOLS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The school should assign someone to show parents where to go, how to get information, etc. This can be done by creating a parent welcome desk with easy access.</li><li>• The school should get all information regarding students to families on time.</li><li>• The school should welcome volunteers to help get information out and send out monthly calendars, etc.</li></ul>

<b>Recommendations to:</b>	<b>The Recommendations</b>
<b>SCHOOLS</b> <i>continued</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The school should hold events at varying times around the parents' obligations.</li><li>• The school should coordinate high school "buddies" to be with children during parent-related events. These events can also offer students credits as an extra incentive.</li></ul>
<b>PARENTS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Parents should communicate with each other about the school by having formal and informal meetings to make changes in the school.</li><li>• The parents should communicate with their children and those who are in contact with them such as teachers, staff, and students.</li><li>• Parents should contact the District if school access is limited /poor or if teachers are not communicating.</li><li>• Parents should let teachers know if something is affecting the student.</li></ul>
<b>STUDENTS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students should stay in communication with parents or other caring adults.</li></ul>
<b>STUDENT UNION CHAPTER</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The chapter should talk to parents of new members about getting involved with meetings and events concerning the school and their children.</li><li>• The chapter should encourage members to talk to their parents about the issues about the school.</li><li>• The chapter should ask members how they engage with their parents and get ideas about how to improve parent engagement in school.</li></ul>

## APPENDIX A

**WEST/SOUTHWEST PHILADELPHIA PARENT SURVEY**  
(for parents of public high school students in West/Southwest Philadelphia)

Hi, are Mr. /Mrs. .... There?

*My name is ..... And I'm a student at West Philadelphia High School and a youth researcher with Research for Action. We are conducting a research project on parent participation in urban high schools. I got your name and number from the Philadelphia Student Union. We are doing a survey to gain important information about parents' beliefs about what strong parent participation should look like in an urban public high school.*

*We have support from our principal and Mr. Paul Vallas to conduct this research. The survey will take about 5 to 7 minutes and your responses will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. On this survey, you will be asked to provide factual information about yourself and your perceptions about parent participation in high school.*

*Will you agree to take the survey? (If yes) conduct survey. (If no) Would it be possible to conduct the survey at another time because we would really like your input?*

### ABOUT PARENT PARTICIPATION

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about parent participation in high school? Please indicate your most appropriate response for each item where 1=strongly agree and 5=strongly disagree.

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>				<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
1. Students should learn to be independent during their high school years.	①	②	③	④	⑤
2. Parents need to support their children and be involved in their high school so that the child(ren) can get a good education and become whatever they choose to be in life.	①	②	③	④	⑤
3. My child(ren) attends a good public high school.	①	②	③	④	⑤
4. I know my child(ren)'s teachers well and have a good line of communication with them.	①	②	③	④	⑤
5. I regularly ask my child(ren) about his or her days at school.	①	②	③	④	⑤
6. Parents should be actively involved in their high school's Home & School Association.	①	②	③	④	⑤
7. I am very involved in my high school's Home & School Association.	①	②	③	④	⑤
8. I know when my child(ren) are doing what they are supposed to, or not supposed to, in their high school classes.	①	②	③	④	⑤
9. Parents are involved and have a strong presence at my neighborhood high school.	①	②	③	④	⑤
10. I wish I were more involved in my child(ren)'s public high school.	①	②	③	④	⑤

## ***Parents Speak Up and Out about Parent Participation in Urban Public High Schools***

	<i>Strongly Agree</i>			
11. Parents should have a say in what decisions are made about their public high school (such as decisions about curriculum, teacher and principal hiring, programs open to the community, etc.)	①	②	③	④
12. Parents who aren't actively involved in their child(ren)'s high school just don't care.	①	②	③	④
13. I regularly attend high school events (Report Card Days, talent shows, public meetings about the school, Home & School events, etc.)	①	②	③	④
14. My child(ren)'s public high schools welcome parent involvement.	①	②	③	④
15. My child(ren) want me to be more involved in their high school and education.	①	②	③	④
16. Parents should be in regular communication with the Principal.	①	②	③	④
17. Parents should be in regular communication with teachers.	①	②	③	④
18. Parents should be in regular communication with the high school's Community Coordinator.	①	②	③	④
19. Parents should be in regular communication with School District Officials	①	②	③	④
20. High school students do not need their parents to be very involved in their lives.	①	②	③	④
21. My high school aged child(ren) are responsible for themselves and what they need to do for school.	①	②	③	④
22. I don't need to worry that my child(ren) will fall through the cracks.	①	②	③	④
23. Parents can't change anything about the high school.	①	②	③	④
24. My child(ren)'s high school education could be improved.	①	②	③	④

### **GENERAL INFORMATION**

How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

How many children do you have in each of the following  
grades in West/Southwest public schools?

9th \_\_\_\_

10th \_\_\_\_

11th \_\_\_\_

12th \_\_\_\_

Which Philadelphia high school(s) have your child(ren) attended? (list all that apply)

☐ West Philadelphia HS    ☐ University City HS  
☐ Sayre HS    ☐ Bartram HS    ☐ Overbrook HS

Do your children attend their neighborhood high school in West Philadelphia?

☐ Yes    ☐ No

Do you have any children in private, parochial, or charter high schools?

☐ Yes    ☐ No

Why are these children not in public school?

How long have you lived in West Philadelphia?

☐ < 1 year    ☐ 1 – 3 yrs    ☐ 4 – 7 yrs  
☐ 8 – 10 yrs    ☐ 10 – 15 yrs    ☐ 16 yrs +

Please list below anything you are engaged in (such as work, community association responsibilities, church events, etc) that prevent you from participating in your child(ren)'s high school (during or after school hours)?

What is your gender?

☐ Male    ☐ Female

What is your age?

☐ under 30    ☐ 31 – 35    ☐ 36 – 40  
☐ 41 – 45    ☐ 46 – 50    ☐ 51 +

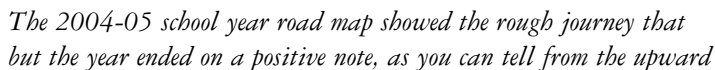
What is your ethnic background? Please identify: \_\_\_\_\_

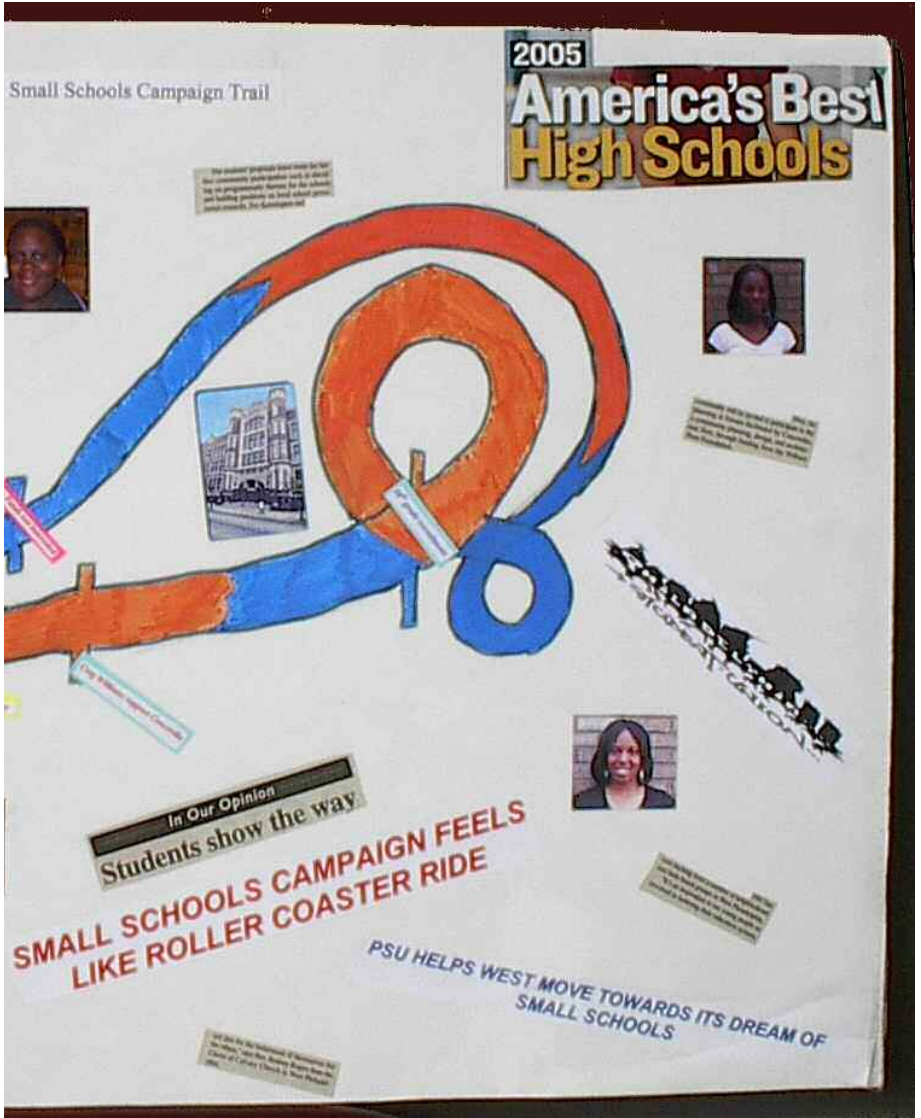


**WEST PHILADELPHIA PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS  
PARENT PARTICIPATION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

We appreciate the opportunity to talk with you about parent participation in urban public high schools. We are interested in learning about your perspectives on what strong parent participation should look like in West/Southwest Philadelphia public high schools. The insights that you share with us will remain confidential, meaning we will not use your name in anything we produce, so we ask you to please speak honestly. We hope to share the findings from this research with you, the Home & School Associations, the principals of the public neighborhood high schools, and others who might be interested. Do you have any questions before we start? May we record the interview for accuracy only?

1. What do you think good parent participation looks like in an urban high school?
2. Do you participate regularly in your child's high school? Such as attending Report Card Night, Home & School Events, or different programs at your child's high school (such as a talent show)? What do you participate in at the high school? Why or why not?
3. Would you like to do more things inside your child's high school or connected with the high school? Is there anything that stops you from participating?
4. What would you like to see happen that would improve parent participation in your child's high school?
5. Did your participation change once your child(ren) got into high school? If so, how did it change? Why did it change?
6. Do you think that parent participation looks different, or should be different, between elementary, middle, and high school? If so, how? Why? If not, why not?





the students of PSU experienced. There were many ups and down that year, pointing arrow at the end of the road.

## APPENDIX C

### Reflections by Youth on the Project

*The youth researchers have had opportunities for reflection on their work with RFA throughout the project: through journal writing, peer feedback, end of meeting evaluations, and public forums. Below, you will see some of their comments in which they assess the opportunity the project offered to contribute to improving their schools, and to improving on their academic skills. Overall, they conveyed that the experience of working individually and collectively to research and write was an important experience – larger and different from anything they had previously undertaken.*

#### About the experience:

“This is something new. It’s like I’ve never been through anything like this. I never really did research and stuff like this before. So just doing research to help my school and people at my school is just a good experience.”

“The journal was important to me because like we would write in our journal and then our mentors would reflect back on the words that we say--like they give a personal note.”

“Being a youth worker makes me proud of what I accomplished and proud of myself for what I have done. This also makes me proud of my peers to show we are leaders of today and will be tomorrow if we continue to do the right thing.”

#### Influence on school work:

“I’ve learned a lot from this writing. I became a better writer and my English teacher told me I got better. That’s how I knew.”

“[My English teacher] says I was a pretty good writer...but since I been doing this research and all this writing it seems like my writing has skyrocketed as part of the skills of learning how to write longer and just to write better.”

I learned that “now’s the time when you know you all have to start doing [multiple drafts] and it’s actually better for me to proof read something and then when I finish proof reading it to then go into my rough draft instead of just going to the final

draft off the bat.” My teacher said “when I was writing my report on *The Crucible*...oh my gosh...your draft is so good, and I did like five of them. That’s all I kept thinking about was [people] telling me you’re going to start needing to do drafts.”

“I now observe everything around me and form my own opinions and act on them too. Participating in the research program helped me learn to do that. I actually improved my English skills in paragraph writing. When the honors teacher asks me to do an essay I now know how to use evidence or examples to back up my point.”

“I’m used to writing to myself or a close friend or a teacher, but when you have to write like past that, it’s harder because you got to make sense of it, and you got to make sense so that other people will know besides yourself. It’s a lot of corrections and all that [we] had to do. It was hard work but it paid off...I learned that I have to push myself and stop staying in my safe zone.”

#### **Speaking out:**

“I had to push myself to speak in front of everyone and then it made me feel like...the topic was really important, not only to us but to other people out there because they really were interested in knowing what we wanted to talk about so I had to dig deep and be brave enough to just do it and just say what I had to say and so I did and I was proud of myself for doing it.”

#### **Working as a team:**

“I learned how to work as a team. Because when I first came, I knew that that would be one of my problems. I never worked as a team, I work by myself. It’s just like playing a sport. If you think you’re the team then you’re going to go nowhere. Same with the project: If you don’t let people share their ideas and experiences, then it’s just not going to work.”

“When I looked at [the research report] I didn’t think I wrote all that. And my peers around me did a lot of stuff and so like when it all comes together and you see the final product, it’s crazy...in a good way!”

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*Philadelphia Student Union's mission is to assist Philadelphia public high school students in organizing to transform public schools into places where all young people receive a high quality education, and to help young people across schools and communities connect their issues to build power locally and regionally.*