Relationships First:
Scaling up a multi-tiered schoolwide restorative approach in the School District of Philadelphia

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A. SIGNIFICANCE

The School District of Philadelphia (SDP), in partnership with Research for Action, (RFA), requests $3,973,175 for a five-year Early-Phase EIR project that meets **Absolute Priorities 1 and 4** and **Competitive Preference Priorities 1 and 2**. The project will scale up and rigorously evaluate *Relationships First* (RF), a multi-tiered school-wide restorative practices model, in SDP. RF is a field-initiated approach that 1) builds on existing restorative-practices and multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) approaches, and 2) addresses the shortcomings prior research has identified in these existing approaches. This project will contribute insights about the implementation and impacts of an innovative approach that integrates a promising strategy, restorative practices, within an evidence-based school-wide interventions framework, MTSS. The project will involve 40,000 K-12 students in 72 SDP schools. A majority of students will be high-need, defined as those whose personal and/or familial circumstances have been negatively impacted by historical marginalization, structural racism, and/or economic inequity. In the SDP, most high-need students are from low-income backgrounds; are Black or Latinx; have been identified as having disabilities; and/or are English language learners.

RF is a multi-tiered, schoolwide restorative model that addresses disciplinary, academic, and social-emotional outcomes for K-12 students by fundamentally shifting relationships among and between adults and students in schools. It was designed and is supported by SDP's Office of School Climate and Culture, and is proving to be effective, efficient, and sustainable in SDP's challenging urban context. RF has expanded fast in SDP serving over 110 thousand students in 212 district operated schools. The first cohort of 55 elementary, middle, and high schools implemented RF in SY2021-22, and the second cohort of 18 schools are preparing to implement RF in fall 2022. RF will be rolled out to additional 18 schools in each of the first four project years

SY2023-24 through SY2026-27. This project will contribute insights about the scalability of tiered restorative programs, and their capacity to improve engagement, academic achievement, and school climate, to strengthen students' social-emotional skills, and to reduce behavioral incidents and the use of punitive disciplinary practices.

Research demonstrates that disengagement at school results in part from school environments young people perceive as hostile or uncaring (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013; Hendron & Kearney, 2016; Yeide & Kobrin, 2009), and leads to poor academic and social outcomes (Rosenbaum, 2018; Anyon et al., 2016; Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016; Balfanz et al., 2014). Punitive disciplinary practices drive such disengagement, and Black and Latinx students, English language learners, and students with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by such practices (Gray et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2014; Losen & Martinez, 2013). This disproportionate impact contributes to long-standing racial inequities in student outcomes that have been exacerbated by COVID-19 (Whitley, Beauchamp, & Brown, 2021; Welsh, 2022).

In response to these trends, schools are turning to restorative practices, a broad term that refers to any of a number of non-punitive approaches to behavior management and prevention of and response to harm. Most school-based restorative programs use core components like circle-based conversations and conferences. While the literature in this area is nascent, it associates restorative practices in schools with decreases in suspensions and disciplinary referrals and disciplinary disparities based on race and socio-economic status; improved test scores and attendance; and improved relationships (Katic, Alba, & Johnson, 2020; Fronius et al., 2019; Augustine et al, 2018; Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2016; Hashim, Strunk, & Dhaliwal, 2018; Anyon et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2016). Recent studies using causal designs provide promising results and lessons for innovators. An RCT study of the implementation and

impacts of a widely used restorative practices program in the Pittsburgh Public Schools revealed improved relationships and reduced suspensions and racial inequities (Augustine, et al., 2018). The researchers found, however, that impact was limited by inconsistent teacher buy-in, student engagement, and a lack of systems-level change from the restorative approach they studied.

Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is a process for organizing academic and behavioral supports by tiers of intensity. Tier I programs reach all students. Tier II interventions are targeted to groups not responding to Tier I programming. Tier III supports are provided to individual students with extraordinary challenges. Decisions about programming at each tier are based on student data, and implementation is fine-tuned over time. MTSS is used in SDP and other districts and shown to improve behavior, achievement, and attendance (Bradshaw, Pas, Debnam, & Johnson, 2021; Scott, Gage, Hirn, Lingo, & Burt, 2019; Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Epstein et al., 2008; Sugai & Horner, 2006). However, recent research finds mixed results from models that focus on student behavior over relationships (Condliffe et al., 2022).

The proposed project focuses on an innovative, replicable model developed within the School District of Philadelphia that responds to the best available research by combining: 1) a restorative practices model that focuses on racial equity, acknowledging trauma, adult and student buy-in, youth leadership, and systems change, with 2) a relationships-focused approach to MTSS that offers an alternative to behavior-focused models. Because of its responsiveness to lessons from research and practice, and because it leverages MTSS, we anticipate this project will produce the largest impacts of any restorative practices intervention to date.

B. QUALITY OF PROJECT DESIGN

B.1. Underlying Conceptual Framework. The conceptual framework for this project posits that MTSS can best support improvements in school climate and student outcomes when

combined with the tools for transforming relationships and systems, and that RF provides the tools for this transformation. Several bodies of literature inform this framework: 1) classic relational schema theory; 2) literature identifying the elements of restorative-practice approaches critical to lasting school transformation; and 3) the literature on change processes in schools.

Relational schema theory holds that frequent interactions within a given context are internalized and, over time, reified into tacit roles and expectations. Repeated interactions in schools inform the social scripts that govern who adults and students believe they are in school, and how they assume others will respond to them (Baldwin, 1992). In many urban schools, students' and adults' contextual relational schemas are shaped by repeated negative experiences, including punitive discipline, hostility, and racial bias (Ansely, Houchins, & Varjas, 2019; Balfanz et al., 2014; Calefati, Purcell, & Graham, 2019; Marchbanks et al., 2015; Losen, Hodson, Ee, & Martinez, 2015; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Skiba, Arredondo, & Rausch, 2014). From a physiological perspective, these experiences lead to activation of the limbic system instead of prefrontal cortical arousal that supports learning and prosocial behavior (Greenberg, 2006; Perry & Pollard, 1998; Walkley & Cox, 2013). From a psychological perspective, they create relational schemas of distrust, defensiveness, and skepticism about one's ability to elicit positive feedback. From a practical perspective, this combination of limbic over-activation and negative interactions is a self-reinforcing phenomenon that makes it difficult for both adults and students to engage in the work of teaching and learning.

The second body of research that informs our conceptual framework focuses on restorative practices. This literature explores its roots in indigenous communities (Davis, 2019; Johnstone & Van Ness, 2013), and its benefits to individuals' and communities' functioning and well-being (Bazemore, 1998; Beven et al., 2005; Davis, 2019; Strang & Braithwhite, 2001).

While each of these perspectives informs the RF model, our framework draws most specifically on recent research that identifies the following elements of restorative approaches most critical to lasting systems- level transformation, all of which are included in RF's model: 1) focus on equity; 2) acknowledgment of trauma; 3) intentional shifting of implementer beliefs; 4) honoring the indigenous roots of restorative justice and community cultural knowledge; 5) sustained, supported community building at Tier 1; 6) cultivation of school leader ownership and buy-in; 7) empowerment of youth; 8) codified implementation process that provides structure while allowing for individual adaptation; and 9) allocated time (Fronius, et al., 2019; Martinez, Villegas, Hassoun Ayoub, Jensen, & Miller, 2022; Mustain, Cervantes, & Lee, 2021).

These findings from restorative practices research are underscored by the literature on change in schools. While restorative practices demonstrate promise for mending social bonds, this research reminds us that far more is required to shift school culture in a sustainable fashion. Scholars have long underscored the complexities of school-level change initiatives, and the critical role of individual implementers (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976; Datnow & Castellano, 2000). More recent research highlights the critical role of both teacher buy-in and principal leadership (Grissom, Egalite, Lindsay, 2021; Leithwood, Lewis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). This highlights the need for a thoughtful implementation process that emphasizes building ownership and engagement of all stakeholders.

Relationships First (RF) comes in direct answer to these key research findings. RF actively targets students' and adults' relational schemas, in part through supported discussions around racial equity and trauma, the key factors contributing to distrust in urban schools. For example, the semi-structured Community-Building Circle (CBC) protocol (described below) reshapes teachers' perspectives regarding "difficult" students by integrating new information

about their strengths, backgrounds, and challenges. In turn, “difficult” students develop a new view of the teacher and peers as people with feelings and thoughts who do not intend them harm. As a result, students and adults build empathy, confidence, and a gradual shift in their relational schema. RF facilitates this with conversational protocols and procedures that scaffold open, respectful discussions; build authentic connections; and provide explicit modeling and regular practice of social-emotional skills. Through these protocols, RF facilitates individual change and social-emotional growth, but also improvements in the functioning of groups--including classrooms, staff teams, and groups or individuals experiencing conflict or difficulty.

RF embeds CBCs and other core activities (described below) within the larger frame of a comprehensive, multi-tiered program that aims not only for improvement of individual relationships, but systems-level transformation. RF coaches work with school teams to support implementation of RF as well as their implementation of the MTSS framework. This includes training on the use of an RF-based MTSS meeting agenda (Appendix J-1). MTSS implementation is also supported in SDP by district training and resources.

Table 1. Project Goals, Activities and Outcomes

Objectives	**Outcomes/Targets**
Goal 1: Build Capacity of schools to implement the RF program with fidelity, within the framework of MTSS	
1.1. Identify a RF team in each school 1.2. District RF team trains each school's RF team members (administrators, lead teachers, and support staff) on full implementation scope of RF sequence (Tier I, II and III) 1.3. Assist each participating school to integrate RF in their school improvement plan 1.4. Improve schools' implementation of core RF activities in Tier I, II, and III in response to implementation monitoring information 1.5. School RF teams train teachers and youth leaders in RF approaches 1.6 District MTSS team and RF coaches assist schools in integrating RF with MTSS process	1.1.a. RF teams are formed at 100% of participating schools 1.2.a. 100% of new RF teams receive a total of 30 hours of training before or during the first year of RF implementation 1.3.a. 100% of new RF schools integrate RF practices in their school improvement plan 1.4.a. District RF team monitors RF implementation in 100% of new and continuing RF schools 1.5.a. 90% teachers and youth leaders participate in RF training provided by school RF teams 1.6.a. 100% of participating schools’ leadership and RF teams receive training and coaching around integrating RF into comprehensive MTSS process

Objectives	Outcomes/Targets
Goal 2. Through on-going support by district RF team, school RF teams will implement Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III activities with high fidelity at their schools	
2.1. Teachers implement Tier I CBC in their classroom 2.2. School RF teams implement Tier I ADC at their schools 2.3. School RF team implement Tier II (HHC) and Tier III (WRC and COSA) activities as needed 2.4. Student leaders co-lead RF activities at all Tier I, II, and III levels	2.1.a. 80% of teachers implement CBCs for at least 45 minutes every week 2.2.a. 80% schools implement ADCs every week 2.3.a. 100% of schools fully implementing Tier I CBCs move to next sequence by implementing Tier II and Tier III activities 2.4.a. Youth leaders co-lead 50% or more of Tier I, II, and III activities
Goal 3. Improve student, teacher, staff and parent perceptions of school climate and equity	
3.1. Improve students' perceptions for positive school climate and equity 3.2. Improve teachers' perceptions for positive school climate and equity 3.3. Improve parents' perceptions for positive school climate and equity 3.4. Improve principal and staff perceptions of school climate and equity	3.1.a. Increase the percentage of students who report positive school climate and equity by 20% annually (District Wide Survey) 3.2.a. Increase the percentage of teachers who report positive school climate and equity by 20% annually (District Wide Survey) 3.3.a. Increase the percentage of parents who report positive school climate and equity by 20% annually (District Wide Survey) 3.4.a. Increase the percentage of principal and staff who report positive school climate and equity by 20% annually (District Wide Survey)
Goal 4. Informed by the evaluation of RF implementation and effectiveness, further improve and revise RF program components	
4.1. Investigate the extent to which RF program components are implemented as intended 4.2. Examine the impact of RF on teacher and student outcomes 4.3. Examine the relationship between implementation fidelity and teacher and student outcomes 4.4. Improve RF coaching resources and implementation manuals	4.1.a. Conduct and complete semiannual implementation fidelity analysis using data collected through RF activity monitoring logs, interviews, observations, and focus groups 4.2.a. Conduct a comparative interrupted time series analysis to estimate the impacts of RF on select teacher and student outcomes 4.3.a. Complete an exploratory analysis examining the relationship between implementation fidelity and teacher and student outcomes 4.4.a. Refine RF coaching resources and manuals based on evaluation results

B.2. Project Activities, Goals, and Outcomes. Table 1 presents the goals, activities, and measurable outcomes of the proposed project. These flow from the RF Logic Model (Appendix

G). Our goal for building schools' capacity to implement the RF program with fidelity (Goal 1), aligns with the inputs in our logic model to facilitate an environment for effective implementation. Our goal to support school RF teams to implement Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III activities with fidelity at their schools (Goal 2) aligns with the outputs section of the logic model, whose objectives involve classroom- and school-level implementation. Goals 3 and 4 directly relate to the outcomes sections of the logic model.

The logic model and Table 1 reflect the core activities at the heart of RF. These activities, which are codified in RF's Implementation Guide (Appendix J-2) and RF Implementation Action Steps and Indicators (Appendix J-3) align to the three tiers of MTSS through a set of in- and out-of-classroom processes as follows:

- Tier I. Community-Building Circle (CBC). The CBC is a semi-structured group intervention designed to be used by teachers and all students in each classroom. In RF schools, all classroom teachers (or advisory teachers in the case of some middle and high schools) and their students participate in a CBC for 45 minutes each week. CBCs are facilitated by students (youth leaders) as well as teachers.
- Tier II. Harm and Healing Circle (HHC). The HHC is a semi-structured group intervention used to reach a peaceful solution to a social conflict. It is implemented as needed, and takes between 20 and 60 minutes to implement. HHC is typically led by a teacher, counselor, or other staff member, though students can be trained to lead HHC as well. HHC uses a structured protocol and debrief procedures to repair relationships, solidify commitments, and build social and behavioral skills.
- Tier III. Welcome and Re-entry Circle (WRC) and Circle of Support and Accountability (COSA). The WRC is a semi-structured group intervention for students who are entering the

school community following a suspension, a treatment program stay, a change in guardianship, or other life events. It is implemented as needed, for 20 to 60 minutes per circle, and is led by a trained adult. Peers, support team members, and family may participate as appropriate. The purpose is to welcome the student and prepare them to participate in the RF community that exists in the school. WRC is focused on the needs, concerns, and feelings of the entering student. The COSA is a semi-structured group intervention that works to build a high-functioning support group around a struggling student and clarify the student's goals and commitments. It is implemented as needed for 45 to 90 minutes, facilitated by an adult, and can include peers and adults from in or outside school. The COSA guides support group members to take responsibility for supporting the student.

Each of these interventions follows the same basic process that dialogues through an opening; review of circle expectations; brief discussion of what is important to each participant; a semi-structured activity that can focus on any issue of relevance to participants; a structured discussion; and a closing that can include a debrief about the circle. RF includes roles for any and all members of a school community, including administrators, teachers, non-instructional staff, school police, and family and community members. In RF schools in SDP, all of these groups receive training. RF youth leaders are trained to support, facilitate, and plan circles across all three tiers. Along with these tier-aligned circles, RF includes two additional core activities:

- Restorative Conversation (RC). The RC is a spontaneous, private 1:1 intervention that uses prompts to quickly problem-solve and address needs in escalating situations in less than 3 minutes, during instruction or whenever de-escalation is required. It gives adults and student leaders skills and strategies to calm and problem-solve with dysregulated students and develops social-emotional skills. Students can also use RC with peers.

- Adult Decision-making Circle (ADC). The ADC is an adult-only version of CBC that is designed to create high-functioning adult groups in schools and is used during staff meetings across the school, including for MTSS teams (See Appendix E), leadership, and staff and faculty. Adults can share or take turns leading the ADC. The ADC is also an important systems-change lever that build buy-in and demonstrates how RF can transform culture.

RF's implementation is supported by a structured training model led by coaches from SDP's Office of School Climate and Culture. RF coaches support initial implementation via professional development, training, and modeling to leaders and RF teams, as well as coaching and training on integrating RF into the comprehensive MTSS process. Over time, responsibility for supporting implementation is transitioned to members of the school community, including youth leaders, so that only occasional external coaching support is required. This model is replicable and manualized. Enhancements to the model will be made based on research.

B.3. Addressing Needs of Target Population. This project will benefit students and staff of K-12 schools in SDP and, ultimately, other districts. SDP is a large and fiscally challenged urban district that serves over 110,000 students -- it is the 8th largest school district in the US and one of the most diverse. Historically, SDP faces all the challenges common to urban districts, including exclusionary discipline trends and inequity in suspension and arrests; poor relationships within schools; and high staff attrition. Almost 90% of students qualify for free lunch and most are from historically underserved minority groups (52% of students are Black; 22% LatinX; 7% Asian; 5% multiracial/other). SDP students have long been disproportionately affected by trauma due to poverty, violence, racism, and addiction (Hardy, 2014). Following COVID-19 and increased gun violence in the City that accompanied it (Beard et al, 2021), the estimated numbers of students with traumatic stress has soared (Jones et al., 2022), further

fueling the need for trauma-informed interventions.

Preliminary implementation data from RF's first school year of full implementation in SY2021-22 demonstrate a level of buy-in and optimism about the program that suggest its approach and promise meet a significant need. We have observed notable progress toward implementation, school scheduling and staffing decisions for the coming year that prioritize continued implementation, and staff eagerness to participate in summer training offered by the RF team. Furthermore, schools and their teams have provided testimonials about the difference RF is already making in their schools, resulting in a growing list of schools seeking to adopt RF and in hundreds of students volunteering to be trained as RF youth leaders.

C. QUALITY OF PROJECT PERSONNEL

C1. School District of Philadelphia (SDP) Project Team. SDP's policy 104[1] is to provide to all persons equal access to all categories of employment in this district, regardless of race, color, age, creed, religion, sex, sexual orientation, ancestry, national origin or handicap/disability, gender identity, or genetic information. Personnel for the proposed project at SDP bring extensive expertise in restorative justice-practices, in school climate and operations, and in experimental research. Key program personnel at SDP include:

[redacted] **PhD (PI, .15 FTE).** Dr. [redacted] is the Deputy Chief of School Climate and Culture at SDP. She oversees a team of roughly 65 staff in the Office of School Climate & Culture and is responsible for setting strategy related to school climate and social-emotional learning for the entire district. She oversees all aspects of program development and implementation in this area, and also leads several district-level initiatives that extend beyond the scope of the office. Dr. [redacted] has initiated, supported, and overseen the growth of RF by securing

[1] Full policy available at: https://www.philasd.org/schoolboard/wp-content/uploads/sites/884/2017/07/104-Nondiscrimination-in-Employment-Practices.pdf

funding commitments at the district level, hiring the Director, and ensuring alignment of RF with the Board of Education's Goals & Guardrails and district-level priorities and processes. Prior to assuming her position at SDP three years ago Dr. [redacted] was a Senior Researcher at the Consortium of Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania, where she conducted research related to school climate and restorative alternatives to punitive discipline. Dr. [redacted] has led multiple large-scale projects funded by federal grants totaling $12 million, including multiple research grants. These include the U.S. Dept of Education-funded i3 evaluation of Reading Recovery (co-PI), which included a large-scale RCT and mixed-methods implementation study; U.S. Dept of Education (IES) funded efficacy evaluation of Zoology One in SDP (PI), which included a large-scale cluster-randomized controlled trial and mixed-methods implementation study; two consecutive Comprehensive School Safety Initiative grants from the U.S. Department of Justices, which included a combination of an RCT, a rigorous quasi-experimental study, and mixed-methods implementation research; a $2.5 million Project Prevent grant from the U.S. Department of Education. This project includes outcomes research and embedded implementation-science research. Dr. [redacted] is a What Works Clearinghouse-certified reviewer of group design studies and a reviewer of IES NCER grant proposals for the Department of Education. She is a graduate of the IES Predoctoral Training program at the University of Pennsylvania, where she now teaches mixed-methods research to doctoral students.

[redacted] **(Director of RF, .5 FTE).** Mr. [redacted] is the founding Director of Relationships First at SDP. He has hired, trained, and supervised the growing team of RF coaches since the launch of the program. Mr. [redacted] has a long track record in the restorative practices field, including serving as a district restorative justice facilitator with the lauded Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY) program in Oakland, CA. Previously, he taught both general

and special education with a focus on emotional/behavioral supports in both Baltimore County, and served as an administrator with the Oakland SPED department, supporting all moderate/ severe non-autism-support programs across the district.

[redacted], **(Lead Climate & Culture Coach, .5 FTE).** Mr. [redacted] is a former high school teacher in Philadelphia and Chester, PA, who brings deep experience and expertise in restorative processes and equitable program design. Mr. [redacted] led the development of RRt's equity modules, and collaborates with Dr. [redacted] and SDP's Diversity Equity Inclusion Office to lead district-level equity initiatives.

[redacted], **PhD (project Advisor, 1-2 days per year).** Dr. [redacted] is a leading national voice on restorative justice. She is a long-time social justice activist, Civil Rights trial attorney, writer, restorative justice practitioner, and educator with a PhD in Indigenous Knowledge. She writes and speaks internationally on restorative justice, racial justice, truth processes, and indigeneity. Dr [redacted] is Founding Director of Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY) and Co-Founding Board Member of the National Association of Community and Restorative Justice (NACRJ). She is the author of *The Little Book of Race* and *Restorative Justice: Black Lives, Justice, and U.S. Social Transformation* (2019).

[redacted], **(Project Advisor, 1-2 days per year).** Mr. [redacted] has led the well-known restorative practices program in Oakland Unified School District in Oakland, CA since 2011. Oakland's program is widely regarded as the most successful school-based restorative program in the country (Jain et al., 2014; Todić et al., 2020) and was recognized by Pres. Obama as a National Model. He leads a team of more than 30 restorative justice facilitators. Mr. [redacted] brings deep expertise and will advise the project team on all aspects of restorative programming, with a focus on the growth and scaling of a district-led effort. He and Dr. [redacted] personally

trained Mr. [redacted], SDP's Director of Restorative Programming.

[redacted] **(Project Advisor, 1-2 days per year).** Mr. [redacted] is a highly skilled and experienced trainer and facilitator of restorative practices. He has worked as a consultant to multiple school districts seeking to implement restorative alternatives, including Los Angeles Unified, Oakland Unified, and districts in Louisiana and Montana. He has deep expertise in training and engaging adults as well as students. Mr. [redacted] will work with the RF team to further develop the training and coaching components of the program, to strengthen the components targeting adults, and the youth engagement effort.

Relationships First Coaches. SDP currently employs 15 full-time RF Coaches who report to Mr. [redacted] and are responsible for supporting school-level implementation. Consistent with SDP's commitment to equitable hiring and the Office of School Climate & Culture's goal to provide culturally responsive supports, this team is racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse; nearly all the coaches are individuals of color. These commitments will continue as new coaches are hired to support the work outlined in this proposal.

[redacted] **(Director of Climate Implementation and Innovation, .10 FTE).** Ms. [redacted] leads the SDP team responsible for monitoring and troubleshooting the implementation of climate programming–including RF–in schools. She designs systems for collecting and analyzing data specific to implementation, and utilizes implementation science methodology to identify barriers to implementation across schools, networks, and the entire district. Ms. [redacted] brings roughly a decade of experience supporting school climate improvement efforts in SDP. Under Dr. [redacted] direction, she also leads the district-wide rollout of improved guidance and resources for schools around the implementation of MTSS. She works with the RF team to develop tools and supports for integration of MTSS and RF (e.g., see Appendix E).

[redacted] **(Project Manager, .20 FTE).** Mr. [redacted] is a skilled project manager with more than 20 years of experience providing administrative support to organizations serving urban youth. Mr. [redacted] will oversee the project timeline, collaborate with SDP's fiscal office to monitor the budget, and assist with reporting and communication with the funding agency.

C.2. Research for Action (RFA) Evaluation Team. RFA has experience conducting federally-funded research (e.g. IES Research Grant Award #R305A210286), evaluations of school-wide interventions, and applying interrupted time-series designs. RFA also has 30 years of experience conducting research in Philadelphia school settings and studying PA educational policy. The RFA evaluation will be led by a culturally and racially diverse team with extensive experience in rigorous experimental and quasi-experimental design, implementation research, longitudinal multi-site studies, equity-centered research practices, and a deep understanding of the Philadelphia context. Drs. [redacted], [redacted], and [redacted] will lead the independent evaluation.

Dr. [redacted] RFA's Chief Research Officer, will oversee all aspects of the evaluation, ensuring the rigor, timeliness, and independence of its execution and dissemination. With over 20 years of research expertise across a wide range of educational settings, she brings a strong skill set in managing complex longitudinal research projects and guiding research teams in the execution of mixed-methods program evaluations in applied contexts. She successfully designed and led a five-year randomized controlled trial and accompanying implementation study across 11 US states, funded through a federal First in the World (FITW) grant. In addition to leading projects, teams, and departments, [redacted] background includes quantitative and qualitative data collection experience inside K-12 classrooms and settings in urban public-school systems.

Dr. [redacted], RFA's Chief Statistician and senior methodologist, has extensive experience and expertise in quantitative research methods, including group designs (e.g., RCT, quasi-experimental design, propensity score matching, etc.), advanced statistical modeling (e.g., multilevel modeling, structural equation modeling, etc.), and survey data analysis (e.g., psychometrics analysis, survey weighting, etc.). Much of his research focuses on evaluating educational reform initiatives in the K-12 sector and measuring the fidelity of implementation of education programs. Dr. [redacted] has experience as a PI for an IES-funded study (#R305A110621) that developed and field-tested a suite of fidelity of implementation instruments used to measure teacher implementation of inquiry-based curricula. Dr. [redacted] is currently leading an IES-funded project (#R305A210286) that evaluates the effects of California community college curriculum reform on student outcomes in 114 public community colleges in the state.

SECTION D. QUALITY OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The objectives detailed in this proposal are aligned with SDP's top district-level priorities and directly support the Goals and Guardrails established by SDP's Board of Education. The Goals & Guardrails lay out targets for student outcomes in SDP by 2025, along with the necessary conditions (Guardrails) for achieving these goals, and drive all district-level strategic priorities. Relationships First has been identified as a key strategy for achieving two of the four guardrails, and therefore for accomplishing the Goals. RF directly addresses Guardrail 1, which focuses on providing supportive and welcoming school environments that facilitate student belonging and social and emotional development. It also addresses Guardrail 4, which focuses on equity and removing barriers to high-quality education for historically marginalized students. As an initiative that supports the Goals & Guardrails, RF is assured of ongoing support and commitment from the highest levels of the district. The district's investment in the RF effort

offers evidence of this commitment; with support from SDP leadership, the RF team has grown from a staff of one to 15 full-time staff in less than 3 years. With impact findings in hand from the proposed project, the team foresees being able to sustain the growth of RF well beyond the end of the grant, with district operating or stable grant funds supplanting EIR support.

The process of implementing RF in schools is supported and driven by the district's Commonwealth of PA-mandated school planning process. Each spring, every school goes through a data review process that culminates in the selection of key climate and academic strategies for the following school year. Schools that select RF as their primary climate strategy through this planning process are assigned coaches from the Office of School Climate & Culture and begin receiving training and support to prepare for the following year. Implementation then proceeds according to RF Action Steps (see Appendix D), which are developed by the RF team and included in the plan based on the school's stage of implementation. Office of School Climate & Culture coaches use a Qualtrics-based tool to track individual schools' progress toward their action steps, and to record qualitative observations about barriers to implementation. Along with identifying and removing barriers to implementation of RF for this project, this system will be used for collecting implementation data that will then be shared with the RFA research team.

This connection with the school planning process brings accountability and oversight to schools' implementation of RF. Through their oversight of school plans, the following entities provide implementation monitoring: RF Coaches, who are responsible for supporting schools in achieving their implementation Action Steps; Assistant Superintendents, who are the direct supervisors of principals and responsible for overseeing their progress toward school plan goals; the Planning and Evidence-Based Supports Office, which is responsible for liaising with the Commonwealth of PA; the Office of Schools, which oversees all school leaders; and the Office

of Research and Evaluation, which conducts analyses of the impacts of school plan strategies. With rare exceptions schools are required to continue implementing the same strategies for at least several years; therefore, the school plan process will help minimize attrition.

All activities outlined in this proposal will be overseen by Dr. [redacted] Mr. [redacted] and Mr. [redacted] will collaborate to direct the day-to-day execution of the grant activities according to the project timeline (see Table 1). Ms. [redacted] will collaborate with these individuals to ensure collection of high-quality implementation data. Dr. [redacted] meets regularly with Mr. [redacted] and Ms. [redacted] in biweekly 1:1 supervision meetings, and with Mr. [redacted] Ms. [redacted] Mr. [redacted] and the project manager in bi-weekly Leadership meetings. This project will be added to the standing agendas of these meetings, and all activities will be monitored against the project timeline on an ongoing basis. The project manager will use the Asana platform to streamline management of tasks, timeline, and communication among project staff.

To maintain the independence of the evaluation, the RFA evaluation team's contact with the district will be funneled primarily through the Office of Research and Evaluation. This office will collaborate with RFA around all data needs and permissions, and access to schools. On a quarterly basis, all project personnel from SDP's Office of School Climate & Culture, the Office of Research and Evaluation, and RFA will convene to review upcoming activities and revise the timeline and troubleshoot any issues as needed. The RFA evaluation team will assign a designated project manager who will liaise with SDP's Office of Research and Evaluation and monitor the project plan and timeline. The RFA team will provide SDP with yearly reports and presentations of findings from their summative and formative evaluations.

E. QUALITY OF EVALUATION

Research for Action (RFA) will serve as the independent evaluator for this project,

drawing on experience and expertise in both impact and implementation evaluation of K-12 education programs. The evaluation will employ a rigorous mixed-methods design that includes impact and implementation evaluations, in alignment with the RF logic model (see Appendix A) and project milestones and timelines (see Appendix B). Both study components leverage RF's staggered cohort-based implementation across SDP schools and will include all schools that will have implemented RF from its full launch in SY2021-20 through SY 2026-27. Table 2 presents the projected schools for each cohort/school year under study. Prior to the beginning of the proposed project in January 2023, a total of 73 SDP elementary, middle and high schools (55 in Cohort1 and 18 in Cohort 2 schools) are expected to be implementing RF. The recruitment of successive cohorts of schools will be conducted through SDP's state-mandated school planning process.

Table 2. RF Program Rollout Timeline and Number of RF Schools

	Pre-Project Period	Project Period					
School Year	SY21-22 Cohort 1	SY22-23 Cohort 2	SY23-24 Cohort 3	SY24-25 Cohort 4	SY25-26 Cohort 5	SY26-27 Cohort 6	Jul.-Dec. 2027
# new RF schools	55*+	18*+	18*+	18*+	18+	18+	-
# total RF schools	55	73	91	119	137	155	-
Evaluation	-	-	Planning	Implementation & Impact Evaluation			Reporting

*Included in impact study; + Included in implementation Study

E.1. Impact Evaluation. The impact study will use a rigorous, quasi-experimental comparative interrupted time-series (CITS) design with a matched comparison group, ***designed to meet What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards with reservations***, to determine whether RF improves student, teacher, and parent outcomes and equity in student outcomes. With an equity lens toward understanding how RF impacts high-need students, the proposed work will examine variation in effects across race, gender, special education, language, and SES subgroups. The RFA team will

collect outcomes data throughout the project years and conduct the cumulative impact evaluation at the conclusion of each school year 2023-24 through 2026-27. The impact evaluation aims to answer the following six confirmatory and three exploratory research questions.

Table 3. Impact Evaluation Research Questions and Outcome Measures

Confirmatory Research Questions	Outcome Measures
RQ1: What is the impact of the RF program on school wide student academic outcomes?	% of students meeting or exceeding state standards or the district benchmark
RQ2: What is the impact of the RF program on school wide student behavioral outcomes?	Attendance, out-of-school suspension rates; serious incident rates; and office disciplinary referrals
RQ3: What is the impact of the RF program on teacher retention?	Teacher retention rates
RQ4: What is the impact of the RF program on student perceptions of school climate?	Bullying, safety, & belongings measured by District Wide Survey (DSW)
RQ5: What is the impact of the RF program on teacher perceptions of school climate?	Student-centered learning, respect, classroom & school-level challenges measured by DSW
RQ6: What is the impact of the RF program on parent perceptions of school climate?	Bullying and Safety measured by DWS
Exploratory Research Questions	**Outcome Measures**
RQ7: Do the RF program effects on student outcomes and perceptions about school climate vary across student subgroups including race, gender, special education, ELL, and SES subgroups?	Same outcome measures as RQ1 and RQ2
RQ8: Does student perceptions of their SEL skills and equity vary between RF schools and non-RF schools?*	Quarterly Student Well-Being Survey: Quality of relationships with peers and adults in schools & confidence in SEL skills District Wide Survey: Educating all students & cultural awareness/action
RQ9: What is the relationship between the fidelity of implementing core RF programs and student and estimated RF program impacts?	Same outcome measures for RQ1-RQ6 and the fidelity of implementation measures from the implementation study.

* We cannot conduct a CITS analysis to answer this research question because the SEL and equity measures are not available for pre-intervention years. The measures are available from SY2021-22.

Outcome measures. The measures for the evaluation are aligned with outcomes specified in the RF logic model and include state assessments (PSSA and Keystone); district academic

screeners; SDP District Wide Surveys for students, teachers, and parents; SDP administrative records on disciplinary outcomes, teacher retention; and SDP's quarterly Student Well-Being Survey. To make state and district assessment scores comparable across different grade levels, the team will use the percentage of students who meet or exceed state standards or the district benchmark. SDP's District-Wide Surveys have been administered annually since SY2014-15 and provide reliable measures for school climate. In the 2020-21 surveys, school climate scale reliabilities fell within 0.79 and 0.94, which indicates an acceptable internal consistency of items measuring the school climate construct (SDP, 2021). Appendix J-4 shows the sub-constructs of school climate and equity measured in the District Wide Surveys.

Study samples. The CITS analysis estimates the impact of the RF program on school-level aggregates of teacher, student, and parent outcomes by estimating a break in trends of intervention schools before and after the implementation of the RF program, compared to trends of matched non-intervention schools. Since a minimum of three data points from both pre- and post-intervention periods is needed, the confirmatory impact evaluation will focus on implementing schools from Cohorts 1-4 (see Table 2 above), which will have implemented the RF program between SY2021-22 and SY2024-25 thus providing at least three years of post-intervention data before the conclusion of this project. RFA will use propensity score matching to identify comparison schools for each treatment cohort separately among SDP schools that did not implement RF until the end of project year and that match the treatment schools in terms of aggregated student outcomes, demographics, and socio-economic variables.

Statistical power. Statistical power analysis indicates that the CITS study will have sufficient statistical power to detect a small effect size of the RF program on both student and teacher outcomes. Assuming (i) a balanced sample size for treatment and comparison groups for

each cohort, (ii) five years of baseline data, (iii) two-tailed alpha level of 0.05, R^2 of 0.5 and (iv) statistical power level of 0.8, the proposed CITS study will yield a minimum detectable effect size (MDES) of 0.07 for Cohort 1 and 0.11 for Cohorts 2, 3, and 4 for the student and parent outcomes analyses. Assuming the average number of teachers per school is 30, MDES for teacher outcomes analysis is 0.19.

Baseline equivalence and propensity score matching (PSM). The baseline equivalence of the potential treatment and comparison schools was examined using SDP's school-level data from SY2020-21 that contains information about student demographics, SES, behavioral outcomes, and academic outcomes for all 212 district-operated schools in that school year. When the 55 Cohort 1 schools that implemented RF in SY2021-22 were compared with the 157 non-RF schools, baseline differences in all key student demographic, SES, and academic outcome variables, measured in standardized effect size units, ranged from 0.01 to 0.24, which are lower than WWC's upper bound threshold for equivalence (see Table 1 in Appendix J-5). When baseline differences were computed from matched samples identified by propensity score matching, baseline differences were substantially reduced to below 0.10, ranging from 0.01 to 0.09 (see Table 2 in Appendix J-5). These results strongly suggest that, while the pool of potential comparison school will shrink over time as the number of RF schools grows according to the projections in the proposal, it will be still feasible to identify valid matched comparisons among remaining non-RF schools for each RF cohort within SDP.

Statistical model and data analysis. We will use a multilevel model to estimate impacts of the RF program on school-level aggregates of student and teacher outcomes (***RQ1***, ***RQ2***, & ***RQ3***) and student, teacher, and parent perceptions of school climate (***RQ4***, ***RQ5***, & ***RQ6***). The CITS impact model is a two-level model with repeated observations over years (level-1) nested

within schools (level-2). Since the RF program is school-wide, the treatment indicator will be included in the level-2 model. The CITS analysis examines whether there is a break in trends in treatment outcomes before and after the implementation of RF, compared to trends in matched comparison schools. To ensure that any break is unrelated to external student and school characteristics, the model will include school fixed effects terms and time-variant average student characteristic variables used in PSM. To answer ***RQ7***, we will disaggregate student-level administrative and survey data from multiple years by student subgroup (e.g., racial; ELL; SPED; free/reduced price lunch) and by school. Then, we will estimate the subgroup-specific impact of RF separately using a series of 2-level multilevel models with subgroup-specific repeated observations over years (level-1) nested in schools (level-2). Finally, we will examine differential effects on student subgroups by comparing subgroup-specific impact estimates across student subgroups to identify whether the RF program reduced gaps in student outcomes. To answer ***RQ8***, we will conduct multiple regression analyses to examine differences in student perceptions of equity and SEL skills between study groups. We will conduct multiple regression analyses to explore how variations in implementation of core RF program components are related to impacts for each cohort (**RQ9**) within SDP.

E.2. Implementation Study and Formative Feedback Loop. RFA will use mixed methods to assess the extent to which core RF program components were implemented as intended (i.e., fidelity of implantation, FOI), identify factors affecting implementation fidelity and the sustainability of core RF program components, and provide SDP with timely feedback for continuous improvement. The RFA team will use raw data collected by SDP through its cloud-based implementation monitoring tool, which coaches use to collect standardized data on sites' implementation of core program components on an ongoing basis. The implementation

evaluation will address the following three research questions.

- ***RQ10***: To what extent are core RF program components implemented with fidelity at participating sites? How and why do fidelity levels vary?
- ***RQ11***: What community, district, school, and student level factors support or inhibit the implementation of core RF program components with fidelity?
- ***RQ12***: Which core RF components/activities are sustained over time? What community, district, school, and student level factors support or inhibit sustainability?

Fidelity of Implementation Index. RFA will use data collected through SDP's implementation monitoring to construct a fidelity of implementation (FOI) index, which will provide each RF school with a yearly score. These FOI scores will serve to 1) quantify FOI levels across the study, between sites, and across cohorts (***RQ10***); 2) inform other activities of the implementation study as described below; 3) provide SDP with timely findings to inform RF supports to schools; 4) identify activities that can be implemented with fidelity over time (i.e. are sustainable); and 5) allow for exploratory analysis of the relationship between FOI and impacts.

RF Case Studies and Interviews. The RFA team will collect in-depth qualitative data from nine case study sites to supplement and triangulate implementation data collected through the school district as well as fill information gaps, including identifying factors that influence FOI (***RQ11***) and sustainability (***RQ12***). The nine case study sites will be selected to include a mix of high, medium, and low fidelity schools as identified through the FOI index scores, as well as schools with varying levels of implementation maturity. Site visits will take place in SY 23-24 through SY 26-27, and will each include an interview with a school leader, a focus group with members of the RF team, an interview with up to two circle leaders (e.g. teachers and/or youth leaders), and an observation of an RF program activity. Finally, RFA will interview three SDP

staff members to collect data about plans to support existing and new RF schools and additional insights pertaining to factors that influence program implementation and sustainability.

E.3. Dissemination. RFA will post its finalized evaluation plan on an open repository (e.g. Open Science Framework). Evaluation team members will also attend national conferences to present emerging findings and lessons learned with the field. At the conclusion of the project, RFA will produce a public-facing report of findings with recommendations for the field more broadly. As part of RF's goal of informing SDP families and community members of the program and engaging them in its ongoing implementation, RFA's Philadelphia-based director of community engagement will support the launch of a targeted social media campaign to accompany the report as well as a community engagement activity in close partnership with SDP's Office of Family and Community Engagement. Lastly, RFA will work to publish the study results in peer-reviewed academic journals.

The SDP team for the project will work with the district's internal communications office to formally announce the award, if granted, and to develop a communications plan to communicate about the project both internally and externally that will involve a range of approaches, including internal announcements and updates, social media postings. Information about the project will also be added to the Office of School Climate & Culture website. Finally, members of the Office of School Climate & Culture – including RF team members – present at practitioner conferences and events regularly. The team will actively pursue opportunities to share the insights gained through the scale-up and research.