

# Boosting Adolescent and Young Adult Literacy

*An Examination of Literacy  
Teaching and Learning in  
Philadelphia's Accelerated High  
Schools*

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July 2011



## About Research for Action

Research for Action (RFA) is a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization. We seek to use research as the basis for the improvement of educational opportunities and outcomes for traditionally under-served students. Our work is designed to strengthen public schools and postsecondary institutions; provide research-based recommendations to policymakers, practitioners and the public at the local, state and national levels; and enrich the civic and community dialogue about public education. For more information, please visit our website at [www.researchforaction.org](http://www.researchforaction.org).

## Acknowledgments

Research for Action has studied literacy teaching and learning for the past 18 years, and we are thankful for this opportunity to continue our inquiry into adolescent literacy with research in Philadelphia's accelerated schools. We especially would like to thank the staff in the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Multiple Pathways, the JFF trainer and the providers, principals, site directors, instructional leaders, classroom teachers, guidance counselors and other support staff connected to accelerated schools, all of whom were gracious with their time and shared with us their successes and challenges in developing a focus on literacy teaching and learning. We are grateful to the William Penn Foundation and Project U-Turn for their support of this inquiry.

We would like to acknowledge School District of Philadelphia research staff, Sarah Costello and Josh Culbertson, who provided data analysis on student demographics and reading levels of students enrolled in accelerated schools.

And finally, we thank Yijing Huang, an RFA quantitative analyst working with Project U-Turn, who assisted in analysis of school district data, Ean Fonseca, a graduate assistant at RFA who provided assistance with qualitative data collection, transcription, and analysis, and RFA's Communications Director, Alison Murawski, who edited and coordinated production of the report.

We received valuable feedback to early versions of this report from the Philadelphia Youth Network Data Workgroup, the Steering Committee of Project U-Turn, and the Office of Multiple Pathways and Jobs for the Future staff. We alone, however, are responsible for any shortcomings of the report.

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Executive Summary

**Boosting Adolescent and Young Adult Literacy:  
An Examination of Literacy Teaching and Learning in Philadelphia's  
Accelerated High Schools**

July 2011

### **Overview**

In 2010-11, the School District of Philadelphia (the District) operated thirteen accelerated high schools that served approximately 2,000 under-credited, over-age students. Each of the accelerated schools was managed by one of seven external providers, each with its own educational approach, and each with a contractual agreement with the District's Office of Multiple Pathways (OMP).

In 2009, the OMP, in conjunction with the dropout prevention and recovery city-wide effort entitled Project U-Turn, strongly encouraged every accelerated school to develop a focus on literacy. Many of the students entering the accelerated schools were low-level readers, and those most closely involved with efforts to reduce student dropout strongly believed that improvement of students' reading, writing and oral communication was critical to perseverance to graduation.

This report examines the development of a focus on literacy in Philadelphia's accelerated high schools. To support the focus on literacy, the OMP, in partnership with Project U-Turn, and Jobs for the Future (JFF), adopted of the *JFF Common Instructional Framework*, which is a set of six instructional strategies that work together as a cross-content approach to improving literacy learning. The Framework was accompanied by professional development and coaching, as well as "rounds" – the practice of teachers visiting each others' classrooms in order to observe, share and form professional communities of practice.

The schools also adopted a range of strategies in addition to the JFF Framework. These included reconnecting disconnected students with school and re-engaging them in learning.

This study provides a theory of action explaining how the tasks of reconnecting disconnected students, re-engaging students in learning, and the JFF Framework were to interact and build literacy skills and academic competence which in turn would remediate

learning gaps and accelerate student learning to prepare students for timely graduation. The report focuses on:

- key factors that affected how the accelerated high schools responded to the introduction of the JFF Framework;
- the range of strategies used by the accelerated high schools to reconnect disconnected youth to school; and
- how the accelerated high schools reengaged disengaged students to literacy and learning.

## Research Methods

This study is based on both qualitative and quantitative data and was conducted from January 2010-January 2011.

Qualitative data were collected in two rounds and included:

- Interviews with providers and principals from **ten accelerated high schools in spring/summer 2010**. This sample included all the schools that were actively operating in both 2009-10 and 2010-11 (Round One).<sup>1</sup>
- Interviews with principals, instructional coaches (or lead teachers), and focus groups with teachers at **six case study schools in fall/winter 2010** (Round Two).
- Interviews with selected Philadelphia Youth Network (PYN) staff, OMP staff (including one OMP District coach), and JFF staff.

Quantitative data were provided and analyzed by staff from the District's Research Office and the Office of Multiple Pathways, and included student demographics and entering reading levels for students' enrolled for the 2009-10 school year and September to January of the 2010-11 school year.

Future Research for Action (RFA) research will include student performance outcomes, which were not yet available at the time this report was written.

This study contributes to the existing body of research on adolescent and young adult readers, focusing on an over-age, under-credited group of students who are under-represented in the literature on literacy. This group, however, is front and center among many urban district and city policy-makers because of their risk of dropping out of high school. This study also builds on research on reconnecting disconnected youth with learning, which has largely focused on out-of-school settings, with information about attempts to connect these young people to in-school settings.

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<sup>1</sup> This study excluded the two schools that were disbanded at the end of the 2009-10 school year and also excluded any schools that were slated to open in fall 2010.

## Findings

Our findings fall into three areas: 1) implementation of the JFF Framework; 2) reconnecting disconnected students; and 3) re-engaging adolescents and young adults in learning.

## Implementation

The JFF Framework was a relatively new intervention at the time of this study and the accelerated schools were still at an early stage of adoption. Adoption of the Framework included participation in professional development and implementation of the Framework in classrooms. Participation in JFF professional development varied across schools. All six of our case study schools visited the University Campus Park School (UCPS) at Clark University, the model for implementation, and five sent at least one staff member to the three-day JFF training in Worcester, MA, which included a “residency” component of classroom observations at the UCPS. Here we present findings in three areas related to implementation: adoption, use and sustainability.

### Adoption

1. Adoption of the JFF Framework helped to establish a focus on literacy among all the accelerated high schools. Nonetheless, there was considerable variation in the level of adoption and implementation of the JFF Framework among the 13 accelerated high schools.
2. The alignment of the JFF Framework with each school’s educational philosophy and the attitude of school leadership were the primary determinants of the degree to which each school adopted the JFF Framework.
3. Among our six case study schools, two schools were “highly committed” to the JFF Framework while four schools were “partially committed.”

### Use of the JFF strategies

1. Most schools were not using the full set of six JFF strategies. This occurred for two reasons: schools were encouraged to focus initially on only 2-3 of the strategies and had not progressed beyond them; and/or schools were not fully committed to the JFF Framework.
2. Some school leaders and teachers were unsure of the value of the JFF Framework, believing the JFF strategies mirrored best practices for instruction that they were already using. They did not embrace the idea that the strategies needed to be implemented as a coherent set.
3. The OMP’s focus on literacy and use of the JFF Framework in the accelerated high schools helped to focus the schools more on the need for school-wide consistency in literacy practices, regardless of the degree to which they adopted the JFF Framework.

## **Sustainability**

1. Staff in schools that were strongly committed to implementing the JFF Framework had the most positive response to the JFF residency professional development, the combined professional development provided by JFF in Worcester, and the site visit to UPCS.
2. The JFF-led trainings will end for Philadelphia's accelerated high schools at the end of the 2010-11 school year; the JFF trainer believes the schools could continue on their own to use and train their colleagues in the JFF strategies, but are still fragile in their implementation of the JFF Framework.

## **Reconnecting Disconnected Students**

All the accelerated high schools in this study embraced the importance of reconnecting students to school. While reconnection strategies may overlap with JFF strategies, interviewees identified them as distinctly important. The first four strategies were common across all case study schools—although they varied in intensity—while the fifth strategy was utilized at two of our case study schools. These strategies included:

1. building caring, personalized relationships with students to encourage attendance and school connectedness;
2. creating a welcoming and non-traditional school environment for students;
3. preparing students for postsecondary opportunities;
4. devising various methods to improve and sustain strong student attendance; and
5. developing community-building processes and leadership opportunities to enhance students' sense of belonging and motivate students (two case study schools).

## **Reengaging Students in Learning**

Although JFF strategies were also designed to enhance engagement, schools used additional strategies to engage students in literacy learning specifically. These strategies included:

1. developing relevant content;
2. giving students choice in reading and linking reading to enjoyable learning activities;
3. creating lessons for small group work;
4. offering incentives;
5. designating special times for independent reading; and

6. addressing learning gaps.

## Next Steps & Recommendations

RFA will continue its research on accelerated schools in 2011-12. Based on our first round of research from January 2010-January 2011, we recommend:

1. **Generate buy-in for sustained investment.** Sustained investment by PYN's Project U-Turn and the OMP in a focus on literacy, and the implementation of the JFF Common Instructional Framework across content areas. This was a relatively new initiative, and too early to fully assess. Some accelerated schools had recently opened, and many were still in the early stages of adoption and need time and support in order to be able to fully implement the JFF strategies.
2. **Establish productive dialogue between the OMP and JFF.** Additional dialogue between the OMP and providers about implementation of the JFF Framework and the compatibility or perceived conflict with their instructional approaches in order to encourage stronger buy-in.
3. **Increase staff participation.** Examination by the OMP of the barriers to school staff participation in JFF practices and processes, including professional development opportunities, and how best to address these barriers.
4. **Identify and/or develop effective teaching and learning materials.** Further exploration by the OMP of the kinds of materials and resources teachers need to meet the needs of struggling readers, and assistance in acquiring these.
5. **Determine which factors lead to improved student attendance.** The District should examine the correlation between approaches to improving student attendance and improvement of attendance.
6. **Open up lines of communication between and among administrators and teachers.** Further opportunities for accelerated high school administrators and teachers are needed to share questions, best practices and challenges across schools.







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**Chapter I. Introduction and Overview**

Philadelphia, along with other major cities, has had an intense focus over the last half dozen years on reducing student dropout, as well as bringing out-of-school youth back into the public education system. The city, the School District of Philadelphia (the District), a number of non-profit youth and school reform organizations, as well as local foundations, have partnered in this effort. In this report we examine one aspect of this major effort: the development of a literacy-centered approach to learning in Philadelphia's accelerated high schools.

Philadelphia's 13 accelerated schools serve approximately 2,000 under-credited, over-age adolescents and young adults, including youth who are returning to the public education system. Each of the accelerated schools was managed by one of seven external providers, each with its own educational approach, and each which had a contractual agreement with the District's Office of Multiple Pathways (OMP). Many of the students entering the accelerated schools were low-level readers, and those most closely involved with efforts to reduce student dropout strongly believed that improvement of these students' reading, writing and oral communication was critical to their perseverance to graduation, and to their being prepared for post-secondary opportunities.

To support a focus on literacy, in 2009 the OMP, in partnership with Project U-Turn, and Jobs for the Future (JFF), adopted the JFF Model. The JFF Model consists of the JFF Common Instructional Framework (JFF Framework), a set of six instructional strategies that are designed to work together as a cross-content approach to improving literacy learning. The JFF Framework was accompanied by professional development and coaching, as well as

“rounds” – the practice of teachers visiting each others’ classrooms in order to observe, share and form professional communities of practice.

The development of a focus on literacy, however, involved more for the schools than the adoption of the JFF Model. Most school staff also believed that for literacy learning to occur they also needed to pursue strategies in two other distinct, but sometimes overlapping areas: reconnecting disconnected youth to school and engaging adolescents in literacy and learning.

This study of literacy teaching and learning in Philadelphia’s accelerated high schools was conducted from January 2010-January 2011. Nine of the 13 accelerated high schools had opened within the past two years. The JFF Framework was approximately one-and-a-half years into implementation. At this early stage in the development of the schools and adoption of the JFF Model, we found that, in fact, there was a focus on literacy in all of the accelerated schools. Nonetheless, we also found considerable variation in approaches, including in the level of implementation of the JFF Framework. Philadelphia’s accelerated high schools were attempting to address a range of issues identified as important in the research on adolescent literacy and on disconnected youth. In addition to implementing the JFF Framework, they were implementing distinct strategies to create positive and engaging learning environments, and taking steps to meet the needs of students who often entered their schools with low reading levels, and previous experience of school failure.

## **Overview of the report**

In the remainder of the introduction to this report we:

- map the accelerated schools and describe the students who attend them;
- provide a broader context for this study and why it is important;
- illustrate a theory of action that shows how the accelerated high schools are supposed to work; and
- explain our data collection and analytic methods.

In Chapter II we:

- describe the JFF Common Instructional Framework and accompanying professional development and coaching.

In Chapter III we:

- present our findings, focusing specifically on implementation of the JFF Framework and the professional development that accompanied it, and the other two areas that work in a dynamic relationship with the JFF Framework: reconnecting disconnected youth to school, and engaging students in literacy and learning.

In Chapter IV we:

- conclude with recommendations for strengthening literacy teaching and learning with a population of over-age, under-credited youth. We include in this final section our plans for future research.

### **Philadelphia's Accelerated High Schools**

**Figure 1** below maps Philadelphia's accelerated high schools and their external providers. As indicated in **Figure 1**, the 13 accelerated high schools had different starting dates, with nine less than two years old at the time of this study. Many of the accelerated high schools were still making the adjustments that inevitably accompany any new endeavor, including improvements to facilities, hiring administrative and teaching staff, becoming acquainted with new curriculum, and ironing out student enrollment issues. In addition, each of the providers had its own unique instructional approach. The different instructional approaches were intended to provide students with options, so they could match with the approach that best fit their learning style and needs. Those who brought the JFF Framework to Philadelphia, however, believed it was compatible with all the different instructional approaches, and regardless of differences, could enrich literacy teaching and learning in all the accelerated high schools.

**Figure 1: Map of Philadelphia's Accelerated High Schools, 2010-11, Providers & Years Established**



- Big Picture Learning (est. 1995)**  
El Centro de Estudiantes (2009)

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- Camelot Schools (est. 2004)**  
Excel Academy Central (2010)  
Excel Academy North (2004)  
Excel Academy South (2009)

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- Communities in Schools of Philadelphia, Inc. (est. 1986)**  
Performance Learning Center (2009)

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- Delaware Valley High School (est. 1969)**  
DVHS Accelerated Academy Southwest (2010)

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- Ombudsman Educational Services (est. 1975)**  
Ombudsman Northeast Accelerated (2009)  
Ombudsman Northwest Accelerated (2009)  
Ombudsman West Accelerated (2009)

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- One Bright Ray/International Education & Community Initiatives (est. 1980)**  
Fairhill Community High School (2004)  
North Philadelphia Community High School (2008)

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- Opportunities Industrialization Centers (est. 1964)**  
Career and Academic Development Institute (2004)  
OIC Creative Learning Academy (2010)

## Student Characteristics

In the first half of the 2010 school year, Philadelphia’s accelerated high schools were serving a population of approximately 2,000 over-age, under-credited students between 16-21 years of age. Slightly over half (51%) were female, and the majority were Black (68%). Fourteen percent were classified as special education students. **Figure 2** summarizes the demographic characteristics of students enrolled in accelerated high schools in the first half of the 2010-11 school year. Students came to the accelerated high schools on the recommendation of their high school, through the District’s Re-Engagement Center, or by word-of-mouth. The goal of the accelerated high schools is to graduate students within two to three years, and to have the students prepared upon graduation for college or the job market.

**Figure 2: Student Demographics, Averaged across Schools, as of December 15, 2010**

<b>Gender</b>	
Male	49%
Female	51%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
Black (non-Hispanic)	68%
White (non-Hispanic)	9%
Hispanic	21%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2%
Other (includes American Indian)	<1%
<b>English language learners</b>	2%
<b>Special education</b>	14%

Source: School District of Philadelphia  
N=2,046

## Barriers to Success

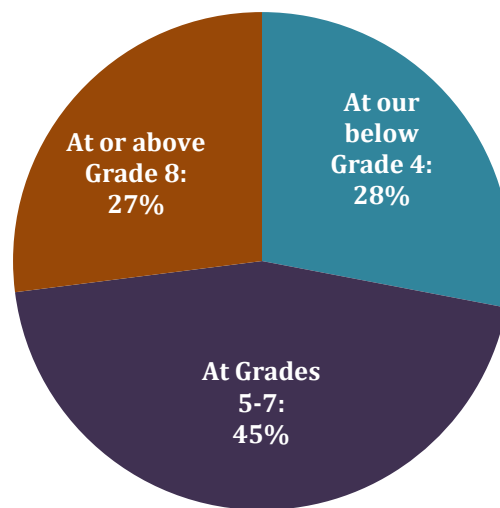
Students served by the accelerated high schools bring with them a host of barriers to becoming successful students. According to those who work with the students, these barriers include issues related to:

- Students’ personal or living situations;
- Undeveloped reading and writing abilities,
- Previous unproductive school experiences.

As one school leader stated, the students often come with “educational and/or life trauma.” In addition, many of the youth who attended the accelerated schools arrived with low literacy levels. A District analysis of students entering the accelerated high schools in the first half of the 2010-11 school year (between September 2010 and January 31, 2011) showed that more than a quarter tested below a fourth grade reading level, while another 45 percent tested between the fifth and seventh grade levels. See **Figure 3**. A low reading level presents a serious challenge to the content learning expected of high school students, and is the reason for the adoption of the JFF Framework.

Despite the many personal and educational barriers these young people faced, however, they have determined to work against the odds, return to school and try again. In one school, student-made posters displayed students’ pride at their efforts, declaring how proud they were to be back in school and to be making plans for the future.

**Figure 3: Reading Levels for Students Enrolled in Accelerated High Schools between September 2009 and January 2010**



Source: School District of Philadelphia  
N=1,954

## What the Research Says

Studies on adolescent literacy abound, but few address the challenge of how to simultaneously “remediate and accelerate” students who have become disconnected from school and are either on the brink of dropping out of school or are youth returning from out of school to earn a high school diploma. Attention has largely been focused on the significant number of students who are in middle or high school, but are testing less than proficient.<sup>2</sup> Much of this research identifies the need for and challenges of making school reading assignments and writing opportunities engaging. These studies emphasize that adolescents who are struggling readers need to have many opportunities to read, need access to readable and interesting books relevant to content areas being studied, and need to have available a good supply of “just read” materials of students’ own choosing.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the importance of students reading and writing throughout the day, and teachers in all the content areas being familiar with instructional strategies for teaching reading and writing is highlighted.<sup>4</sup>

Literacy scholars have pointed out the importance of students being taught “disciplinary literacy” between 6-12<sup>th</sup> grades, so that students learn content knowledge and reading strategies in tandem.<sup>5</sup> The International Reading Association reports that “teachers who infuse literacy instruction into their classes are able to cover more content effectively and their students are able to learn the content more successfully.”<sup>6</sup> Although these studies do not generally address students who have already disengaged from school, some recent studies do examine the challenges of reconnecting a “disconnected” population. These studies focus, however, largely on out-of-school programs. This research points to the need for strategies that establish the learning environment as credible, develop strong, caring

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<sup>2</sup> Fisher, D., Ivey, G. (2006). Evaluating the interventions for struggling readers. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 50:3, pp. 180-189. [www.jstor.org/stable/40013697](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40013697)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid; Moje, E., Overby, M., Tysvaer, N., & Morris, K. (2008). The Complex World of Adolescent Literacy: Myths, Motivations, and Mysteries. *Harvard Educational Review*, 78(1), 107-154

<sup>4</sup> Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy. (2010). *Time to act: An agenda for advancing adolescent literacy for college and career success*. New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

<sup>5</sup> Lee, C. D. & Spratley, A. (2010). *Reading in the Disciplines: The Challenges of Adolescent Literacy* New York: Carnegie Corporation.

<sup>6</sup> International Reading Association. (2006). *Standards for Middle and High School Literacy Coaches*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.



relationships starting with entry, and offer a range of supports for young people with multiple needs.<sup>7</sup>

This study contributes to the body of research on adolescent and young adult readers, focusing on a vulnerable group that is front and center among many district and city policy-makers, but is still peripheral in the adolescent literacy literature. It also builds on research on reconnecting disconnected youth with learning, with information about attempts to connect these young people to in-school settings.

## Methodology

This study is based on both quantitative and qualitative data. Staff from the District's research office and OMP provided data on student demographics and reading levels of all students for the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years respectively, for all accelerated high schools that were part of this study. This study was completed too early in the 2010-11 school year to examine student performance data, a subject for the next phase of research.

Qualitative data were collected in two rounds between January 2010 and January 2011. In round one, we interviewed providers and principals from all accelerated high schools then operating, with the exception of one provider, whose contract was not renewed. In round two, we interviewed administrators and staff and observed classrooms at six sample schools. Each school visit was between five and six hours (and three hours in a half-day program). The sample schools included one school from each provider. When a provider managed more than one school, we selected a school with the help of the OMP instructional coach, primarily based upon which school was performing best on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), with the assumption that these schools would most likely have a stronger focus on literacy.<sup>8</sup> Staff from the OMP and JFF were also interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured, lasted between 20 minutes and 1.5 hours, and were recorded and transcribed. Quantitative data included student demographic data collected by the SDP, as well as TABE literacy scores for students enrolled in accelerated high schools. Appendix A provides a demographic description and overview of the experience of teachers who

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<sup>7</sup> Bloom, D., Thompson, S.L., Ivry, R. (2010). *Building a Learning Agenda Around Disconnected Youth*. MDRC: [www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org)

<sup>8</sup> The OMP coach reported that schools that were implementing the JFF Framework with the greatest fidelity had seen the greatest improvement in their TABE results, based on their 2009-10 TABE scores.

participated in focus groups and of school-based instructional coaches, based on RFA surveys. **Figure 4** provides our research questions and data sources.

**Figure 4: Research Questions and Data Sources**

### Research Questions

- What is the theory of action guiding literacy teaching and learning in the accelerated high schools?
- How is the JFF Framework being implemented in the accelerated high schools? What contextual factors at different schools support the adoption and implementation of the JFF Model? What are the barriers to adoption and implementation?
- What is the range and variation in the ways the different accelerated high schools work to connect disconnected youth to school?
- What approaches, other than the JFF Framework, do accelerated schools use to engage students with literacy and learning?

### Data Sources

Data Source	Sample*
<b>School Site Visits</b>	<b>6 sites</b>
<b>Interviews</b>	<b>35 interview respondents</b>
Provider	6 respondents
Principal/School Director*	10 respondents
Individual Teacher or Literacy Coach	9 respondents
School Counselor	5 respondents
District, PYN, JFF**	6 respondents
<b>Teacher Focus Groups</b>	<b>5 focus groups (21 participants)</b>
<b>Observations</b>	<b>28 observations</b>
School Tours	6 tours
Classroom Observations	20 observations
Professional Development Observations	2 observations
<b>Teacher &amp; School-Based Instructional Coach Surveys</b>	<b>27 surveys</b>
<b>Data provided by School District</b>	
TABE literacy scores for enrolled students	Sept. 2009-Jan. 2010
Student Demographic Data	as of Dec. 15, 2010

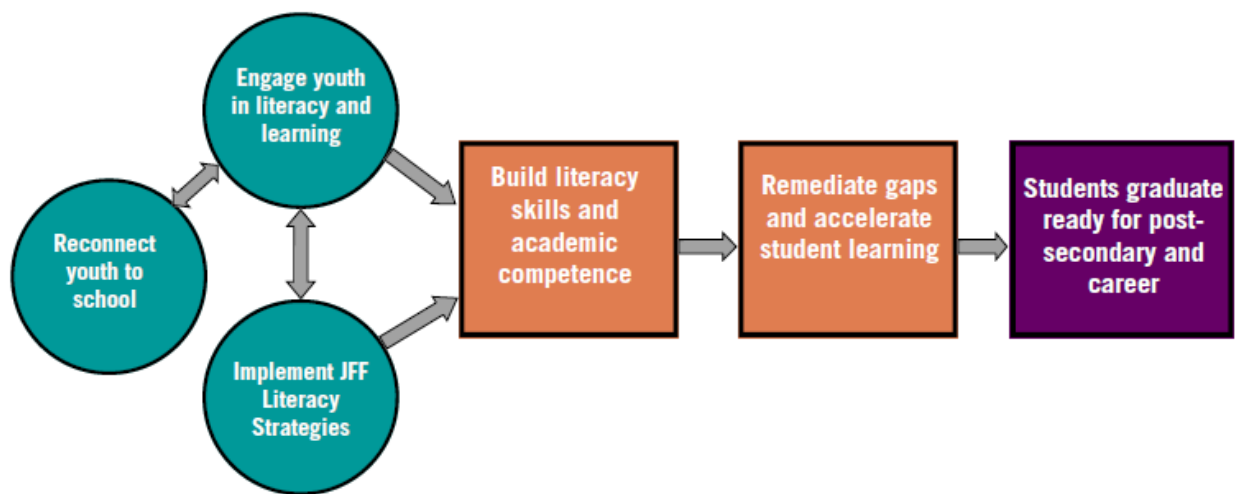
\* Among ten principal interviewees, five were interviewed twice (in both round one & round two of fieldwork).

\*\*One District interviewee was interviewed twice.

## Theory of Action

Based on analysis of our interview and observation data, we developed a theory of action which explains how the accelerated high schools are supposed to operate. The initial theory of action we developed was refined with feedback from members of the Project U-Turn data workgroup and the Project U-Turn Steering Committee, both of which include staff from the School District of Philadelphia. **Figure 5** graphically depicts the final iteration of the theory of action.

**Figure 5. Theory of Action for Literacy Teaching and Learning at Accelerated High Schools**



As this graphic illustrates, teachers at accelerated high schools are simultaneously working on three coexisting tasks: reconnecting students with school; engaging them in literacy and learning; and implementing the JFF strategies. These three areas reinforce each other and work in a dynamic relationship. In conjunction, these three areas build students' literacy skills and academic competence and remediate literacy gaps and accelerate learning. When literacy skills and academic competence are strong and gaps have been remediated and learning accelerated, then students can accumulate credits, graduate in two-three years, prepared for post-secondary opportunities.

In the next chapter we provide a description of the components of the JFF Model before turning to our findings on the three interrelated areas that our theory of action identifies as critical to literacy teaching and learning in the accelerated high schools.

## Chapter II. The JFF Framework and Professional Development Model – An Overview

With the support of Project U-Turn, the OMP adopted the JFF Model in the 2009 school year. The adoption of the JFF Model was the result of Project U-Turn’s and the OMP’s participation in a seven-city national network, Pathways through Graduation Workgroup, which was supported by a consortia of national and regional funders. After the initial investment, the District has picked up many of the costs of implementation, but Project U-Turn continued to provide some support as well.

In this chapter we describe the JFF Model which consists of the JFF Framework and the professional development and coaching that accompanied it. In the Findings chapter we look more closely at issues related to adoption and implementation of the JFF Framework.

### The JFF Framework

The JFF Framework consists of six instructional strategies, as described by JFF in **Figure 6**. The assumption underlying the OMP’s adoption of the Framework was: if proper teacher supports (for example, professional development, coaching, and the use of “instructional rounds”<sup>9</sup>) accompanied implementation of the six JFF strategies, and the six strategies were used as a coherent set across the content areas, then it would be possible to boost the literacy levels of all students, regardless of initial skill level.

The JFF Framework is *not* designed to be a menu of strategies from which to pick and choose. Nonetheless, the OMP coaches did not expect teachers – or schools – to begin implementing all six strategies simultaneously. A JFF trainer explained that participants were encouraged to begin by thinking about which strategies teachers were already using, and to build from there, noting that “there is not a prescribed order” to implementing the six strategies. An OMP coach noted, “At the very beginning, we encouraged them to start with two or three [strategies] and not pull in all six at once. They chose where they were

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<sup>9</sup> The “instructional rounds model” of professional development is based on medical school rounds. In typical rounds at a teaching hospital, interns and a teaching doctor together visit patients, and review, discuss, and do research relevant to each case. The University Park Campus Schools and Clark University adapted this process for education. In education rounds, a teacher hosts a group of teacher visitors in his or her classroom and engages with them in a dialogue on students’ learning and corresponding teaching practice. Rounds are designed to create a professional learning community of highly reflective teachers.

going to start.” Accordingly, each school began implementation of the JFF Framework based on their own logic and experience.

**Figure 6: JFF Handout explaining the JFF Common Instructional Framework**

**JFF Common Instructional Framework**

University Park Campus School (UPCS) has a common instructional framework consisting of six instructional strategies. These instructional strategies drive the instructional practice at UPCS and have led to its success. They also act as the core of the professional development program offered by the University Park Campus Institute, a partnership between UPCS and Jobs for the Future. These strategies create classrooms that allow for powerful learning and powerful teaching and form the basis of a coherent college preparatory curriculum. They give all students of all skill levels access to the complex information needed to meet state and college-ready standards. These instructional strategies succeed because they engage all students in learning and require them to take an active role in their education.

**Collaborative Group Work:** Collaborative group work involves bringing students together in small groups for the common purpose of engaging in learning. Effective group work is well planned and strategic. Students are grouped intentionally with each student held accountable for contributing to the group work. Activities are designed so that students with diverse skill levels are supported as well as challenged by their peers. Collaborative group work uses questioning, scaffolding and classroom talk and is at the center of literacy groups.

**Writing to Learn:** Writing to learn is a strategy through which students can develop their ideas, their critical thinking ability and their writing skills. Writing to learn enables students to experiment every day with written language and increase their fluency and mastery of written conventions. Writing to learn can also be used as formative assessment and as a way to scaffold mid- and high-stakes writing assignments and tests.

**Literacy Groups:** Literacy groups provide students with a collaborative structure for understanding a variety of texts and engaging in a higher level of discourse. Group roles traditionally drive literacy groups by giving each student a role to play and a defined purpose within the group. The purpose of literacy groups is to raise student engagement with texts by creating a structure within which they may do so.

**Questioning:** Questioning challenges students and teachers to use good questions as a way to open conversation and further intellectual inquiry. Effective questioning (by the teacher and by students) deepens classroom conversations and the level of discourse students apply to their work. Teachers use this strategy to create opportunities for students to investigate and analyze their thinking, their peers’ thinking, and the authors that they read.

**Scaffolding:** Scaffolding helps students to connect prior knowledge and experience with new information. Teachers use this strategy to connect students with previous learning in a content area as well as with previous learning in an earlier grade. Scaffolding also helps facilitate thinking about a text by asking students to draw on their subjective experience and prior learning to make connections to new materials and ideas.

**Classroom Talk:** Classroom talk creates the space for students to articulate their thinking and strengthen their voice. Classroom talk takes place in pairs, in collaborative group work and as a whole class. As students become accustomed to talking in class, the teacher serves as a facilitator to engage students in higher levels of discourse. Classroom talk opens the space for questioning, effective scaffolding and successful collaborative group work and literacy groups.

Source: JFF Handout at District cross-site professional development session, August 2010.

## The Professional Development Model

The JFF professional development model is a multi-year, layered model, designed to build local capacity to implement the JFF Framework, and to ensure sustainability. The Professional Development Model consisted of: an immersion in JFF practices through a 3-day site visit to the University Park Campus School (UPCS) and accompanying workshops with JFF in Worcester, MA; local professional development provided by the OMP in conjunction with JFF in Philadelphia which included on-site coaching provided by JFF-trained OMP coaches and OMP hosted cross-site workshops; and the use of “rounds” a peer process of classroom visitation in which teachers have the opportunity to observe each other and to share their practice.

**On-Site Coaching and Cross-Site Professional Development:** In 2009, the OMP hired an instructional coach who was trained by JFF to provide support for implementation of the JFF Framework. The OMP instructional coach received ongoing support from a JFF trainer, who visited Philadelphia two to three times a year. The coach was to work with all the accelerated high schools, co-planning lessons with teachers, modeling the JFF strategies, conducting instructional walkthroughs and providing feedback to school leaders.

The OMP initiated the JFF Framework with one OMP coach, but in the 2010-11 school year, it hired a second OMP coach to help facilitate cross-site professional development and to provide additional on-site support to the schools. In addition to providing support to teachers through modeling, both OMP coaches do regular walkthroughs of accelerated school classrooms and provide feedback to school principals and instructional leaders.<sup>10</sup> Their observations and judgment about what is most needed in the schools has contributed to the topics covered in the OMP/JFF cross-site professional development.

**The Residency Program:** School leaders (principals and/or school-based instructional or literacy coaches) and teachers could attend professional development in Worcester, MA, where they had opportunities to immerse themselves in the JFF strategies through

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<sup>10</sup> Formal walkthroughs with District and school members included in the walkthrough team are done at each school one-to-three times per year, although one coach described informal walkthroughs by the coaches occurring more frequently at most schools.

classroom visits at UPCS and participate in JFF-led workshops where they could further learn about the strategies. A JFF trainer explained that the OMP and school staff who participated in the Worcester residency program were expected to train others in their schools on the use of the instructional strategies. One interviewee described the process like this:

*JFF's general arrangement is that it's a two- to three-year trajectory. ... The first [step in the process] was [an OMP coach] came to Worcester [and was brought] up to speed on the model. Then [this OMP coach] brought a cohort of teacher leaders up to Worcester. Six months later he brought another cohort. The idea is to train this group and have them get things started—then you train another group and have it widen even more.*

The residency program was designed to deepen understanding of the six strategies in the JFF Framework, and overtime to reach enough school staff to sustain implementation in the schools.

**Rounds:** The use of “Rounds” was an important aspect of creating a self-reinforcing community of practitioners who used the JFF Framework. Rounds was a particularly important professional development strategy for deepening knowledge and understanding of the Framework, once there had been initial exposure through some of the other professional development opportunities.

As depicted in the theory of action, the JFF model is just one lever that works to improve students’ literacy and learning; the JFF strategies are one of three interrelated areas that work in a dynamic to build literacy skills and academic competence.

## Chapter III: Research Findings

Our findings are based on research conducted in six sample schools, which provided us with a deeper understanding about the different approaches accelerated high schools were taking to focus on literacy teaching and learning. Our findings fall into three areas: A) adoption of the JFF Framework; B) reconnecting disconnected students; and C) re-engaging adolescents and young adults in literacy and learning. We find that despite differences across the schools in the degree to which they embraced the JFF Framework, literacy teaching and learning had become a priority in the accelerated high schools.

### Adoption of the JFF Framework

The OMP adopted the JFF instructional Framework as a means to build literacy skills and academic competence through implementation of a coherent set of strategies designed to infuse literacy teaching and learning across content areas. We discuss three areas related to adoption of the JFF Framework: implementation of the Framework, use of the strategies; and sustainability of the JFF Model.



### Implementation of the JFF Framework

#### *Degree of Implementation*

**Schools were in different stages of implementation of the JFF Framework.** While two of the sample schools were highly committed to implementing the JFF Framework, the remaining four were partially committed, and fell along a continuum of “in process” to “just getting introduced.” One school, whose staff believed it was already implementing some of the JFF strategies, did not intend to adopt the entire JFF Framework, because they did not see it as a priority within the context of their overall instructional approach. **Figure 7** delineates the characteristics of highly and partially committed schools.



**Figure 7: Features of Schools Highly-Committed or Partially-Committed to Adoption of the JFF Framework**

### **Profile of a Highly-Committed School (2 schools)**

- Full buy-in and commitment of leadership at the provider and school levels to fully implement the entire JFF framework
- Framework aligned well with provider’s educational philosophy, and school staff viewed it as foundational to their work.
- Organizational structure (e.g., full-day program, primarily teacher-led instruction) facilitated adoption.
- Teachers incorporated the JFF strategies into their lesson plans on a daily basis, or teachers were taking on the strategies gradually with the goal of eventually using all of them.

### **Profile of a Partially-Committed School (4 schools)**

- Insufficient buy-in and commitment of leadership at the provider and school levels to fully implement the entire JFF framework
- Framework competed with the provider’s educational philosophy, and school staff viewed it as supplemental to their work.
- Organizational structure or logistical road blocks (e.g., half-day program, primarily individualized instruction) hindered adoption.
- Teachers acknowledged the value of using common literacy strategies across content areas and may have incorporated a few strategies from the JFF framework.

**The priority the OMP gave to literacy and the adoption of the JFF Framework helped to focus the schools on the need for consistency in literacy teaching across the content areas.** Across the sample schools staff recognized that school-wide communication and collaboration were key to developing a focus on literacy. The instructional coach at one school described the mixed messages students were getting regarding their writing assignments before her school began to focus on literacy teaching and learning. She explained:

*The kids were going from one class to another with no consistency. One teacher wanted the topic sentence in the first sentence, and the next teacher didn't*

*mind if it was in the second sentence. Kids were getting lost by third period in terms of what was expected of them...All this was cropping up in the faculty meetings.*

Schools were addressing the problem of “mixed messages” in different ways. For example, at one school staff were prioritizing specific literacy topics or skills to address school-wide, such as, “writing” or “vocabulary.” As the principal at this school explained:

*Whether it's a Word Wall, sharing ideas in regards to something that they have read or learned...If you have heard it in one class, you're going to hear it again. And that's something that we were talking about because there has to be a link. It has to be a link if it's going to be across the curriculum.*

An administrator of another school similarly planned to promote literacy school-wide, but her strategy was to have all teachers focus on a literacy “skill of the month,” regardless of their content area.

### ***Commitment to Implementation***

**The commitment to implementation varied among the sample schools.** The four schools that did not fully implement the JFF framework fell short of this goal for one of two reasons: 1) schools were at an early stage of adoption, and therefore had been encouraged by the OMP coaches and JFF trainer to begin implementing just one or two strategies, and had not had sufficient time to go further, or 2) the schools were not fully committed to the JFF Framework because they did not perceive it as aligned with their organizational structure and/or instructional approach.

### ***Factors Influencing Implementation***

**Alignment with each school’s educational philosophy and the attitude of school leadership.** We found the alignment of the JFF Framework appeared to be better for some schools than for others. For example, a JFF trainer explained that one provider aligned well with the JFF Framework because,

*They like having a model – that fit well with their corporate culture. ...  
Everyone who worked at the school was already expected to follow certain*

*norms and certain expectations. . . They didn't feel it [the JFF framework] was being imposed on them.*

In this school, having a “packaged” set of strategies introduced by the District was aligned with the professional expectations of school leadership or staff, who were accustomed to having direction set from the top-down.

Ultimately, whether school staff perceived the Framework as *foundational* to their practice or *supplemental* to their overall instructional approach corresponded to the degree to which providers and school administrators embraced the Framework. When school leaders embraced the Framework as a core aspect of their instructional program, staff were likely to see it as the foundation upon which they should build their approach to literacy teaching and learning. But when school leaders saw the JFF Framework more as a set of discrete practices they were already doing, or as an approach not fully aligned with their educational approach, then staff were likely to regard the Framework as *supplemental* to what they were doing and not as a core aspect of their practice.

**Logistics of instruction.** Interviews and observations revealed that schools which built instruction around individualized learning—rather than encouraging interaction among teacher and students and among students-- tended to only partially adopt the JFF Framework. As the JFF trainer explained, “There’s a semi-unspoken philosophy in JFF that you believe kids learn best by talking to each other, and learn best by constructing their own learning.” Half-day programs also found adoption of the JFF Framework difficult because the limited time students were present in school inhibited a school-wide focus on literacy. Structures and practices that facilitated adoption were teacher-led instruction, grouping students to learn in collaborative groups, and a full-day schedule.

**Teacher attitude.** A staff person at a highly-committed school suggested that the attitude of the many new teachers on staff at her school was important. These teachers she believed were open-minded and eager to incorporate anything useful to their practice. A school-based instructional coach at a partially-committed school suggested that teachers’ receptivity might also be shaped by classroom logistics: small classroom size and difficulty in manipulating furniture made the use of strategies such as the literacy circle challenging.

**Perception of student population.** Several of those involved with the initiative questioned whether the difference between students served by Philadelphia’s accelerated high schools and the student population at UPCS,<sup>11</sup> which served as the model of implementation, could be a factor that made implementation in Philadelphia more challenging. As one school-based coach reported:

*[W]e were new to it last year, and we were all trying to get accustomed to how exactly it would benefit our population. Their population in Worcester is very different. They’re dealing with those students from elementary on to high school. We had to play with it and tailor it to see how it would fit us. We had to see what would work with us. Now we know what will work with us in our classrooms. That was the biggest challenge: seeing them do it and do it so well.*  
-School-based instructional coach

**School culture.** A number of those who visited UPCS believed that the UPCS context differed significantly from that of Philadelphia’s accelerated schools. In particular, they believed that the longevity of the school—nearly a decade—in which the school has been involved with children in a particular neighborhood, meant that trust and high expectations had been built with families that choose to attend UPCS. This contrasts with the population the accelerated schools serve, who are young people who arrive with having had negative school experiences, and often carry with them a distrust of anything having to do with school. In Philadelphia many in the accelerated schools perceived that implementation of the JFF Framework was complicated by the need to simultaneously connect students to school, and re-engage them with literacy and learning.

**Lack of alignment with the computer-based school model.** The JFF Framework was a stretch for the computer-based schools, where one interviewee pointed out, “the model [does not appear] useful to those schools” because of the absence of teacher-student and student-student interaction. Nonetheless, the JFF Framework stimulated these schools to

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<sup>11</sup> UPCS serves about 200-250 students in grades 7-12; 73% receive free or reduced priced lunch; 67% speak English as a second language; 61% are students of color; admission is by lottery. UPCS Institute (2006). “About UPCS.” Web page. Retrieved Feb. 16, 2011, from <http://www.upcsinstitute.org/UPCSDesign/Overview.html>.

think more about literacy and their instructional practice, and the provider reported that they had begun providing classroom-based instruction in addition to computer-based instruction because of feedback from both the OMP coach and JFF trainer. These schools were becoming more of what is known as “blended” learning environments, where on-line instruction is combined with classroom instruction.

### **Use of the JFF Strategies**

***Classroom talk and collaborative group work were the most commonly used strategies.***

Many teachers said that classroom talk drew on the verbal strengths of many students and worked as a low-pressure way to engage students in learning activities. As one teacher explained, “I’ve seen some pretty heated discussions; they like to debate. I think it’s useful. They can pull prior knowledge [into the classroom].” Teachers believed this strategy to be especially useful for engaging low-level literacy students, who struggle with reading and writing. Similarly, many teachers believed that collaborative group work enabled students to “own” their learning, and be more active. Students benefitted, they reported, because they could fill each others’ “gaps” and learn from each other. Some teachers also believed that collaborative group work helped to build community because group work encouraged students who might not be familiar with each other to become acquainted. Collaborative group work, like classroom talk, was believed by teachers to be a good engagement strategy.

***Some school leaders and teachers believed the JFF strategies mirrored best practices for instruction that they were already using.***

Teachers in sample schools that were partially committed to the JFF Framework often believed that the JFF strategies were “best practices” that they already were familiar with. In fact, many teachers who had not received any JFF training reported that they were using strategies which they called by the same name as the JFF strategies. As one teacher explained,

*The JFF strategies are really so simple that you’re already doing them...*

*Everyone does something different, but we’re all using the same strategies in one way or another.*

We observed in a number of classrooms that teachers were using strategies by the same name as the JFF strategies, but their implementation differed from how the strategies are defined within the JFF Framework. For example, even though some teachers understood the rationale behind the JFF strategy of collaborative group work, we saw collaborative group work in which students had grouped themselves, and in which all the students appeared to be struggling with the assignment. JFF collaborative group work is a strategy for intentionally grouping students at different skill levels together to foster peer support and learning.

***Even when teachers were using the JFF strategies, there was frequently little recognition that the power of the strategies was in their use as a coherent set.***

The intention of the JFF Framework was to offer not only a definition of what the individual strategies should entail, but also a set of strategies that, when applied by all teachers, would provide students' with tools for building their ability to read, write and communicate orally, regardless of the subject area, or the student's initial reading level. But in focus groups with teachers we learned that even though teachers often were familiar with the JFF Framework, and may have started to use one or more strategies, few were thinking of them as a set of strategies that reinforced one another. Few realized that the theory behind the framework was that if the strategies were, used together, and by staff in all subject areas, they would help students unlock the meaning of text and express their thoughts – orally and in writing – with greater clarity.

### **Sustainability and the JFF Professional Development Model**

The JFF Professional Development Model has four interrelated, mutually reinforcing activities:

- the Worcester residency program;
- local, cross-site professional development planned by OMP and JFF;
- on-site coaching by a JFF trained OMP coach;
- and rounds.

Working together, these professional development activities are designed to build a base of knowledge and common approach to literacy teaching and learning at the school site that would make the JFF Model sustainable.

***Most staff who participated in the UPCS residency program and JFF professional development in Worcester responded positively to the experience.***

At a few accelerated high schools the majority of staff had participated in training in Worcester, while at others only one or two people had participated. The positive attitude of those “highly committed” to the model was reflected in the enthusiastic statements of school staff at one such school.

*“I loved it; I got so many ideas.”* -Teacher

*“You don’t get it until you see it.”* -Teacher

*“I thought it was awesome professional development. Especially being in their school and observing their teachers’ investment in the strategies, their collaboration with each other.”* - School instructional coach

Even staff at “partially committed” schools reported the benefits of the JFF training in Worcester. As an administrator from one such school reflected, “by going to the JFF workshop in Massachusetts, I was able to bring back a vision of what I wanted. It gave us a focus of what [our school] should look like.” Only one school, which made an abbreviated visit to UPCS, believed that the JFF model had little to offer them.

***Most schools participated in at least one local cross-site professional development provided by the OMP.***

In addition to the Worcester residency program, the OMP encouraged school staff to participate in local cross-site trainings one to three times per school year. These trainings included one-day in-service days during the school year, and three-day trainings during the summer, jointly planned and facilitated by the OMP coach and a JFF trainer.

The staff of some schools did not attend the OMP trainings regularly because school administrators and/or providers gave priority to teachers attending their own school-based professional development, which was often held at the same time. Others did not

attend because administrators and/or providers did not perceive that the JFF strategies matched their priorities for professional development. At least one principal said that her school did not attend the OMP professional development with consistency because it was sometimes held at a time of the day when the school was still in session.

The intention of the local training was to supplement the Worcester residency experience. By providing training in Worcester, as well as in Philadelphia, to as many staff in accelerated high schools as possible, the hope was that a critical mass of school leaders and teachers would be reached, thus creating a knowledge base about the JFF Framework that would help make the model sustainable.

***The OMP hired a second coach in October 2010, which intensified the attention coaches were able to give to individual schools.***

In addition to the professional development component, the OMP coaches regularly visited the schools. The OMP coaches observed classrooms, modeled strategies, conducted walkthroughs (at least one formal walkthrough a year, and regular informal walkthroughs), and provided feedback to principals and school-based instructional coaches on use of the JFF strategies. The initial OMP coach was stretched across all the accelerated high schools, and in the end, the amount of attention a school received corresponded to the degree to which the school embraced the JFF strategies. As one OMP coach reported:

*The more effective it is, the more they want me to come, the more they collaborate with me, the more they're really putting forth a good faith effort and implementing, the more time I would spend with them.*

By hiring a second OMP coach, the OMP was ensuring that all the schools were able to receive coaching assistance.

***Schools varied in their assessment of OMP coaching quality.***

Some schools spoke very highly of the OMP coaching, while others – those for whom implementation was less a priority, as well as those dealing with start-up issues – spoke of it less enthusiastically. In these cases the OMP coaching often was perceived as not aligned with the staffs' immediate needs, and/or with the school's



instructional priorities. Not surprisingly, those schools which embraced coaching were those where the greatest number of staff were positively inclined toward using the JFF strategies, and where the ground for sustainability appeared most firm.

***Instructional rounds – the practice of having teachers visit each other’s classrooms to learn from each other – was not yet a widespread practice.***

At the time of our visits, few schools had identified a lead teacher with release time to do instructional rounds. One school was an exception, reporting they conducted instructional rounds every two weeks. Teachers or administrators from at least three other schools in our sample, however, intended to adopt this practice. For example, one school-based instructional coach who had just attended her first JFF professional development said she planned to “steal” this practice, while a principal from another school said she “fell in love” with the idea of instructional rounds. In one case, a school-based instructional coach believed that instructional rounds might be the only JFF practice that the school was likely to adopt.

***The JFF professional development was over at the end of the 2010-11 school year, and the JFF trainer believed Philadelphia now had the basis for sustaining the use of the JFF Framework.***

At the end of the 2010-11 school year, the JFF residency program in Worcester and support from a JFF trainer is slated to end. All along, the intent of JFF was that after two years of exposure, use of the JFF Framework should be self-sustaining—that is, that enough layers of administration and teachers would have received training that use of the Framework would continue to fan out through local efforts. As the JFF trainer explained,

*The trajectory is coming to an end. . . I’ll be working with [Philadelphia] through the end of this school year. . . . [The OMP coach] knows all of this stuff now, he doesn’t need to bring teachers to Worcester anymore. They are at the point where they should be training each other internally.*

At least one staff person from each of the 13 schools had received training, and many schools had both administrators and teachers who had received JFF professional development. Although the JFF trainer believed that the potential for sustainability had

been achieved in a number of schools, she and the coach believed that “local” training, coaching and professional development would need to continue, as well as a mechanism for release time to conduct instructional rounds. In this way, new cohorts of teachers could be made familiar with the JFF strategies, while veteran teachers gained additional expertise in their use.

Although adoption of the JFF Framework was the centerpiece of literacy teaching and learning in most of the accelerated high schools, implementation of the JFF Framework was only one component of the schools’ focus on literacy. In the two sections that follow, we examine staff efforts to reconnect disconnected youth to school and to engage them in literacy and learning, both regarded by school staff as critical to student engagement.

### Reconnecting Youth to School



As the theory of action indicates, concurrent with implementation of the JFF Framework, the staff in accelerated high schools was challenged to reconnect students to school. The accelerated high schools used a range of strategies to foster students’ motivation to attend school, participate in class, and complete their schoolwork. This was a crucial and difficult task given that most students in the accelerated high schools were previously unsuccessful in their traditional schools, and arrived at their accelerated school predisposed to be skeptical of or worse, dread school.

All accelerated high schools in our sample used a similar set of strategies to heighten students’ investment in their education, although the level of intentionality of implementation varied across schools. **Figure 8** highlights the strategies most commonly identified in interviews and through observations.

Figure 8: Strategies for Reconnecting Disconnected Youth

### Strategies for Reconnecting Disconnected Youth

- **Personalization:** A goal of many school leaders was to build caring, personalized relationships with students to encourage attendance. They also believed that strong relationships and a willingness to listen to students contributed to an effective classroom environment.
- **Physical Environments:** Accelerated high schools focused on creating warm and often non-traditional environments that would better connect students to school.
- **Preparing for Postsecondary Opportunities:** Accelerated high schools sought to help students make sense of school by strengthening the connection between their high school education and future education and employment opportunities.
- **Attention to Absences:** Accelerated high schools were constantly working to maintain student attendance.
- **Community Building and Leadership Opportunities:** Two schools had strong community building processes in place that contributed to students' sense of belonging. Leadership opportunities were also used to motivate students and build a connection to school.

Below, we address our findings for each strategy.

#### Personalization

***School leaders articulated the importance of building caring, personalized relationships with students to encourage attendance and a sense of connection with school.***

Across all the sample schools, administrators and teachers reported that students needed to feel that the adults in the school knew them and cared about them, in order for the students to want to be at their schools. As two school leaders reported:

*We're warm, we're safe. We have time to meet with them. I ask students, 'Why did you leave your previous school?' [and they answer,] 'The teacher or nobody had time for me. They didn't know who I was. I could just swipe in and leave.' Here everybody knows you. While we're walking in, everybody's at the front*

*door. ... That's one way we engage them. . . . In a small school we have that ability to greet the kids. . . to have lunch with them. -School Principal*

*Forming relationships is a big piece to re-engage the students. Most, if not all, of our students have not had very positive adult relationships at all in their lives. Our first mission was to get them in and engage them with a teacher. . . showing them that this was a different kind of school. . . . Having them in a small classroom where the teacher knows who they are. . . . Just really making it feel like a small family at the school. -School Principal*

All accelerated high schools were small,<sup>12</sup> making one-on-one contact with students more feasible than in the much larger neighborhood high schools. Administrators and teachers in the accelerated high schools were well aware of the importance of making students who had felt invisible, overlooked or ignored in their previous school feel known in their new environment. Some schools, however, were more intentional than others in their strategies for personalization. The more intentional schools had dedicated time for individualized advising, while in schools that were less intentional adults would meet with students in a more ad hoc manner, i.e. “when we can find the time.” The way a school was staffed appeared to have an influence on the level of intentionality of effort. Within our sample schools, we found a wide range in numbers of support staff at a school. One school, for example, had four social workers (two staff and two interns) while another had neither social workers nor guidance counselors. Schools with greater numbers of social workers and/or guidance counselors reported having more frequent and more regularly scheduled meetings with students.

***Personalization and relationship-building contributed to an effective classroom environment.***

School leaders believed that efforts to create good adult-student relationships contributed to positive classroom environments in which students felt safe and were willing to participate.

*We really try to gain a rapport with students – have an adult gain rapport. We have case managers, an advisory period where all the teachers were asked to*

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<sup>12</sup> The number of students in an accelerated high school ranged from about 60 students to 340 students.

*learn a little bit more about a select group of students. . . Teachers here understand the importance of gaining that relationship with the student and they see that once they have that relationship, they can get the student to comply with certain things. . . so things can work better in the classroom.”*

-School-based literacy coach

*I think we give students the ability to feel comfortable to ask questions. A lot of our kids come in so intimidated, they plan to fly under the radar. We encourage them to take risks, to put themselves out there a little bit. . . . They had a lot of anxiety when they came to us, lots of anxiety about test-taking, anxiety about being an active participant in the classroom. We allow them to be comfortable with themselves taking risks in their education. -Principal*

Accelerated high school leaders and teachers in our sample schools were sensitive to the prior negative school experiences many students had had, and to the importance of breaking down distrust and resistance to learning that often characterized their students. In many instances we saw that teachers were trying to go beyond just knowing the young people as students, and learning about their lives beyond the school walls. This kind of relationship-building they believed “paid off” in the classroom, because students were more likely to want to cooperate with and work harder for a teacher whom they perceived as caring about them.

### **Physical Environments**

***Accelerated high schools focused on creating warm and often non-traditional environments that would better connect students to school.***

The accelerated high schools tried to make their environments welcoming and attractive. For example, some renovated their buildings and/or applied fresh paint and bright colors, while others also tried to create a school environment *different from* traditional schools. This meant holding school in a non-traditional setting, or making students the center of the school environment. One accelerated school with a computer-based curriculum chose to have their school setting appear more like a business to heighten students’ motivation and sense of connection.

*Most of our sites are in shopping plazas. . . We want to completely remove the kids from the environment where they weren't successful. By putting them in this completely new setting, a lot of them are successful—it's a very professional-looking site. Each kid has their own work station, and it kind of models a business. -Provider*

Another school communicated the importance of “student voice” by displaying student-made posters presenting students’ photographs, and their successes and dreams. School staff described these “Walls of Success” as part of an effort to show students that they are valued as individuals, and thus connect them to the school. In conjunction with a strong focus on relationship building between adults and students, and among students, the principal of this school believed the environment in her school presented a different atmosphere than the students’ previous school experience.

*I think our school culture and climate is a big success. That was one of my huge focus areas. When I took this job, I knew this population had such bad experiences in school or were fighting or were kicked out of schools... To bring all the kids together, that had to be the number one goal. I'm really proud of where we are with that. I think you'll walk down the halls and see that students don't disrespect each other very much, hardly. There's not a lot of yelling in the halls, no fighting; and they all say they feel safe here. ... Did that happen the first day? No. It's just constant talking about who we are—that this is not the school you went to [before]. We're trying to do something different. -Principal*

Like this principal, in other alternative high schools we similarly saw the attempt to create environments different from traditional schools—environments that adults hoped would remind their students that they were in a different kind of setting than the kind where they had previously struggled, felt isolated, or rejected.

## Preparing for Postsecondary and Employment Opportunities

***The accelerated high schools sought to help students make sense of school by strengthening the connection between their high school education and future education and employment opportunities.***

Staff from across the accelerated high schools believed that students needed a combination of both practical support and inspiration in order for them to connect their education to future plans for college or work. As a provider explained:

*I think what's important is making kids believe in themselves. The first week of school, we take kids off to college campuses, trade schools, and one thing I tell them before they leave is be aware of your surroundings.... Tell me what you see. When they come back they tell me, 'that kid looked just like me.' [I tell them] 'You know, you're right. You may be whatever you resolve to be, you just need to put forth the effort and the consistency to make that happen.'*

In addition to inspirational trips and speakers, the accelerated high schools' staff offered students practical support by helping to them build a pathway to college and employment. They organized trips to colleges, had college speakers at their schools, and provided assistance with college essays, filling out the FAFSA forms and practicing and registering for the SATs. This level of attention included advisories in which each student filled out a postsecondary plan or a senior English class in which they worked on a personal essay which could double as their college essay. In other instances, where there was not designated staffing focused on post-secondary planning, school leaders or teachers would organize activities that would help remind students about the importance of future planning. As one principal said,

*Getting them to think beyond high school; that's a real focus of ours. . . . We don't really have time for it, but we are going to have guest speakers. Or grabbing them while they're working on something [to say], 'We're updating your file on the postsecondary piece. Are you still thinking about nursing school?'*

As well as focusing on future educational planning, many schools incorporated mock interviews and resume writing into their post-secondary activities. Some had a designated

period and/or internships that provided hands-on learning opportunities in areas in which students had career interests, while a few offered trade certification in selected areas.

While not all the accelerated high schools had designated staff or structured time for post-secondary education and career planning, all appeared to find ways to help students connect their high school education to their futures..

### **Attention to Absences**

#### ***Accelerated high schools worked to maintain student attendance.***

While all schools did some outreach when a student was absent, some – especially those with higher numbers of social workers or guidance counselors – actively tracked students, following up every absence, making multiple phone calls home to find a student, and even making home visits. Schools with less or no support staff were less intense in their follow up, simply calling a student “if we haven’t seen him in awhile.”

One principal described an active approach to combating absenteeism:

*If a kid doesn't show up, the first person who calls is our attendance coordinator. Then the instructor, whose class they missed, is gonna make a phone call. After that it's going to go to the behavioral specialist on that floor. From there it's gonna go to the team leader on that floor. After that, they're gonna get a call from the operations director, and if the kid is chronically truant, they're gonna get a phone call from me (the principal). If need be, we'll go to their house, with the parent's permission . . . to let them know the importance of getting to school.*

Another principal described a different strategy – the use of an attendance panel with students on it – which s/he believed was particularly effective.

*“They [the students who had been absent] had to talk about their attendance [to the school attendance panel], they had to talk about their obstacles, they had to sign a contract. That was pretty successful. . . I can tell them all day that they need to come to school but if they actually have to sit here and two students—the students will be very honest, they will not hold back. They will say, “Don't you care about your education.”*



*For some of our students, this is their last opportunity, because of their age, to get a high school diploma. And they'll flat out say, "If you don't do it here, when do you think you are gonna do it? What's keeping you from coming to school?" They will ask harder questions than the adults sometimes.*

A third school grouped its student body into "teams," and awarded McDonalds' coupons or a pizza party to the team with the highest attendance.

### **Community Building and Leadership Opportunities**

*Two schools had strong community building processes in place.*

School leaders and teachers in two schools believed that students' sense of belonging was enhanced through school-wide community building processes that established safe spaces for students to talk, places where students felt listened to, and in some instances, practices for defusing tensions or problems.

At one school, teachers and students built a sense of community in their school through the use of restorative practices circle. All students participated in circles in their individual classrooms for 10-15 minutes three or sometimes four times per day. As the principal described them, "restorative practice" sessions are intended to be "80% preventative and 20% restorative, [the latter] when someone damages trust." If a crisis happened, a teacher could call a restorative circle. "The goal is to build community, so that kids see the circle as a safe place. They talk about issues that students face, and that face the school. They have so many obstacles. This gives them a chance to talk to each other about how they want to be treated." Through restorative practices which provide a process for students listening to each other and for solving interpersonal tensions this school was working to make students feel a deep connection with the school and their peers.

Another school used their Group Guided Interaction (GGI) time, which was largely focused on postsecondary education, to build a sense of community among students and teachers.

*Our students have GGI every day [for 25 minutes]. They will sit down with their advisory. They will discuss postsecondary, any issues they're having, current events. Teachers are building rapport and trust during GGI.*

Both of these schools also held town hall meetings as a way of enhancing the sense of community in their schools. For example, one school had a half-hour morning “Pick Me Up” ritual that started the day, which the principal described as “an activity to get everyone engaged. It’s to bring the whole school together, to see us as one kind of family.” In addition, the school also has a town hall meeting every Friday:

*... we do awards, we do Shout Outs for students or teachers of the week, and fun activities that are embarrassing for the advisors, like Fear Factor or American Idol. It’s just a way for us to come together as a community.* School-based instructional coach

In these schools, school leaders and staff believed that collective activities that involved school members in solving problems, celebrating achievements, or having fun contributed to rapport and built a sense of belonging and community among staff and students.

***Other schools included leadership programs to motivate students and increase their sense of connection.***

In two schools, teachers selected students who showed positive social and academic behaviors and rewarded them with student leadership positions. In one of these schools student leaders were identified by the color tee shirt they were wearing. The different colors signified levels of responsibility, and school leaders and teachers presumed that gaining status in the leadership system would help students feel more connected to their school environment. At another school the students self-selected into leadership positions, but here too the intent was the same: to give students a sense of belonging through opportunities to be leaders at their school.

### **Re-Engaging Students with Literacy and Learning**

Rekindling interest in learning and literacy was a major challenge to staff in the accelerated high schools. As the theory of action indicates, engagement with literacy and learning should happen simultaneously with reconnecting youth to school and implementing the JFF Framework. While



engagement with reading and writing is widely discussed in the research on adolescent and young adult literacy, the accelerated high schools faced a particularly daunting task – the need to engage youth who, in many cases, were low-level readers and had experienced failure previously. As one principal explained:

*The most important thing is to make it engaging. With a population of students who last year went to school 40% of the time if they came at all, you really have to be on fire if you want to capture a group of students who haven't come to school in four years. Anything we can do to engage them and make it relevant and meaningful.*

Staff in the accelerated schools used a variety of strategies to engage students. **Figure 9** below outlines the strategies we identified as those used in our sample schools.

**Figure 9: Engaging Students with Literacy and Learning**

### **Engaging Students with Literacy and Learning**

- **Developing Relevant Content:** Teachers and administrators believed that student engagement in literacy was strengthened when students could make personal connections during the learning process.
- **Making Learning Enjoyable:** Many teachers believed that students learned better when learning activities were fun.
- **Grouping Students:** In all but one school, having students collaborate was regarded as a means for furthering engagement.
- **Offering Incentives:** Teachers frequently used incentives to reward students for their participation and work completion.
- **Designated Time for Reading:** Two schools had designated times for leisure reading.
- **Addressing Learning Gaps:** Teachers used an array of strategies to prevent gaps in skills from becoming obstacles to engagement with reading and writing.

#### **Developing Relevant Content**

*Teachers and administrators believed that student engagement in literacy was strengthened when students make personal connections during the learning process.*

As one teacher noted, it was important for him to “start with how they [students] can connect with the reading on a personal level.” In observing classrooms, we saw teachers beginning class by asking students to reflect on what they were reading, and share aloud when they had had a similar feeling or experience as a character in the text. In response to being asked what motivates or engages students, an instructional coach elaborated on the topic of helping students make a personal connection.

*Anything real-world [that] they can make the personal connection to; they enjoy that...[that] they can recall from hearing or seeing it from outside of school; they take to those. Anything they feel that [they] can benefit from they grab a-hold to. This population looks for a connection to anything. They need to know they can relate and gain something from knowing this. They don't like anything they feel like 'I'm never going to use this or hear this outside of school.*

Ways in which teachers made learning relevant included:

- Selecting books and topics that promote cultural knowledge, pride, and positive identity;
- Using books that have characters and situations that reflect students' real-life experiences;
- Bringing current events, popular culture, and/or controversial issues into the classroom;
- Prompting students to express their opinions, points of views, and reflect on how something made them feel, especially through journaling and/or Classroom talk;
- Giving students choice, by allowing them to choose books, choose the roles they played in literature circles, and/or choose the topics or presentation method for their assignments.

Teachers across our sample schools considered these types of strategies to be ones that helped students connect with the content of their lessons.

### **Making Learning Enjoyable**

*Many teachers believed that students learned better when learning activities were fun.* To enliven learning, schools often expanded the curriculum to include activities such as shopping together to choose books to read during independent reading time, and/or dramatization or games that would have appeal to adolescents. Examples of strategies used to make learning fun included:

- Field trips at the start of school to a book store where the students were given gift cards to purchase a book of their own choosing;
- Pairing literacy activities with visual arts projects or drama, which gave students a chance to showcase other skills;
- Using game-like strategies for review or as low-risk, ungraded assignments to stimulate students thinking.

These kinds of activities not only enlivened learning, but could also help build student investment in their own learning by directly involving them in shaping learning activities

through their purchases, their visual or dramatic creations, or by being “contestants” in game-like situations.

### **Grouping Students**

***In all but one sample school, grouping students was regarded as a means for furthering engagement.***

Grouping students was sometimes intentional and sometimes a matter of students grouping themselves. Many schools in our sample, however, practiced intentional heterogeneous grouping at least some of the time. When students were grouped heterogeneously it was because teachers believed that students could better learn from each other this way, especially lower-skilled students. As one teacher explained “When you pair the lower level with the higher level, it gives them more opportunity to be successful.” This also provided students with stronger skills the opportunity to take on leadership roles.

In our sample schools, we also found that group work provided teachers with time to focus on individual students while others worked together. Many teachers believed that this one-on-one assistance was key to sustaining student engagement.

As noted in the chapter on the JFF Model, collaborative group work was a JFF strategy, and one which teachers and administrators identified as often among the first to be implemented by them. This is not surprising, as teachers identified grouping students as an engagement strategy, which they believed was a necessary co-condition to enacting the higher level literacy strategies in the JFF Framework.

### **Offering Incentives**

***Teachers frequently used incentives to reward students for their participation and work completion.***

Positive verbal reinforcement was frequent in classrooms we observed, contributing to environments that maintained a positive tone, even when students were struggling. We also observed a handful of teachers using tangible incentives, including point systems (“I offer points for any[thing] and everything they do” a teacher reported) in order to maintain student engagement. Especially for students who had previously had negative school

experiences, a tone of encouragement and verbal and other rewards for their efforts, were strategies for maintaining engagement.

### **Designated Time for Reading**

***Two schools had designated times for leisure reading.***

In order to create greater engagement with books, two schools invited students to read high-interest books during non-instructional time. In one school there was a 30 minute School-wide Reading Time in which teachers and students read the same book, which they could then discuss. The other school had a 30 minute daily Sustained Silent Reading time when students could read books of their own choosing. In one of these schools we observed in the office a display of adolescent literature in paperbacks that students could borrow and take home to read. These schools believed that giving students some choice over the texts they read was a good strategy for engaging them with literacy.

### **Addressing Learning Gaps**

In addition to the engagement strategies above, teachers in accelerated high schools often had to find ways to address students' learning gaps in order to keep them engaged. Teachers reported needing to find or make appropriate reading material in their content area, focus on strategic skills, and utilize assessments that helped students see their learning and progress. These strategies helped to clear obstacles to students' engagement with reading and writing.

***Many teachers struggled to find high-interest, low-level reading materials that would keep students engaged.***

Some teachers used novels about youth like those in their schools, others found that "adapted classics" written at middle-school reading level would work, while others used articles written by teen authors. An instructional coach suggested that GED materials, which are regarded as "real-life" learning, were useful. Some used existing texts in limited ways. Many teachers found themselves adapting texts to be accessible by their students. As one teacher explained:

*I'm teaching environmental science; there are no books for them. I taught environmental science last year [at a different school]... and have been using*

*some of the lessons I developed during that time...Now I use the text more as a resource than a learning material. If I assigned reading, it was like another language for them. Most science texts are written as if the student is in college, even those books written for high school students.*

Many times teachers created their own materials from scratch or adapted the existing curriculum. This included re-doing computer-based lessons at a level their students could understand. They found Internet resources, developed their own handouts, graphic organizers, guided notes and rubrics.

***Many teachers reported being challenged to find pedagogical approaches that could help them break down ideas to enable students to engage more deeply with texts that were challenging for them.***

Teachers found that approaches that helped students draw on their prior knowledge, such as starting with a journal prompt and using graphic organizers were important to helping students gain access to difficult material and stay engaged. One strategy we observed being used was “visualization,” that is, taking a complex story, breaking it down into shorter segments, and turning those segments into a comic strip. One teacher explained that within the short time students are with them, “you don’t teach them depth of content, but it is more strategy-driven.” In other words, many of the teachers we interviewed believed that their most important task was to provide their students with a set of strategies they could use to decipher meaning when faced with a complex text—so they would not give up, but stay engaged with the text.

***Many teachers said they looked for ways to build literacy skills in the key areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, in order to facilitate engagement.***

A number of teachers mentioned specific areas in which they needed to focus in order to overcome obstacles that hindered students’ engagement with literacy-related tasks. Vocabulary-building, for example, was named by many teachers as an area in which students needed particular attention. Other areas teachers mentioned were: active reading, comprehension, critical thinking and the conventions of writing and speaking. Many of the teachers believed their students needed “back to basics” instruction. Along these lines, three of the sample schools had a school-wide writing goal to teach their students to write



a five paragraph essay. An instructional coach reported a positive response among students to her school's focus on "basics:" "This year we've made things more skill-centered and more structured. The students seem to be responding to it; they seem to like it." She was contrasting this to last year, when the school had had less focus on literacy and had not had classroom instruction with a focus on areas such as vocabulary building, understanding the structure of stories, and character development.

***Schools were using multiple assessments for both diagnostic and summative purposes, including portfolios and projects as well as the TABE. These assessments were also used as tools for engaging students in their learning.***

At over half of the sample schools, administrators and teachers described assignments in which students were working on major projects throughout the school year. These projects involved multiple components, which were intended to draw on specific skills that students were expected to demonstrate. Projects often involved extensive reading and writing as well as research and oral presentations. In describing these projects, one administrator commented, "[T]hey actually have to talk about what they've read, and they'll get questions about it. So it's not like they can go Google and fake it." Students approaching graduation needed to complete senior projects as well, an opportunity to showcase their learning and provide evidence of their readiness for postsecondary life.

At least two schools required students to compile portfolios, which were used to evaluate students' progress and achievement of learning goals. The portfolios were also a chance for students to reflect on their own learning, a strategy for maintaining engagement. One school was developing "performance expectations" and rubrics from which to build curriculum that would better meet students' academic needs.

At a computer-based school, teachers could view assessments of student progress in real-time and could easily generate reports, which they could then use to adjust instruction, and keep their students engaged, they believed, because instruction would be aligned with their learning needs.

All of the schools used the TABE as a diagnostic tool providing data on students' grade level performance in literacy and numeracy. Staff from three of the sample schools discussed the

TABE as important not only for determining students' baseline skill levels but also for informing teachers' instruction. Two schools indicated that they used the skill breakdown provided by the TABE to determine students' weaknesses, which they targeted in students' academic plans and during instruction. Staff from these schools also talked about periodically sharing the data with students, which they believed created transparency around students' academic standing, as well as kept students focused on their learning and areas for improvement. Using the TABE as well as portfolios and/or projects for self-assessment was a strategy for maintaining student engagement with their learning.

## Chapter IV: Conclusion and Recommendations

Our findings have examined the strategies for literacy we observed and learned about through interviews in three interrelated areas:

- implementation of the JFF Model,
- reconnecting disconnected students to school, and
- engaging youth with low reading levels with literacy and learning.

These three areas, and the strategies connected to them, were talked about as distinct: regardless, there was often overlap among the approaches used in these areas, all of which staff in accelerated high schools believed needed to occur simultaneously to remediate learning gaps and build academic competence.

### Evidence of Success

Despite the fact that this research was conducted at an early juncture in the development of many of the accelerated high schools, we found evidence that the schools had committed to a focus on literacy.

- The adoption of the JFF Model by the OMP, in particular, appeared to have boosted awareness of the need for a focus on literacy among all the accelerated high schools.
- Development of a cross-content approach to literacy corresponds to what the literature on adolescent literacy suggests is important to building competent readers and writers.
- Most schools were working on implementation of the JFF Framework in conjunction with two other areas they considered critical—reconnecting disconnected students, and engaging youth in literacy and learning. In line with findings in the literature on disconnected students, school leaders and teachers were creating environments in which strong relationships and the provision of multiple student supports were a priority.
- In the attempt to re-engage students who had become disengaged from literacy and learning, some of the accelerated high schools were pursuing strategies suggested by the literature on struggling readers, such as allowing students to choose their

own reading material to ensure high interest, and working to locate or make accessible appropriate level reading material in the different content areas.

At the time the research for this report was completed, however, it was still too early in the school year to determine whether the schools' focus on literacy, and their strategies for reconnecting and engaging students had affected students' academic outcomes.

This study will continue for another two years, providing an opportunity for RFA to investigate more fully the impact of a heightened focus on literacy to meet the needs of over-age under-credited students and, in particular, the longer term influence of the JFF Framework on teaching and learning in these schools. This research can inform the efforts of Project U-Turn and the OMP in their efforts to focus on literacy to assist youth who, without special interventions, might never complete high school. This research could also be of interest to District staff concerned about reforms to improve student learning and achievement in Philadelphia's other alternative schools and in the comprehensive high schools. Finally, this research should be of national interest. Other cities, including Boston, Chicago, New York City, and Portland, OR, are also developing multiple pathways programs and are similarly focused on literacy learning.,

## **Recommendations for Next Steps**

Based on our first phase of research, we recommend:

1. Sustained investment by Project U-Turn and the OMP in a focus on literacy, and the implementation of the JFF Common Instructional Framework across content areas. We make this recommendation because this study was conducted too early in the implementation of the JFF Framework to assess its effectiveness. Too often, promising reforms are abandoned before their effectiveness can be assessed. Some accelerated schools were relatively new and many were still in the early stages of adoption of the Framework and need time and support in order to be able to fully implement the six JFF strategies.
2. Additional dialogue between the OMP and providers about implementation of the JFF Framework and the compatibility or perceived conflict with their instructional

approaches in order to encourage stronger buy-in, and/or to learn what the OMP might do to increase buy-in.

3. Examination by the OMP of the barriers to school staff participation in JFF practices and processes, and how best to address these barriers. This might include supports that would allow schools to carve out time for professional development related to the JFF strategies, the instructional rounds process, and other learning opportunities.
4. Further exploration by the OMP of the kinds of materials and resources teachers need to meet the needs of struggling readers, and assistance in acquiring these.
5. Examination by the OMP and District research office of the correlation between approaches to improving student attendance and improvement of attendance. This analysis could be useful to the larger system as well as to the accelerated schools.
6. Further opportunities for accelerated high school administrators and teachers to share questions, best practices and challenges across schools. All the schools are attempting to meet the social and academic needs of a similar population and have developed some expertise; all also have burning questions about how to better meet the needs of the youth they serve. Creating structured opportunities for exchange, collaboration and sharing can help build knowledge within individual schools and also for the larger mission of these schools, the OMP and the District.

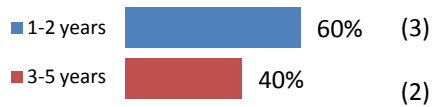
### **Future RFA Research Plans**

RFA will work closely with PYN and the OMP to design a mixed-methods study that investigates the impact and outcomes of accelerated high schools on student achievement, and continues to track the implementation successes and challenges of this model.

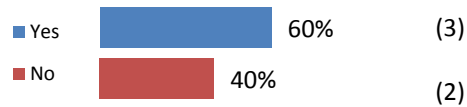
## Appendix A

Figure A1: Characteristics of Literacy Coaches, RFA survey, Fall 2010

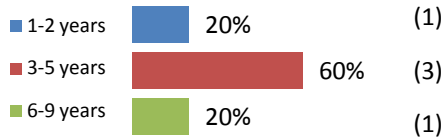
*Including the current school year, how many years have you been coaching?*



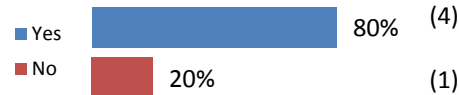
*Have you attended any JFF/UPCS literacy trainings in Philadelphia?*



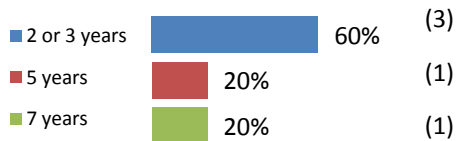
*How many years did you teach before becoming a coach?*



*Have you attended any JFF/UPCS literacy trainings in Worcester, MA?*



*Including the current school year, how many years have you been teaching and/or coaching at your school?*

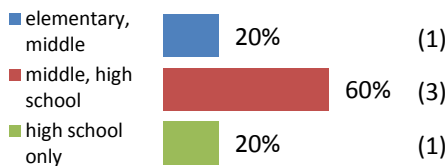


One respondent hadn't attended any training.

*If applicable, where did you teach/coach before this school?*

All had previously taught and/or coached at another school. They had taught at a variety of middle and high schools, including charters.

*Which grade level(s) have you taught?*



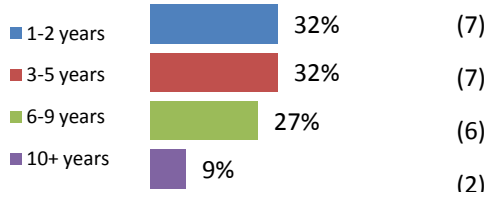
*In which content area(s) have you taught?*

Four had taught English. Of those 4, 3 had also taught social studies and/or special education.

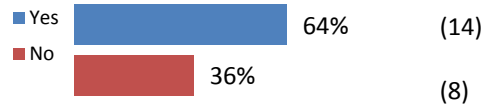
N=5

**Figure A2: Characteristics of Teachers, RFA survey administered prior to focus group, Fall 2010**

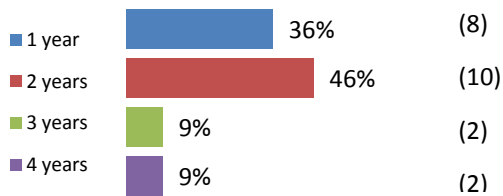
*Including the current school year, how many years have you been teaching?*



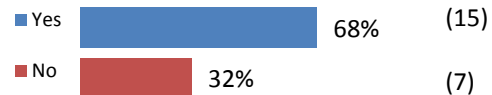
*Have you attended any JFF/UPCS literacy trainings in Philadelphia?*



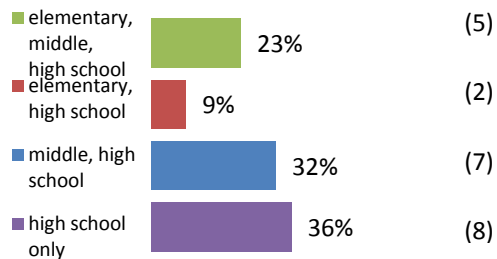
*Including the current school year, how many years have you been teaching at your school?*



*Have you attended and JFF/UPCS literacy trainings in Worcester, MA?*



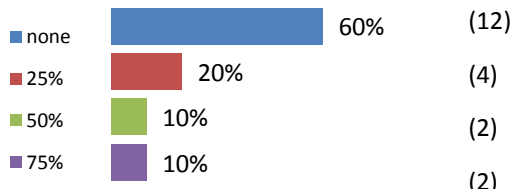
*Which grade levels have you taught?*



*If applicable, where did you teach before this school?*

All but 4 teachers reported previously teaching at one or more schools. Respondents listed a variety of schools in the Philadelphia area, including multiple neighborhood high schools.

*About how much time do you generally provide for computer-based instruction during a class period?*



*In which content areas do you currently teach?*

Five respondents were teaching more than one subject. Eight taught English, 4 taught math, 4 taught social studies, and 4 taught science.

N=22

RFA surveyed between 3-7 teachers per school.