

An Interview with Kate Shaw from Research for Action

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Research for Action (RFA) engages in research to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for underserved students. RFA strives 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.

Kate Shaw became executive director of RFA in December 2009. Since then, she has overseen fourfold organizational growth. Although Shaw had "never run a nonprofit before," since starting at RFA she has worked hard to increase RFA's visibility and strengthen its commitment to educational research. Shaw worked quickly to more clearly brand RFA as an objective, non-partisan research organization, and has successfully raised funding to increase its research and communications capacity. Shaw also worked hard to change the culture of the organization by creating a quantitative shop in order to compete for more funding. Shaw also created a policy department to get RFA's research projects out in a more timely and accessible manner. Finally, Shaw bolstered organizational communications to translate RFA's work for different

audiences and to have a stronger media presence.

As a leader, Shaw has brought an entrepreneurial spirit to RFA. She says that being executive director "is a hard job." It can be difficult to raise money: "we get very little direct operating support; nearly all of our resources must be directed towards [our] research projects." Shaw is very aware of her responsibilities to her staff members, 32 people who depend on her for their salaries. Shaw diversified funding and began to acquire larger grants and more multiyear grants in order to "work more deeply" and expand funding nationally.

Since Shaw stepped in as executive director at RFA, she has exemplified her passion for impactful education research through her leadership style. Shaw describes herself as being "comfortable with making the tough decisions" even when she has to "be the bad guy sometimes." She makes decisions based on what is best for RFA's growth and development. She values structure, respect, fairness and above all maintaining RFA's mission-driven approach.

When asked about her thoughts on being a leader, Shaw specifically said that being executive director can be "exciting and rewarding" but also that it is "so hard to find the right balance between local, state and national grants." One of the most important responsibilities for Shaw, as executive director, has been to diversify RFA's funding, by include larger grants, contracts and state and

federal government grants. Shaw has worked hard to secure grants that average \$250,000 dollars per year, and multiyear grants that help stabilize RFA. Shaw has also expanded funding nationally, garnering grants that elevate RFA's profile and influence.

Shaw believes that "education is the only pathway to social mobility and that we don't have a level playing field. And I believe that research, [if] done well and translated for the right audience—if it is timely enough—can have a positive influence on educational policy [and] practice."

Shaw has implemented higher standards for research. With increased expectations, she has also increased compensation. As executive director, Shaw does not conduct research herself, but she provides strategic direction for every project, and reviews all documents before they are released. Her goal with every deliverable is to ensure accessibility. She asks herself, "Who are [we] trying to reach?" Shaw believes that in order for research to make an impact it must be understandable. Research should be used "as a tool to make things better."

Shaw's overall attitude is to keep her organization "smart and agile" and to be "prepared" for any opportunities that arise. RFA's strategy is to focus on producing consistently credible research that aligns with the organizational mission and values of ensuring equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for all children.