

Harvard Family Research Project



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## **The Right Question Project**

**Capacity Building to Achieve Large-Scale Sustainable Impact**

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The DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund

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# **The Right Question Project: Capacity Building to Achieve Large-Scale Sustainable Impact**

*Nonprofit leaders are beginning to confront the most important unfinished business of their sector. Having invented scores of successful model programs to address virtually every type of social problem or goal, they are discovering that large-scale, sustain[able] impact remains elusive.*

– Letts, Ryan, & Grossman, 1999

Family-school-community partnership programs are at a critical juncture in their development. While many have already proven their success in getting parents more involved in their children's education, few have taken their success to the next level and increased their impact by effectively expanding and sustaining their programs.

When faced with the question of how to achieve large-scale sustainable impact, non-profit organizations that implement family-school-community partnership programs often think first about program replication – that is, expanding their programs to multiple sites. Their vision becomes one of many programs operating in a consistent way across an increasing number of locations.

While certainly this is one way to increase the scale of a program, it can make sustainability harder to achieve. With more programs, non-profit organizations take on more administrative, management, and oversight responsibilities. More importantly, they must constantly drum up more and more funding to support an ever-increasing number of program sites.

This is not to say that program expansion and replication cannot be a viable option for achieving large-scale sustainable impact. Indeed, this can be an effective strategy, particularly if non-profits make a significant investment in building the organizational capacity of added sites to become self-sustaining. Self-sustaining sites are not dependent on their “parent” organizations, but are able to implement high quality programs and at the same time get the financial support needed to continue that implementation over time (Letts et al., 1999).

Program expansion and replication is the dominant scale up and sustainability model within the family-school-community partnership field. Few alternative models exist to guide non-profits interested in scaling up and sustaining, but choosing not to take on the increased administrative and oversight responsibilities that go along with the replication and expansion model.

This case study describes one alternative model that achieves large-scale sustainable impact through the dissemination of an idea. Using the example of a small Massachusetts non-profit organization – the Right Question Project – this case study describes how the Right Question Project evolved from implementing an effective family-school-community partnership approach, to achieving large-scale sustainable impact with that approach.

## What Is the Right Question Project?

The Right Question Project (RQP) is a small, non-profit organization that promotes parent and community involvement in schools by building parents' skills to effectively support, monitor, and advocate for their children's education. RQP works primarily with low- and moderate-income communities that historically have been disengaged from the educational process.

True to its name, the Right Question Project believes that parents must be able to ask the "right questions" to be active partners in their children's education. This is the primary skill that the organization helps parents acquire. Rather than giving parents a list of questions that they should ask, RQP helps parents identify educational issues that are important to them and develop *their own* questions. The practice of formulating questions becomes a way for parents to organize their thoughts, prioritize their concerns, and come up with effective ways to communicate those concerns (Right Question Project, 1999a). This approach builds a permanent skill in parents that can be applied not only in their child's classroom or in school, but in many everyday situations.

### What Is the RQP Methodology?

At the heart of RQP's work is an educational strategy or process, referred to here as a *methodology*, that when used in training develops parents' question-formulation and critical thinking skills (Right Question Project, 1998a). The methodology consists of three main parts:

1. a set of beliefs, principles, and values about parent involvement that parents discuss and sign on to
2. a skill-building technique that helps parents learn to think critically and ask the "right" questions
3. a framework that parents use to create action plans and use their question formulation skills.

### RQP Beliefs, Principles, and Values

As summarized above, during training, the methodology begins by introducing parents to a set of fundamental beliefs, principles, and values that RQP promotes as critical to parent involvement. This step is important because it lays the "ground rules" for RQP's approach with parents. Parents learn that RQP's approach places them in the driver's seat, and that there is an important role for them to play in their children's education.

RQP's belief, principles, and values challenge some traditional models of working with parents, especially disengaged and low-income parents. While many traditional models tend to give parents proposed solutions to their problems, RQP instead helps parents create their own solutions.

## RQP Beliefs, Principles, and Values

### Fundamental Belief

- Parents are capable of thinking and acting on their own behalf.

### Principles

- Schools require parents who can advocate for themselves.
- Schools require parents who can participate effectively in decision-making processes that affect them.
- Schools require parents who can hold decision-making processes and decision makers accountable.

### Values

- Parents need to name key issues and concerns for themselves.
- Parents need to formulate their own questions.
- Parents need to design their own action plans.
- Parents need opportunities to learn from each other.

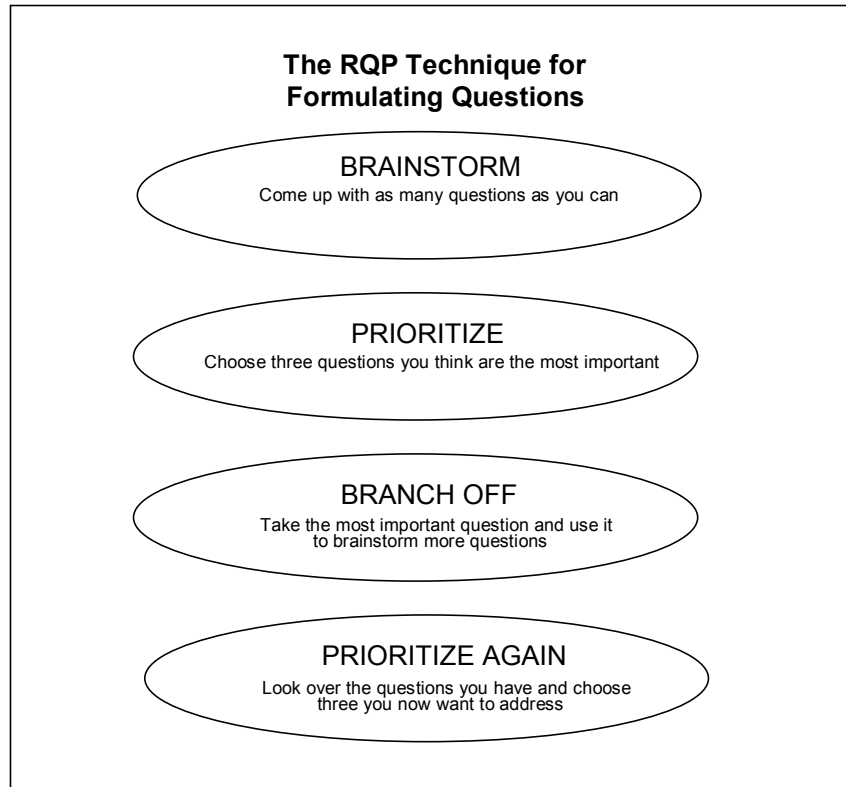
## **A Skill Building Technique**

The second part of the methodology builds practical skills that help parents apply the beliefs, principles, and values. Parents go through a four-part skill-building technique, as summarized in Figure 1, that builds their capacity to think critically and formulate questions that will get them the answers they need (Right Question Project, 1999a).

Parents begin the four-part technique by focusing on an issue that is important to them in supporting their children's education. For example, this issue could be learning more about how their child is doing in school or understanding teachers' expectations about homework. Once parents choose the issue, they proceed through a series of activities focused around that issue. Parents begin by brainstorming to generate a list of questions they have about that issue and then prioritize their questions. Parents also learn the advantages and disadvantages of asking open- versus close-ended questions.

Next, parents branch off with the most important question from the list and brainstorm to generate more questions about it. Finally, they choose the three most important questions from their final list. At the end, parents take away a few targeted questions that will be most effective in getting the answers they need.

Figure 1



### **Developing an Action Plan**

The third part of the methodology has parents develop an action plan for using their questions. Parents learn a simple framework on the three roles they can play in their children’s education – supporter, monitor, and advocate. This framework becomes the foundation for their action plans. Their action plans translate those roles into specific tasks that the parents commit to doing on behalf of their children.

The main advantage of the RQP methodology is that it is simple to use, yet powerful. Regardless of education or literacy level, all parents can easily participate and learn from the methodology’s three steps. Additionally, the question-formulation and action planning skills parents learn are flexible. Parents can use them in virtually any context to help them support, monitor, and advocate for their children. For example, they can use their skills to prepare for a parent-teacher conference, to find out how to enroll their child in an after-school program, or to help them get proper health care for their children.

## **The Challenge of Program Expansion and Replication**

It took RQP some time as an organization to understand the full value and potential of its methodology. For the first seven years of the organization’s existence, RQP was primarily an organization with two purposes. First, RQP staff conducted structured workshops in which they trained both workshop facilitators and parents in how to use the methodology.

Second, RQP staff worked to develop “mini-RQP programs” across the nation that mirrored RQP as an organization in both form and function (Right Question Project, 1998b; 2000a).

These years were an important developmental period for RQP, because they allowed the organization to define, test, and refine the methodology and how it was delivered during training. RQP staff members explored several iterations of the workshop training curricula and tested many types of training formats and workshops.

Ultimately, RQP staff members emerged from these years with the knowledge that all of the programmatic structures surrounding the methodology were not as important as they first thought. Rather, they began to realize that the simple process or set of ideas that constituted the three-part methodology was what worked consistently and resonated with parents most, regardless of the setting or length of the workshop training.

Even as they were coming to this realization, RQP staff members continued to train more workshop facilitators and build more mini-RQP programs across the country. Consequently, RQP moved toward an expansion and replication model that was increasingly difficult to accommodate. RQP staff members eventually ended up managing multiple programs and had to fundraise continuously to meet the expanding management and administrative needs associated with these programs. While RQP was expanding its impact by increasing the number of people trained to deliver workshops to parents, staff time, energy, and resources became stretched to the limit. Eventually, RQP staff members found that this model inhibited, rather than facilitated, sharing the RQP methodology with a large audience of parents.

## **A Revised Focus: Disseminating the Methodology**

From 1996 to 1998, RQP staff members went through an extended period of reflection and exploration of RQP’s strengths in the family-school-community partnership field. They spent a good deal of time thinking through the implications of what had and had not worked well with RQP’s overall strategy for disseminating the methodology to parents.

RQP has always demonstrated a strong commitment to continuous learning and improvement. Staff members believe in the absolute importance of learning from practice, learning from the field, and then translating that learning into new practice. During the years of self-reflection, RQP used formal evaluation data, participant observation, and informal conversations with trainers and training participants to generate clear lessons learned. Technical assistance from two external organizations also helped RQP emerge from these years with a clearer future direction. Specifically, Replication and Program Strategies<sup>1</sup> helped the organization articulate the RQP methodology for the first time in 1997. In addition, the Harvard Family Research Project<sup>2</sup> helped RQP staff members use logic models as tools for modeling and thinking through different strategic options.

From this period forward, RQP staff members concluded that RQP’s value lay in the methodology, and not in building entire programs and structured workshops designed to deliver the methodology. As RQP Executive Director Dan Rothstein stated, “The articulation of the RQP methodology for the first time in August 1997 was a critical factor in

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<sup>1</sup> Replication Program Strategies, Inc. is located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. It supports the wider adoption of effective social programs through technical assistance, analysis, and education.

<sup>2</sup> The Harvard Family Research Project is located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Through a grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, HFRP provided technical assistance to RQP from 1997-1999.

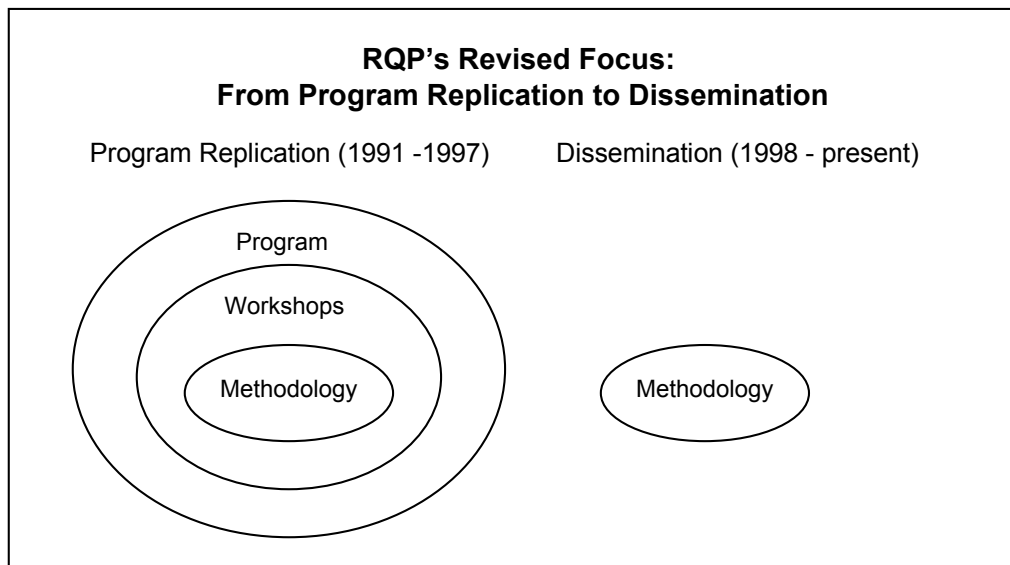


imagining a different way of working – a different avenue to the sustainability of *ideas* rather than of *organizations* [using those ideas].”

As Figure 2 illustrates, expansion through program site replication was not an appropriate scale-up and sustainability strategy for RQP, because this approach buried the methodology within layers of unnecessary program and workshop infrastructure. Instead, RQP needed to find a strategy to disseminate the methodology itself as a simple process that could be integrated into virtually any type of parent training.

Once the focus on methodology dissemination became clear, staff members needed to realign RQP’s organizational structure and activities to be consistent with its revised focus. Until that point, RQP’s organizational structure and activities had been consistent with a training and project management focus. This left RQP staff members working with a limited number of organizations, because each of these organizations demanded high resource investments. Furthermore, a rigid workshop training structure limited how the methodology could be delivered and used.

Figure 2



The first step toward realignment was expanding RQP’s target audience. RQP went from working with a select few organizations that were building programs to deliver RQP workshops, to working with *any* organization that was working with low-income parents and wanted to improve parents’ critical thinking and question formulation skills. Defined as a set of ideas with an application for working with parents, the RQP methodology became a component that could easily *add value to* programs without becoming a program in and of itself. For example, organizations that already had training in place for low-income parents could enhance that training by integrating RQP’s question-formulation technique into their curricula.

The second and significant step in RQP’s realignment was loosening the restrictions on how organizations could use the methodology. During one period in RQP’s training history, the organization imposed strict guidelines for how the methodology should be used in workshops with parents. RQP staff learned from experience that this “quality

control” approach actually stifled creative thinking about how the methodology could be used. Consequently, the approach essentially limited the methodology’s reach.

After talking to the diverse groups of people trained to use the methodology, RQP staff found that many people were able to learn the methodology quickly and integrate it into their work without going through elaborate facilitator training workshops and without creating new infrastructures to deliver the methodology. As a result, staff reversed RQP’s stance on implementation and began to encourage those who used the methodology to be creative about how and when they used it with parents.

The final step in realignment was that RQP staff developed a distinct set of activities to help the organization effectively reach an expanded target audience and encourage more creativity and diversity in the methodology’s application and implementation. What emerged was a capacity-building strategy for working with organizations that wanted to use the RQP methodology and that complemented RQP’s new dissemination focus.

## **A Capacity-Building Strategy to Support Dissemination**

Strategy is, in part, the creation of a unique and valuable position in one’s field, with unique activities to support that position (Porter, 1996). RQP staff had already found a unique and valuable position in the family-school-community partnership field with the RQP methodology. What the organization needed next was a set of activities that could support, expand, and sustain that position.

RQP staff met this challenge by developing a set of capacity-building activities to fit RQP’s dissemination focus and at the same time meet the requirement that RQP as an organization remain small. As shown in Table 1 below, RQP chose three capacity-building activities for disseminating the methodology that were targeted to the needs of a diverse and expanded audience. This allowed RQP to manage limited staff and time resources (Right Question Project, 1999b).

Table 1 illustrates RQP’s three main capacity-building activities, the target audiences for those activities, and the intended purposes or outcomes of those activities. Additionally, as shown in the first column, Table 1 illustrates that each capacity-building activity requires different levels of RQP time and staffing resources. RQP achieves this by encouraging *self-support* through training products, *mutual support* through the network, and *direct support* through technical assistance and training that is tailored to the needs of organizations with whom it works.

Allowing for initial set-up time, the first two activities, developing training products and a creating peer learning network, require fewer RQP staff members to support and sustain. RQP staff can effectively disseminate and encourage the use of the methodology to any number of organizations without having to provide time-consuming one-on-one support. The third activity, tailored technical assistance and training, requires the highest RQP resource investment.



that could disseminate and expand the methodology's reach. The RQP users themselves were an important source of this expertise and information.

To help users connect, learn from each other, and share ideas about how to use the methodology, RQP staff created a peer learning network (still in its early stages) of practitioners or methodology users. The purpose of the peer learning network is to strengthen and broaden the ways in which organizations or individuals use the methodology.

Organizations involved in the network have a responsibility to document the lessons they learn from implementing the RQP methodology with parents. Each organization has a liaison that works with the network, shares the lessons, and participates in periodic joint network conference calls or meetings. RQP staff foster communication and the sharing of lessons learned among network members with an electronic and printed newsletter.

### **(3) Training and Technical Assistance**

Training products and the peer learning network alone do not completely meet the demands of all organizations that are interested in using the RQP methodology. Some organizations remain interested in getting direct training and technical assistance support from RQP staff. As a result, RQP staff members continue to provide some training on the RQP methodology, but make choices about how to invest their training and technical assistance time based on carefully selected criteria.

RQP requires organizations to meet five criteria (Right Question Project, 1998c). They have to demonstrate:

1. access to low-income parents
2. an infrastructure to support implementation of the RQP methodology
3. a strong commitment to build parents' skills
4. cost-sharing ability
5. a clear and structured plan for delivering the methodology to parents

Organizations requesting a more intense relationship (meaning more training and technical assistance time) with RQP have to meet more rigorous criteria in these areas. While use of these criteria means working directly and more intensely with a fewer number of organizations overall, RQP ultimately aims to increase its overall impact by working with organizations that commit to using the methodology and sustaining its use over time.

The content of RQP's training also has changed to be more in line with a dissemination, as well as scale up and sustainability focus. RQP no longer only prepares people to lead workshops. Instead of dictating how people should use the methodology, RQP trains people on how to develop their own strategies and applications for the methodology that are grounded in their own needs. When adapted to the organization's own context, RQP's training and technical assistance help the organization integrate and institutionalize the methodology to make it more sustainable.

## Early Capacity Building Results

RQP's strategy is still emerging, and it will take time to show how RQP's revised focus and capacity-building strategy are working in achieving large-scale sustainable impact. Stand-alone products are still being developed and the peer learning network has recently begun to take shape. RQP is also in transition with its training and technical assistance, as it takes time to work with long-time RQP partners around the implications of the new dissemination focus.

What have emerged already are examples that illustrate how RQP's capacity-building approaches are playing out in different and unique ways within organizations. Because RQP's capacity-building activities encourage a range of methodology uses, one important early measure of success is whether that diversity exists.


Table 2 illustrates the multiple ways the methodology has been used and implemented by a number of organizations with which RQP works. The table also shows the value-added of those implementation approaches to the organizations that are cited as examples (Right Question Project, 2000b). Comments in the value-added column come directly from interviews with representatives from each organization.

Looking in Table 2 at the organizations using the methodology, it is clear that they base their decisions about the methodology's use on how it fits within their existing organizational structure and activities. Implementation occurs along a continuum. Some organizations deliver RQP workshops as one of many types of training or programs offered to parents. Others embed the methodology into their organizational culture and use it as a part of almost everything they do.

While the table shows that some organizations integrate the methodology more than others, one approach is not necessarily better than the other. Some organizations find that a structured workshop approach fits better with their organizational style and capabilities. Other organizations prefer to use the methodology more "loosely" and do not restrict it to a workshop format. Faced with a range of options, organizations make their own choices about how they use the methodology.

The table also indicates that the type of capacity-building support received from RQP and the amount of RQP resource investment in the organization does not correlate exactly with the level of integration. Organizations cited as examples in the table have received different types and levels of training and technical assistance. For example, RQP has worked extensively with the Massachusetts Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC), but the New Mexico PIRC is a new partner. The Massachusetts PIRC chooses to deliver the methodology as a separate program or component of their work, while New Mexico integrates the methodology into already existing training.

**Table 2**  
**Continuum of RQP Methodology Use Within Organizations**

<b>Continuum of RQP Methodology Use and Organizational Integration</b>		<b>Implementation Examples</b>	<b>RQP Value-Added</b>
Separate Component 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Train parents using workshops as their own organizational component (traditional approach)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Massachusetts Parent Information Resource Center (PIRC) trains facilitators to deliver RQP workshops and facilitates workshops with parents.</li> <li>• The Indiana PIRC delivers RQP workshops with parents as one component of many services offered to parents.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The PIRC has a stable system in place for training facilitators and delivering workshops to parents. The number of facilitators and parents trained grows continuously.</li> <li>• The PIRC places RQP workshops in the “program” box. The methodology is one important tool of many that are offered to parents.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integration of the methodology into ongoing work with low-income parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Paterson Education Fund in New Jersey uses the methodology in a project called “Lift Every Voice – Levante Cada Voz” to help parents examine data on racial discrepancies in educational achievement.</li> <li>• The New Mexico PIRC integrates the methodology into several trainings and services the PIRC offers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents formulate questions about the data, and develop together an action agenda to address questions and concerns about the data.</li> <li>• The PIRC uses the methodology to help them make incoming phone calls from parents more effective. The NM PIRC uses the methodology with parents to get to the real “meat of the matter” in a shorter amount of time. Parents go away empowered, with their own plan of action.</li> </ul>
Integrated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full integration and institutionalization of the methodology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The New Hampshire Department of Adult Education integrates the methodology into all state-sponsored staff development activities and work is being done to integrate it into the overall adult basic education curriculum.</li> <li>• The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence (Kentucky) incorporates training on the RQP methodology into its Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership in Jefferson County.</li> <li>• In addition to using it in specific programs, the NJ Paterson Education Fund also integrates the methodology more broadly into its work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The methodology works across curriculum lines and is a part of the Department’s culture. The methodology fits into a wide range of programs, from classrooms, to one-on-one tutoring, to work in helping adults move from welfare to work.</li> <li>• The methodology now fits into all the Jefferson County Commonwealth Institute’s work. The Institute uses not only in their work with parents, but as part of the organization’s culture.</li> <li>• The methodology has become integral component of all work. It permeates – from their contact with the Board to all workshops with faculty and low-income parents. When approaching a problem the first thing they do is start with the questions they need to ask.</li> </ul>

## Ongoing Capacity Building Challenges

As RQP works to get its revised focus and capacity-building strategy in place, the organization is dealing with some important challenges that are surfacing in the early stages of the strategy's implementation.

Overall, there is the challenge of getting potential methodology users past the “workshop mentality.” Many individuals who work with low-income parents are not used to RQP's revised approach that requires them to create their own uses for the methodology. They are used to “one-size-fits-all” workshops that leave little to no room for modification. While organizations can still implement a workshop approach, unless overcome, this mentality could affect the methodology's potential reach and limit the number of parents who are trained to use it.

### Product Challenges

With an expanded target audience comes the challenge of effectively reaching that audience. RQP needs to develop audience demand for the methodology and for RQP's products and services. Marketing the methodology to the expanded target audience remains an important and time-consuming task.

Additionally, there is no guarantee that capacity building through stand-alone products can be effective without added support through RQP training and technical assistance. Products need to help users understand the methodology and at the same time motivate them to use it. Some individuals using the methodology note that it requires an “ah-ha” experience that may be hard to generate through a written product. Most product users to date have also received training and technical assistance on the use of those products. Gathering and using feedback continuously to improve products can help to parlay this challenge.

### Network Challenges

While getting the user network up and running is a major challenge in itself, getting the network to foster *learning* is the more significant challenge. In order to learn users need to do more than share information. The network needs to add value by helping people process and apply that information.

Getting the network to function independently and reduce reliance on RQP staff over time also will be difficult. Network start-up time will be substantial, and RQP will need to play a significant role in encouraging network participation and functionality throughout that start-up time.

### Training and Technical Assistance Challenges

While RQP is limiting its training and technical assistance investments with organizations intentionally, the organization still must address the fact that many organizations feel they need training to be confident enough to use the methodology. Products and the network can help to address this issue, but until they are fully in place, RQP staff members must manage training and technical assistance resources carefully.

RQP staff members also must address the challenge that organizations they work with may become dependent on RQP for making the decisions or coming up with new ideas

about how the methodology can be used. Dependent organizational relationships not only go against RQP’s stance on independent decision making with the methodology, but they stifle opportunity for expanding the methodology’s reach through missed opportunities for work with other organizations.

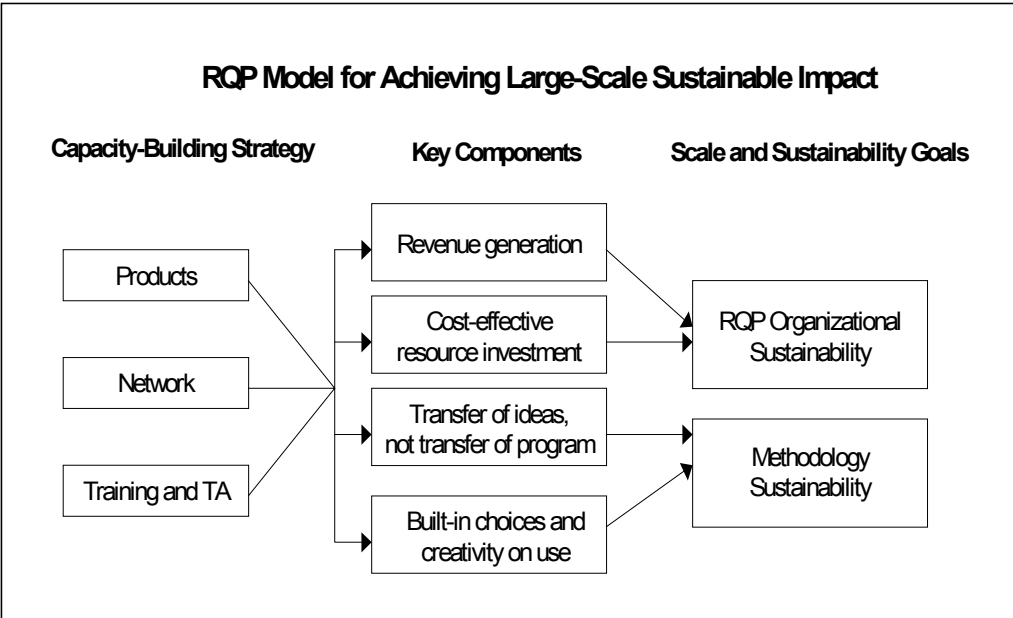
**RQP’s Model for Achieving Large-Scale Sustainable Impact**

RQP’s capacity-building activities themselves are not different or unique and are often part of replication and expansion models. However, the way in which RQP links its capacity building strategy to its scale up and sustainability goals is unique.

Figure 3 illustrates how RQP’s capacity-building strategy links to the achievement of large-scale sustainable impact. It begins with RQP’s three capacity-building activities and ends with two scale-up and sustainability goals – RQP’s own organizational sustainability and the sustainability of its methodology, or more accurately its widespread dissemination. In the middle are four key components or aspects of the capacity-building strategy that link RQP’s activities with its sustainability goals.

1. *Revenue generation.* Revenue generated through the sale of RQP products and technical assistance and training helps sustain RQP as an organization. Keeping in mind that their “customers” often have limited resources, RQP staff members help organizations make informed choices before investing significant resources. Instead of costly training up front, RQP recommends that organizations buy products first, at less than \$100 each. If products lead to more interest, organizations can set up a contract for telephone or brief on-site technical assistance. If organizations want to make the RQP methodology a major part of their work, more intensive and long-term contracts can be set up (up to \$15,000).

Figure 3





2. *Cost-effective resource investment.* With a small staff, RQP cannot be all things to all organizations. RQP's capacity-building strategy allows widespread and effective dissemination of the methodology without always forcing RQP staff to take a significant role in that dissemination. After initial set up, both the products and the network are designed to be self-sustaining and not require much investment of staff development time. This frees RQP staff to focus on more time-intensive training and technical assistance relationships.
3. *Transfer of ideas, not transfer of program.* Infrastructure often acts as a barrier to the sustainability of ideas. By freeing RQP's ideas (i.e. the methodology) from the often cumbersome and difficult-to-sustain infrastructure that went along with them (i.e. the workshops), RQP staff members greatly increased the probability that RQP's family-school-community partnership approach could be used and sustained over time. RQP staff members knew that the key to the sustainability of RQP's ideas meant tapping resources that already existed. As Dan Rothstein, RQP Executive Director stated, "There are vast resources and structures already in place to work with parents. RQP could be an educational strategy to plug in, to offer a focused advocacy strategy that can be universally applied by practitioners and parents. There's not a need for new structures. There's a need to think about how best to use existing structures and resources."
4. *Choices and creativity on use.* The decision to free the RQP methodology from a rigid implementation structure also contributed to RQP's scale up and sustainability goals. Organizations have opportunities to be creative with the methodology and develop their own approaches for integrating it into their work. This freedom and flexibility increases the chance that the ideas themselves will be used more and will be sustained over time. Before, the methodology was shared with parents only through workshops. Now, the methodology (using the question formulation technique) can be shared in brief conversations with parents over the telephone, on the street, or even in the Laundromat.

## Conclusion

The dominant model for achieving large-scale sustainable impact in the family-school-community partnership arena is program replication and expansion. Alternative models are hard to come by. As a result, there is little literature and few lessons learned from alternative approaches to guide organizations that are interested in forging new territory with new approaches.

Because it has departed from the norm, the lessons RQP has learned on its way to achieving large-scale sustainable impact can inform other family-school-community partnership organizations interested in crafting alternative scale up and sustainability approaches. Some overarching lessons learned from RQP's experience follow:

### **On identifying what to scale up and sustain:**

- The strength of an effective approach may lie in its ideas, not in the program designed to deliver those ideas.
- Ideas do not have to be complex to be powerful.
- Good ideas can often stand on their own without having added structure to support them.

**On capacity building:**

- Capacity building does not always need to be time-intensive, nor does it always need to be face-to-face
- Practitioners often make the best experts and should be regarded as valuable resources
- Sometimes capacity building should be more about tapping into people's already existing capacities than building capacity from the ground up

**On achieving large-scale sustainable impact:**

- Approaches or ideas that do not compete with others, but that can be readily integrated or adapted are easier to scale up and sustain.
- Approaches that require fewer infrastructures are easier to scale up and sustain.
- Approaches that are flexible and allow people to be creative about their use are easier to scale up and sustain.

## Research Method

This case study was developed as part of a generous three-year grant to the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund to provide technical assistance to the Fund's family-school-community partnership grantees. The Right Question Project, Inc. was one of these grantees.

Sources gathered during the technical assistance process from 1997 to 2000 and used to inform the writing of this case study include the following:

- RQP training products (training curricula, workshop guides)
- RQP documentation (concept papers, proposals, progress reports, evaluation data, logic models, journal articles, media coverage, brochures)
- RQP communication (memos, letters, electronic mail, newsletters)
- Site visits and RQP staff interviews (15 site visits over three years)
- Participant observation of training (Indianapolis, IN)
- Participant observation of annual grantee meeting (1997-1999)
- Interviews with RQP methodology users (in Indiana, Kentucky, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico)

This case study was reviewed and informed by RQP staff and HFRP team members.

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## Appendix A: Case Study Summary of the Right Question Project

### Agency Contact

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### Brief History

The Right Question Project (RQP) is a small, non-profit organization that promotes parent and community involvement in schools by building parents' skills to effectively support, monitor, and advocate for their children's education. RQP believes that parents must be able to ask the "right questions" to be active partners in their children's education. This is the primary skill that RQP helps parents acquire and then apply. RQP works primarily with low- and moderate-income communities that historically have been disengaged from the educational process.

At the heart of RQP's work is an educational strategy, referred to here as a *methodology*, that when used in training develops parents' question-formulation and critical thinking skills. The RQP methodology helps parents to think and act on their own behalf.

From its inception in 1991 through 1998, the Right Question Project operated successfully as a training and project management organization in the family-school-community partnership field. RQP trained workshop facilitators and parents in how to use the methodology and helped organizations build programs designed to train others to use the methodology.

As a strategy for tackling issues of scale up and long-term sustainability, in 1998 RQP "liberated" the methodology from its training program and workshop infrastructure. Instead of replicating programs, RQP began to focus on disseminating the methodology alone as a core set of ideas or a process that any organization working with parents could use.

In the parent involvement field, today RQP works to build the capacity of practitioners and organizations to integrate the methodology into their work with parents. These organizations, in turn, use the methodology in diverse ways to engage parents in supporting, monitoring, and advocating for improved educational opportunities for their children.

### Number of Sites/Affiliations

RQP does not have formal sites, but offers to work with any organization interested in using the methodology in their work with parents. RQP's methodology easily integrates into existing parent involvement programming.

Interested organizations or individuals can access a range of RQP capacity-building supports that help them understand and learn how to use the methodology. These include: (1) training products/curricula (for a small fee), (2) participation in a peer learning network of methodology users (free), and (3) RQP tailored training and technical assistance (for a negotiated fee).

## **Sources of Funding**

RQP receives funding from state and federal grants, individual donors, partnerships with agencies and organizations, and private foundations, such as the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund.

## **Operating Budget**

RQP operates with a budget of \$400,000 - \$600,000.

## **Organization**

The organization consists of three full-time staff members. Dan Rothstein is Executive Director, Luz Santana is Director of Training, and Charlene DiCalgero is the Network Coordinator. Pat Nelson is a half-time staff member and supports RQP's training activities. While staff members hold primary responsibilities in specific areas, RQP employs a collaborative and creative work environment in which each staff member has the opportunity to play a key role in all areas of RQP's work.

## **Description of Training**

In addition to its other capacity-building supports (training products and a peer learning network), RQP also offers direct training to organizations or individuals that meet a core set of criteria. They have to demonstrate:

- access to low-income parents
- an infrastructure to support implementation of the RQP methodology
- a strong commitment to build parents' skills
- cost-sharing ability
- a clear and structured plan for delivering the methodology to parents

RQP trains practitioners in how to use the RQP methodology in their work with parents. Sites committed to integrating and actively using the RQP methodology receive more advanced RQP training. Organizations requesting a more intense relationship (meaning more training and technical assistance time) with RQP have to meet more rigorous criteria in the five areas listed above.

## **Technical Assistance Services**

RQP approaches technical assistance flexibly. Upon completion of training sessions, RQP supports practitioners in the integration of the methodology into their ongoing work. RQP also offers technical assistance to all RQP users through its support of the peer learning network. The RQP Web page also shares useful information.

## **Evaluation**

RQP consistently uses evaluations and feedback to improve program implementation and integration. Participants complete assessment tools at the RQP direct training sessions and parents evaluate the value of what they learn from the methodology. In addition, the network will establish a system of sharing information, evaluation, reflections and thought processes among organizations that are using the RQP methodology.

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