

20
23

IMPACT REPORT



Strengthening Democracy
From the Roots Up



Right Question
Institute

A message from RQI's executive director

Welcome to the Right Question Institute's 2023 Impact Report, ***Strengthening Democracy From the Roots Up***. I'm grateful to our incredibly dedicated staff, our devoted partners, and all our generous friends who make this impact possible.

The state of our democracy is of urgent concern for many people right now — myself included. The global threat of authoritarianism has never felt so real.

As we approach a high stakes election in the U.S., RQI's origin story gives me hope that **simple steps can equip people with essential skills for participation and self-advocacy and thereby make democracy work better for everyone.**

While working with parents on a student-retention project in a lower-income community in Lawrence, Massachusetts, RQI's founders met with families who obviously cared deeply about their children's futures and wanted to do everything they could to help their kids stay on a path to graduation.

And yet, the parents, most of whom were immigrants to the U.S., didn't feel engaged with their children's schools and were not in communication with their children's teachers.

"We don't even know what questions to ask," they said.

These parents were expressing something important about their experience as members of historically marginalized communities, navigating public institutions where their voices may not be welcomed or recognized.

The fact that they didn't know what to ask was not a reflection of their interest in advocating for their children — far from it. Rather, years of life experience had reinforced the idea that their voices didn't matter in public spheres.

What might help people begin to feel they have the agency to ask questions, make their voices heard, and have a say in decisions that affect them? This question is at the root of RQI's mission.

For three decades, in and out of election years, RQI has dedicated itself to the day-to-day, person-to-person work of advancing an educational strategy **that fosters learning, agency, and pathways to participation — in short, key democratic skills.**

RQI's simple yet rigorous teaching methods are now being used by educators in every state, in more than 180 countries, reaching into more than one million classrooms around the world.

Beyond the classroom, **frontline workers and direct service providers share RQI's educational strategy with clients, helping people become more effective advocates** for themselves, their families, and their communities.

In 2023, our programs have continued to spread roots, reaching audiences across the globe, with a focus on communities that are far from power — including lower-income, immigrant, and working-class communities. Our work has benefited educators and students (across all age levels and academic subjects), adult learners, low-wage workers, people affected by domestic violence, formerly incarcerated individuals, patients in mental health settings, and so many others.

When people across so many fields and communities learn to ask their own questions, time and again we see this experience becoming a powerful catalyst for action. We look forward to sharing this year's highlights with you.

Enjoy the report!



Betsy Smith
Executive Director



We are grateful to our 2023 funders and supporters

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The Right Question Institute works to build a more just and equitable democracy. We strengthen people's ability to ask questions and participate in decisions that affect them. When people of all ages learn to ask the right questions, it leads to feeling a new sense of agency, confidence, and power.

2023 year in review and highlights

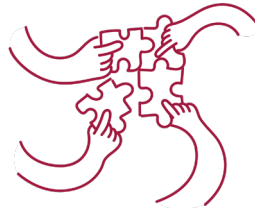
77,000

Members of RQI's online network
across more than 180 countries.



132,000+

estimated students impacted.



Building a lifelong skill for thinking
critically, navigating challenges, and
participating in civic life.

1,650+

educators trained.



375+

legal aid and social service
providers trained.



495

free online resources available.



downloaded **20,300+** times
by educators and practitioners
in all **50** states and beyond.

Organizations we reached and worked with in 2023

4Horsemen Rehabilitation Services
Advanced Placement Teacher Investment Program,
University of Notre Dame Center for STEM Education
Boston University Summer Journalism Academy
Brown University School of Public Health
Chicago Bar Foundation
Full Frame Initiative, Wellbeing Blueprint
Harvard Graduate School of Education
Ibaraki University
Kentucky Education Development Corporation
Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources Eastern
Region Program, coordinated by Waynesburg University
Life Span
Low-Wage Worker Legal Network at the Northwest
Workers' Justice Project
Maryland Office of Public Defenders

Massachusetts Department of Children and Families
Meiji University
National Council for History Education
National Council for Social Studies
National Council for Teachers of Mathematics
National Education Association
National Science Foundation
New Bedford United Way (Massachusetts)
Northeast Region SNAP Employment and Training Program
Northeastern University
NYU School of Law, Bernstein Institute for Human Rights'
U.S. Legal Empowerment Conference
Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization
Project Place
Retro Report
Tokyo Gakugei University

In Chicago, RQI's Legal Empowerment Program trained members of the Chicago Bar Foundation and partnered with Life Span, a domestic violence legal aid organization, to train staff.

RQI's Teaching and Learning team produced a video to support Indiana's Advanced Placement Teacher Investment Program, which works to bring high quality STEM education to all young people, especially those in underserved communities.

RQI reached thousands of educators and students through online and in-person courses held at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

At the Northwest Workers' Justice Project, RQI held a training for lawyers and advocates supporting low-wage workers.

A snapshot of RQI's trainings and events in 2023

As part of a project funded by the National Science Foundation, RQI held a workshop with faculty at Harvey Mudd College to explore ways to develop better, societally relevant research questions.

RQI participated in a conference about supporting rural educators with place-based learning — hosted by the National Council for History Education's Rural Experience in America program at the University of Oklahoma.

RQI held training sessions with the Kentucky Education Development Corporation to support teachers using the Question Formulation Technique.

In New Bedford, Massachusetts, a major fishing port, RQI worked with legal aid and service providers serving in the community's large immigrant population.

RQI hosted a workshop at the Maryland Public Defenders conference.

RQI's *Teaching Students to Ask Their Own Primary Source Questions* course "is an innovative approach to working with primary sources that puts students' questions and observations at the forefront of the classroom."

— Perry Siniard, online course participant

"There are more ways to think, act, work, teach, and plan for democratic engagement than I realized ... this project has recalibrated my thinking about where, how, and at what scale change can be meaningful and effective."

— Student in Building Nimble and Democratic Minds, a course taught by Luz Santana and Dan Rothstein at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

A quick glance at 2024

In 2024, RQI is launching a new online hub to bring its nonpartisan "Why Vote?" Tool and resources to communities across the United States and beyond. Developed in 2020, "Why Vote?" provides a way to engage voters in low-income communities so they can name for themselves the value of voting — building people's motivation and determination to vote. By making the "Why Vote?" Tool, along with supporting resources and training materials, more widely available online, RQI is seeking to lower barriers to use and help ensure more people, especially those furthest from power, are prepared, confident, and ready to make their voices heard at the ballot box in 2024.

Fostering greater agency and empowerment

Democratic skills such as asking questions and zeroing in on key decisions are essential, core components for advocacy, agency, and holding public decision-makers accountable.

These skills are rarely taught in a deliberate way. They remain inaccessible to many people, especially those in low- and moderate-income communities, who often feel they are unable to participate in key decisions that affect their lives.

This feeling can be compounded through people's everyday encounters with public institutions, including social service agencies, legal aid providers, and community organizations, where frontline workers often serve as advocates on *behalf* of clients.

The Right Question Strategy helps frontline workers make a small but significant shift in practice by **building client's ability to ask their own questions, analyze information, and take action on their own behalf.**

Client interactions become opportunities to build self-advocacy skills so that people gain confidence in their ability to participate in the decisions that affect them, their families, and their communities. In the process, frontline workers build trust with clients, creating more efficient and collaborative relationships.

Reaching immigrant communities

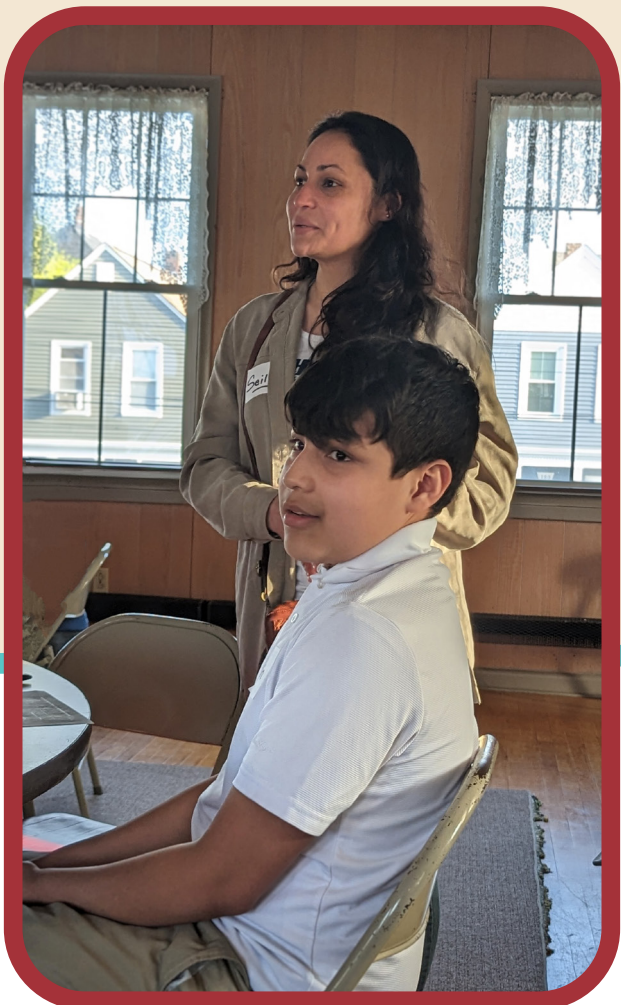
In 2023, RQI's Legal Empowerment Program visited New Bedford, Massachusetts, a city that is home to many immigrants from Central America, often fleeing political violence in their home countries to find jobs in the fishing industry. Our team conducted bilingual training sessions

in Spanish and English for service providers working in immigration law, domestic violence shelters, social work, and mental health services. The training focused on how to foster clients' skills for self-advocacy.

When clients learn RQI's Voice in Decisions Technique and Question Formulation Technique, they are better prepared to advocate for themselves when they need to engage with their children's schools, the immigration system, public agencies, or in other circumstances.

A parent advocate who was a member of the community had this to say after the training:

"No hay que quedarse callada. Que tenemos muchas dificultades pero preguntar las preguntas que tengamos o que tenemos o que pensamos para buscar ciertas soluciones." ["We don't have to stay quiet. We have many difficulties but we must ask the questions we may have or think about in order to find solutions."]



Reaching lower-income communities

RQI's Legal Empowerment team hosted a training for members of the **Low-Wage Worker Legal Network**, run by the Northwest Workers' Justice Project. Members of the network provide legal services around the country on behalf of low-wage workers.

We partnered with **Life Span**, a domestic violence legal aid organization based in Chicago. The whole staff of 40-plus lawyers, advocates, and social workers are now equipped to use RQI's methods with the people they serve.

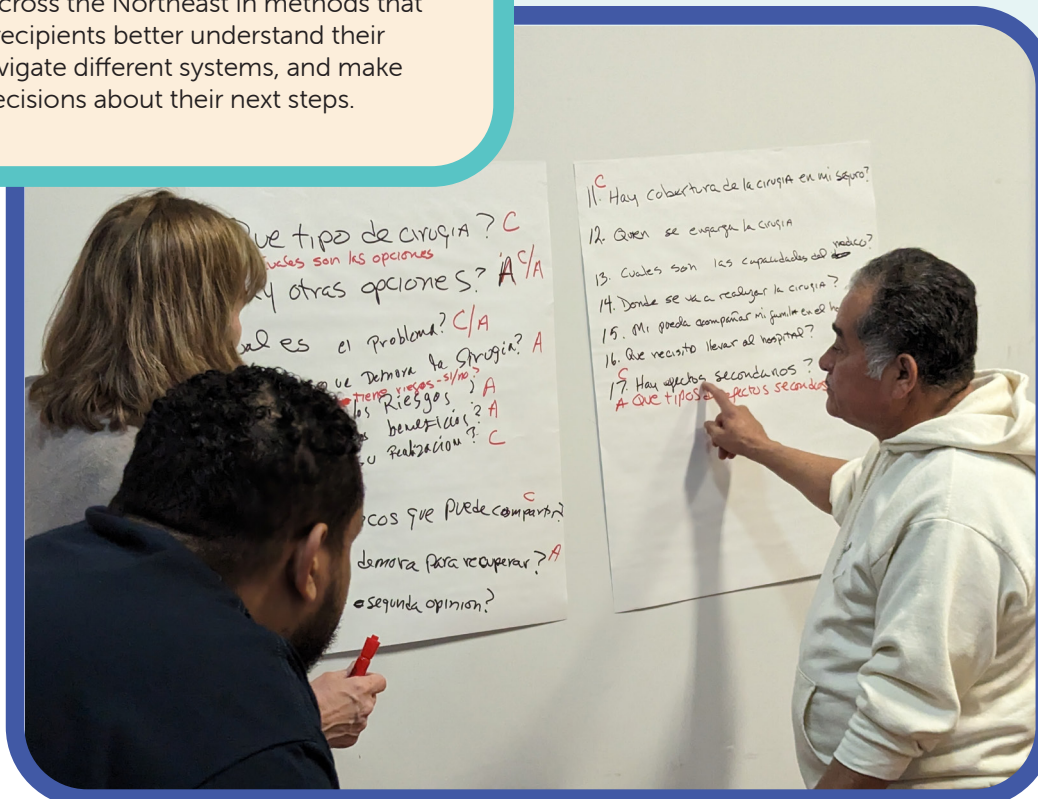
We led a training for the **North East Regional Office of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program** (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps). The Employment and Training Program at SNAP provides employment resources and assistance benefits to eligible low-income individuals and families. We trained supervisors and case managers across the Northeast in methods that help SNAP recipients better understand their benefits, navigate different systems, and make informed decisions about their next steps.

Spotlight: making a difference in people's lives

After a 30-year career in the U.S. Army, where he was a command sergeant major, James Richardson established **4Horsemen Rehabilitation Services**, a nonprofit that supports formerly incarcerated people as they transition back into their communities. He works with individuals ages 17-70, "to help them develop themselves so they can have hope for their tomorrows."

He weaves the Question Formulation Technique into his 16-week training program with clients, saying, "I connect it in all kinds of ways so they're really clear that what they're learning is a skillset in asking questions."

"I love that questions get people to advocate for themselves," he said. "That is the best way to give people autonomy."



Creating a culture of inquiry in schools

Educators around the world, whatever their level of experience, rely on RQI as a go-to place for training and resources that advance inquiry, curiosity, critical thinking, and engagement in school communities. Through our professional learning, they're finding new ways to integrate inquiry practices and take them deeper.

In 2023, we directly trained more than 1,600 teachers on our Question Formulation Technique (QFT), who in turn shared resources with an estimated 8,000 more educators.

We also launched a new advanced online course through the Harvard Graduate School of Education, *Questions at the Core: Extending the Question Formulation Technique to Sustain an Inquiry-based Culture in Schools*.

The course offers experienced QFT practitioners support in creating, scaling, and sustaining a culture of inquiry in schools, districts, and organizations, so that all community members — staff, teachers, administrators, policy-makers, students, and families — are able to ask questions, participate in decision-making, and feel a sense of agency.

Participants of the course come away with tools and resources they can immediately implement to engage community members in new ways and pursue professional learning and leadership. Nearly all (93.4%) found the program “personally enriching” and “relevant to their professional context”.

“Questions at the Core offers me a new perspective to rethink the purpose of education and my responsibility in education. It also challenges me to see how asking questions impacts developing human autonomy.”

— Penny Ma, instructional coach from Beijing, participant in *Questions at the Core*.

“This course has shifted my perception on the importance of question formulation. It uncovers the simple act of questioning to be one of the more powerful tools of education. I am taking away great learning and motivation from the course.”

— Heather Mirczak, educational consultant from Alaska, participant in *Questions at the Core*.



More teaching and learning highlights

Expanding access for rural teachers:

In 2023, RQI received a grant from the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) Eastern Region, coordinated by Waynesburg University, to expand and diversify access to our primary sources materials to new educators.

Thanks to a partnership with the Rural Experience in America program (run by the National Council for History Education), upwards of 25% of the 170 participants came from rural areas. Another 25-35% identified as working in Title I schools. The grant also funded the identification and development of a national cadre of promoters and advocates of questioning as a core thinking and learning skill.

Deepening learning in Advanced Placement STEM:

The QFT was at the center of professional development in 2023 for a program out of the University of Notre Dame that works with AP science teachers across the state of Indiana. Lead teachers across four science disciplines were inspired to participate in a book study, adapt the QFT to their curricula, record their experiences, and co-develop with RQI staff a series of training videos to inspire their colleagues to do the same.

A 'put into practice' workshop model:

Close to 200 educators in middle and southern Kentucky participated in a multi-part QFT training series funded by the Kentucky Educational Development Corporation. The groups participated in quarterly live workshop sessions over the course of an entire school year, experimenting in their classrooms and returning to share their experiences together.

Ripple effects:

While RQI directly trains thousands of educators every year, many more use our free online resources every day to plan lessons, conduct their own trainings, and infuse questioning into their schools and communities.

In New Hampshire, a librarian and media specialist used our online resource, "Primary Sources & QFT: 4th Grade Classroom Video," to introduce the QFT to fourth-grade teachers in her building. Educators then used the QFT in a map-making unit inspired by the one in the video, culminating in students making their own New Hampshire maps.

Using resources from rightquestion.org, a veteran teacher from Oklahoma used the QFT in her master's thesis; a school librarian from Georgia trained groups of parent volunteers; and a Spanish teacher from Alabama ran a professional learning community to engage more teachers at her school in a sustained practice of question formulation.

In follow-up surveys for the Teaching with Primary Sources-QFT program, 98% of respondents reported sharing what they learned with at least one other educator. On average, for each participant RQI trained, 5 additional teachers learned about the QFT practice.



RQI's educational strategy for greater equity and wellbeing

Reaching a wider audience

At RQI, we see agency and self-advocacy as vital to a healthier and more just society — on an individual as well as a collective level.

By building people's skills to ask questions and participate in decisions, our educational strategy contributes to greater equity and wellbeing for the long haul.

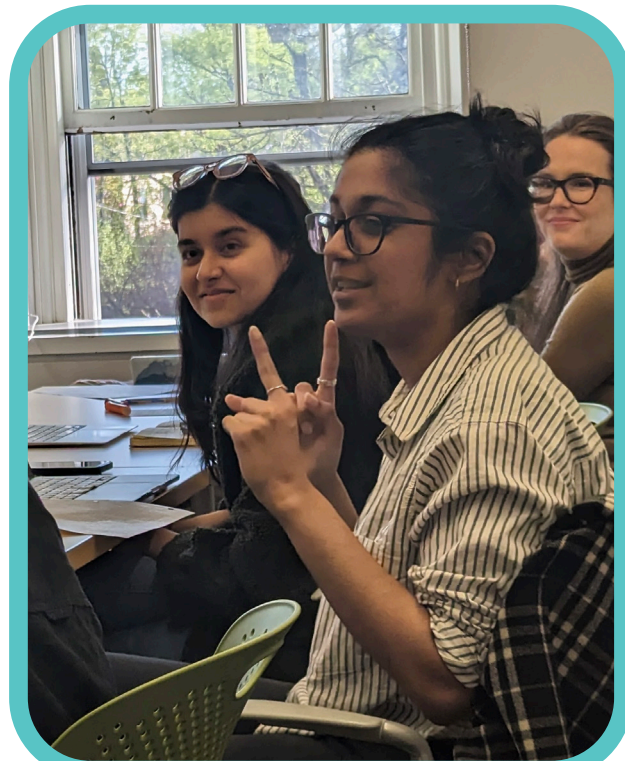
In 2023, RQI reached out to a wider audience with our foundational theory describing how question formulation plays an essential role in strengthening people's ability to learn and take action on their own behalf.

- RQI's co-founders, Luz Santana and Dan Rothstein, taught a course at the Harvard Graduate School of Education called "Building Nimble and Democratic Minds: From Practice to Theory and Back to Practice." Graduate students from across the university took the course to work on how to implement democratic education practices in their respective fields.

- With grant funding from the National Science Foundation, RQI and partner Northeastern University are pioneering guidelines and methods for crafting effective, societally impactful research questions.
- RQI was a featured organization in the Full Frame Initiative's Wellbeing Design Challenge — as an example for people practicing designing projects, initiatives, and policy recommendations that create equitable access to wellbeing.
- Santana and Rothstein, along with Legal Empowerment Program Director Naomi Campbell, spent part of 2023 working on a new book capturing lessons from RQI's work across fields.

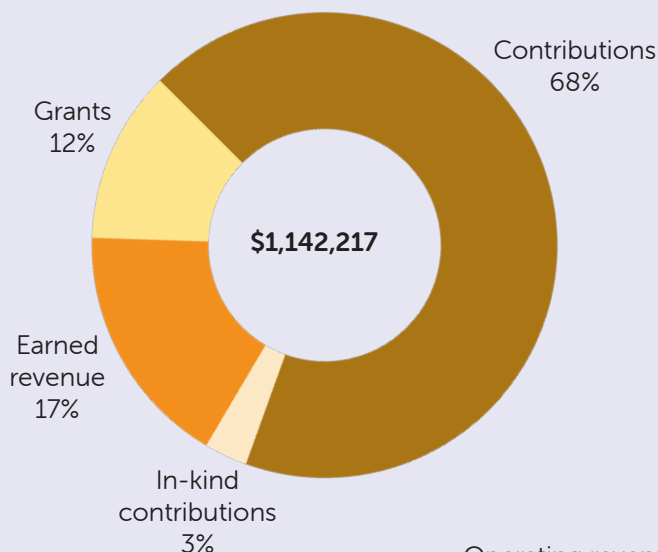
Our network extends to more than 180 countries, including Iran, where a classroom teacher saw the need for our empowering educational tools and took the initiative to create her own translation of a number of RQI's resources — so that other teachers and students could benefit.

RQI co-founders Luz Santana and Dan Rothstein define **democratic education** as "a way of educating that allows individuals to learn to think for themselves, voice their opinions, contribute their ideas, question assumptions, and determine their own ways to take action."

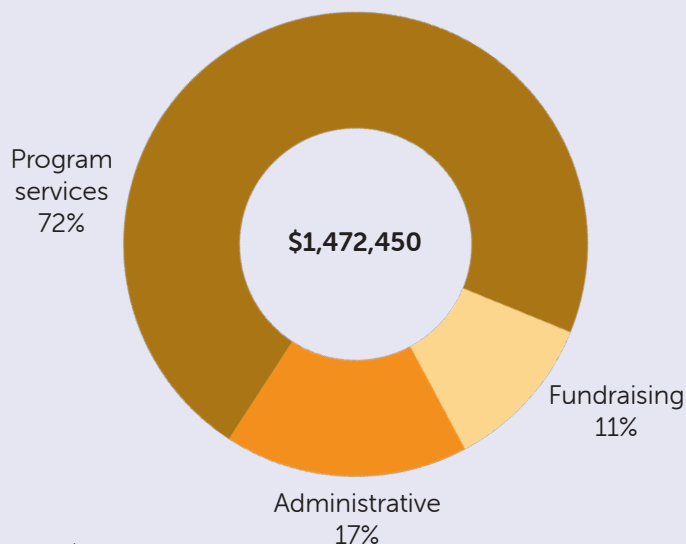


Financials and leadership

FY23 operating revenue



FY23 operating expenses



Operating revenue	\$ 1,142,217
Operating expenses	\$ 1,472,450
Net operating revenue	\$ -330,233
Interest and unrealized gains	\$ 396,203
Net revenue	\$ 57,342

Staff

Betsy Smith, Executive Director
Dan Rothstein, Co-Founder, Co-Director, Democracy-Building Programs
Luz Santana, Co-Founder, Co-Director, Democracy-Building Programs
Naomi Campbell, Director, Legal Empowerment Program
Maame Conduah, Education Program Associate
Katy Connolly, Education Program Coordinator
Milica Koscica, Director of Institutional Giving and Partnerships
Sandy Madero, Director of Operations
Chris Orchard, Director of Communications
Tomoko Ouchi, Manager, Question Formulation Theory Program
Kevin Riera, Legal Empowerment Program Coordinator
Sarah Westbrook, Director of Professional Learning

Consultants

Matri Lamb, Writer
John Sessler, Online Professional Learning Designer

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Stephen Quatrano

The Right Question Institute

Mailing address:

P.O. Box 440431
Somerville, MA 02144

Office address:

2464 Massachusetts Ave.
Suite 315C
Cambridge, MA 02140

(617) 492-1900
contact@rightquestion.org

rightquestion.org

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