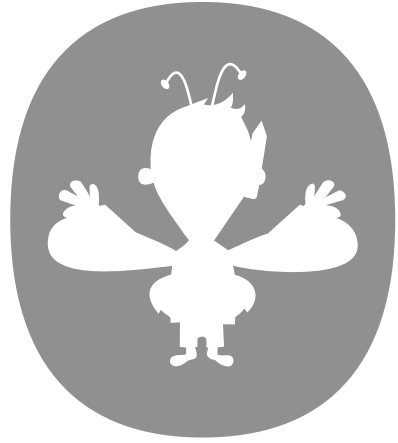


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15

THOMAS B. FORDHAM INSTITUTE
Annual Report



Dear Fordham Friends,

Think tanks and advocacy groups engage in many activities whose impact is notoriously difficult to gauge: things like “thought leadership,” “fighting the war of ideas,” and “coalition building.” We can look at—and tabulate—various short-term indicators of success; but more often than not, we’re left hoping that these equate to positive outcomes in the real world >>>



....which is why I'm excited this year to be able to point to two hugely important, concrete legislative accomplishments and declare confidently, "we had something to do with that." Namely, Ohio's House Bill 2, which brought historic reforms to the Buckeye State's beleaguered charter school system, and the Every Student Succeeds Act, the long-overdue update to No Child Left Behind.

In neither case can we claim anything close to full credit. On the Washington front especially, our contributions came mostly pre-2015, in the form of years of writing, speaking, and networking about the flaws of NCLB and outlining a smaller, smarter federal role. We were far from alone; colleagues like Rick Hess at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) have long been our compatriots in this work. And it only came to pass because friends on Capitol Hill—especially education committee chairs Lamar Alexander and John Kline and their staffs—were simpatico with these ideas and had the persistence, clout, and temperament to push ahead with them.

In Ohio, our influence was more direct. We've been trying to push the boulder of charter reform up the hill for a decade, only to have it roll back over us when it came time for legislators to cut backroom deals. Not this year. We're glad to have played a role in bringing attention and urgency to the issue—in part by serving as a model charter authorizer ourselves, in part via two hard-hitting studies released in late 2014, and in part by working hand in glove with our friends in the Ohio legislature to get the job done. Once again, however, our contribution was easy compared to the courage and tenacity shown by the likes of Governor John Kasich—and especially Senate Education Chair Peggy Lehner, who deserves a medal of honor for outthrusting and outsmarting Ohio's low-quality charter lobby (particularly given their strong political ties).

2015 also marked a key milestone on America's journey toward higher standards, tougher

tests, and a more honest assessment of student performance. For the first time, states nationwide gave assessments linked to the Common Core State Standards and almost uniformly raised their expectations for "proficiency" dramatically. As a recent *Education Next* article proclaimed, "Overall, thirty-three states have strengthened their standards since 2013, while just five have loosened them, with six leaving their standards essentially unchanged. In short, the Common Core consortium has achieved one of its key policy objectives: the raising of state proficiency standards throughout much of the United States." This has been one of our key objectives too, ever since our 2007 publication of *The Proficiency Illusion*. We are heartened to see it achieved.

These victories are a real shot in the arm, both nationally and in our favorite state. They give us hope that our research and commentary on other critical topics in 2015 will also bear fruit in the years ahead—especially our brand-new studies on next-generation assessments and the best cities for school choice, as well as our earlier reports on school closures, gifted education, and pre-k in charter schools.

Thank you, loyal supporters and readers, for making this work and impact possible. And thanks, too, for your patience. It may seem at times that the torrent of words coming from Fordham in D.C. and Ohio—reports, blogs, tweets, op-eds, podcasts, and more—vanishes into the river that is the Internet. But every once in a while, we get to see the outcome of our efforts. We greatly appreciate the confidence you place in us.

Sincerely,



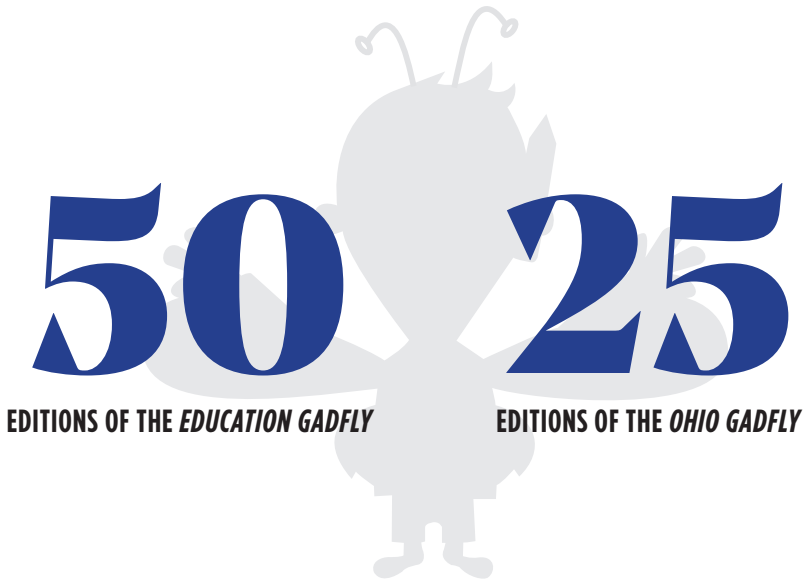
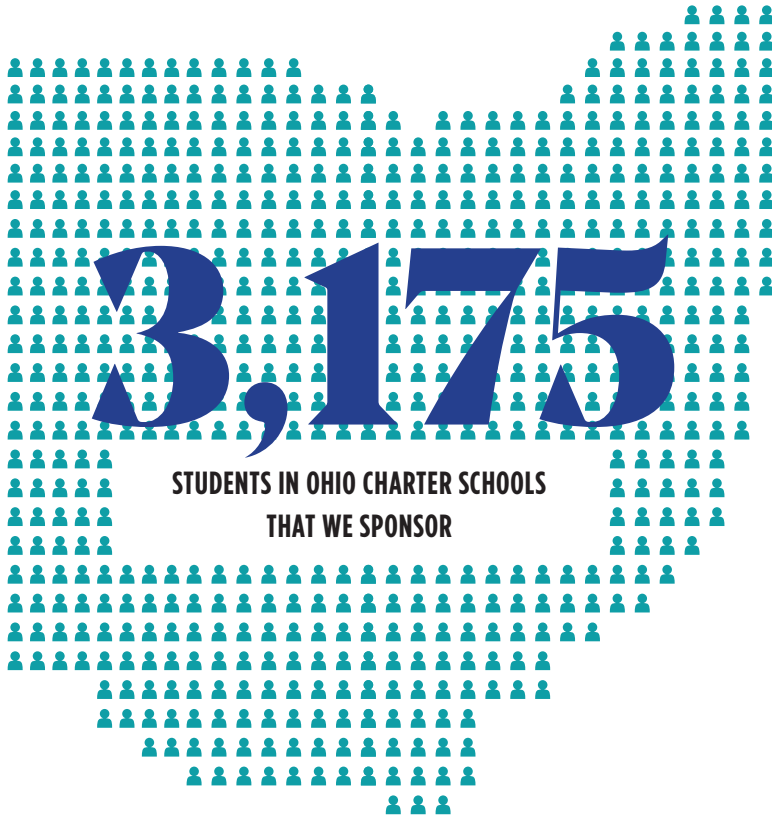
Michael J. Petrilli



@educationgadfly

Are high-stakes tests the problem? Or is short term thinking?





1,100,000 WEBSITE
PAGE VIEWS



16 RESEARCH
REPORTS & BRIEFS



547 BLOG POSTS



12 D.C.-BASED EVENTS



9 TV APPEARANCES



198 RADIO INTERVIEWS



99 OP-EDS



65 SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS



TOP



BLOG POSTS

IS COMMON CORE TOO HARD FOR KINDERGARTEN?
—Robert Pondiscio

ESEA REAUTHORIZATION EXPLAINED IN A SINGLE TABLE
—Michael J. Petrilli

BLESS THE TESTS: THREE REASONS FOR STANDARDIZED TESTING
—Aaron Churchill

TEN ARGUMENTS AGAINST COMMON CORE PRESIDENTIAL HOPEFULS SHOULD AVOID
—Tim Shanahan

NINE QUESTIONS: WHAT DOES IT EVEN MEAN TO OPPOSE THE COMMON CORE?
—Michael J. Petrilli

THE NEW ESEA, IN A SINGLE TABLE
—Michael J. Petrilli

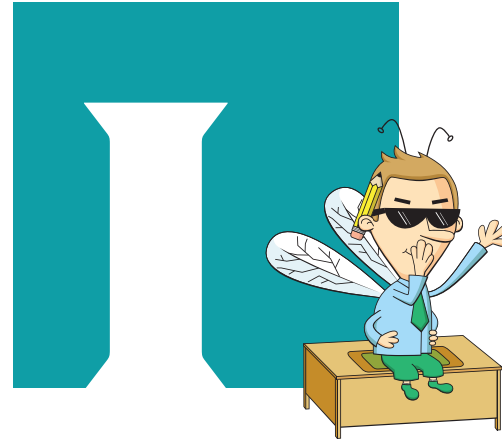
OPTING OUT, RACE, AND REFORM
—Robert Pondiscio

CAN GIFTED EDUCATION SURVIVE THE COMMON CORE?
—Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Amber M. Northern

2015: THE YEAR OF CURRICULUM-BASED REFORM?
—Robert Pondiscio

THE STATE OF PLAY WITH ESEA, IN A SINGLE TABLE
—Michael J. Petrilli

WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE DO



IT'S OFTEN SAID THAT IDEAS ARE EASY, but implementation is tough. In education especially, strategy, research, policy, and good intentions often melt in the crucible of reality. Of what value, people ask, is brilliant policy if it's not well implemented in the classroom?

For nearly twenty years, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute has worked at the intersection of ideas and action in education reform. In our early days, we were one of the first groups to make the case for quality over quantity in charter schools. We proposed uniform standards nearly a decade before the Common Core emerged. As a charter authorizer and state-level policy advocate in Ohio, as well as a national thought leader, we've always had our feet on the ground but our eyes on the sky. We've been a leader and agenda setter on the state's and the nation's most pressing K-12 concerns—from the neglect of low-income high achievers to ineffective and outdated approaches to fixing failing schools.

This past year, we doubled down on assessments, curriculum, and Ohio charter reform. In the Buckeye State, we helped to catalyze a necessary reform of the basic charter law, prodded by two well-regarded reports on the abysmal state of Ohio charter performance. Nationally, our multi-



year push to return accountability to the states paid off when Congress passed the (long-overdue) Every Student Succeeds Act in December. And in early 2016, we released *Evaluating the Content and Quality of Next Generation Assessments*, the most rigorous look to date at the new Common Core tests.

Fordham can make an impact because we're known as rigorous, independent, credible (and sometime irreverent) analysts at the center of education policy, doing our research both in-house and via respected scholars from Morningside Heights to Los Angeles. We've amplified that impact through trenchant and candid commentary, both in our own outlets and through major national vehicles such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *U.S. News & World Report*, along with our deep engagement with like-minded reform organizations and state- and district-level policy makers.

Much of our work is influential but not splashy. The Emerging Education Policy Scholars (EEPS) program (conducted jointly with AEI) identifies exceptionally promising early-career scholars and cultivates the next generation of education policy superstars. In Ohio, we've forged a coalition of community leaders, advocates, and educators, without which 2015's historic charter overhaul would not have happened (and the Common Core would be in jeopardy). Our work there serves as a model for other state-level groups seeking to influence policy change, and the symbiosis of

our state and national teams enhances the capacity of both.

We look toward 2016 and beyond with optimism and determination. We'll help state policymakers leverage our assessments review to make the best decisions for their students and schools, urging them to choose high-quality tests that will accurately and transparently measure achievement. We'll nudge states toward developing commonsense, high-quality accountability systems under ESSA. In the spring, we'll take a hard look at how education can best spur upward mobility for students. We'll close out the year by reviewing the first twenty-five years of charter schooling and making recommendations for the next twenty-five. In Ohio, we'll closely monitor the implementation of the new charter law to make sure that lawmakers don't walk back on critical reforms.

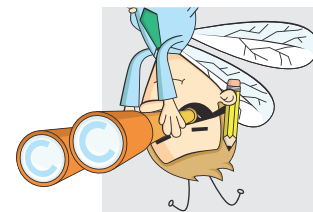
We've spent nearly two decades helping policymakers reckon with bold yet well-grounded ideas for improving schools. We'll continue to influence thinking on the education implications of broader social policy issues like upward mobility—and to bring attention to important and widely ignored topics like policy for smart poor kids. But no matter the topic, what we'll continue to do best is building bridges between ideas and action, policy and practice. We're proud to have played this role since 1997, and we will continue to do so in the years to come.

We've spent nearly two decades helping policymakers reckon with bold yet well-grounded ideas for improving schools.



@educationgadfly

90% of community college students taking remedial courses won't graduate in 3 yrs. It's a #K12 problem.



A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF FORDHAM

JAN

Mike's *Washington Post* op-ed, "Common Core Standards Aren't So Easy to Replace," is reprinted by eleven outlets, including the *Tampa Tribune*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *Capital Times*.



FEBRUARY 10

Doug Lemov stops by to discuss his new book, *Teach Like a Champion 2.0*.



FEBRUARY 14

Mike Petrilli appears on Fox News to discuss whether students really need college degrees to be successful.

FEBRUARY 22

Mike speaks to members of the National Governors Association to discuss ESEA reauthorization, including Governors Baker (MA), Hassan (NH), Markell (DE), and Sandoval (NV).



MAR

Fordham hosts the first meeting of our 2015 Emerging Education Policy Scholars cohort, bringing together twenty of the sharpest and most promising young thinkers in education.



JANUARY 21

Fordham hosts "A Fern Between Two Mikes: Testing, accountability, and the new ESEA," a discussion between Mike Petrilli and AEI's Mike McShane about the issue of over-testing and accountability in schools.

JANUARY 28

Charter reform bill is introduced in the Ohio House. For more information on Fordham's role, turn to page 14.

FEB

Fordham releases *Common Core and America's High Achieving Students*.

No one writes more clearly or intelligently [than Robert Pondiscio] about how to improve our schools.

JAY MATHEWS, *THE WASHINGTON POST*

MARCH 3

Fordham-Ohio hosts an event on teacher evaluations featuring StudentsFirst and the Ohio Federation of Teachers.

MARCH 8

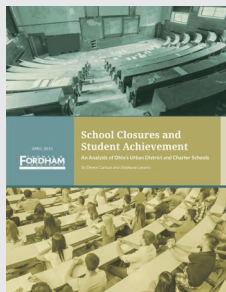
Mike speaks to the New York State Council of School Superintendents on ending the education reform wars.

“Reform runs on data, and data is testing.”

ROBERT PONDISCIO, *MIDPOINT*, NEWSMAX TV

APRIL 18

Mike Petrilli is interviewed live on Al Jazeera America about the opt-out movement, Common Core, and the Atlanta test-rigging scandal.

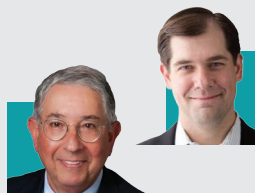


APR

Fordham-Ohio publishes *School Closures and Student Achievement: An Analysis of Ohio's Urban District and Charter Schools*. Mike and Aaron Churchill pen a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed on the issue.

MAY

We host Harvard professor Robert Putnam to discuss his new book, *Our Kids*, and the role of education in upward mobility.



MAY 19

Former Fordham president Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Andy Smarick, one of our Bernard Lee Schwartz Senior Policy Fellows, are appointed to the Maryland State Board of Education.

MAY 19

Fordham releases *Uncommonly Engaging*, our review of Common Core-aligned curricula. For more, see page 20-21.

2015 WOKK A-THON

JUNE 12

We launch our second annual Wonk-A-Thon, which results in fourteen guest op-eds on Education Savings Accounts in Nevada.



@educationgadfly

It is critical that we tell the truth to kids and parents about whether they are on track for success, says @MichaelPetrilli.

JUNE 24

Research Manager Victoria Sears moderates a panel on the intersection of charters and pre-K at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools conference.

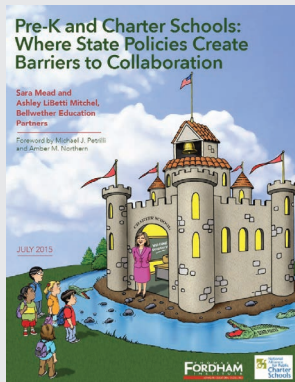
JUN

Fordham hosts “Turnaround Districts: Lessons from Louisiana, Tennessee, and Michigan.”



JUL

We release *Pre-K and Charter Schools: Where State Policies Create Barriers to Collaboration*, examining which states do and don't allow charters to provide state-funded preschool.



■ JULY 8

Checker speaks on NPR's *On Point* about the ESEA reauthorization.

■ JULY 16

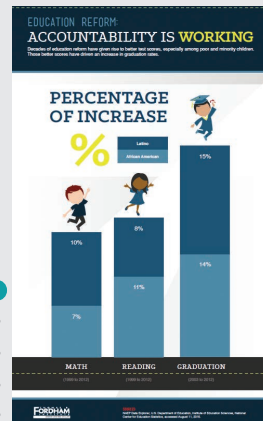
The Senate passes a rewrite of ESEA, sending this overhaul of No Child Left Behind to conference, a critical step toward its December passage.

If we cannot bring ourselves to push smart kids as far as they can go, we will watch and eventually weep as other countries surpass us in producing tomorrow's inventors, entrepreneurs, artists, and scientists.

CHESTER E. FINN, JR., AND BRANDON WRIGHT, THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

■ AUGUST 19

The *Wall Street Journal* runs Checker and Brandon Wright's op-ed, "The Bright Students Left Behind," which receives four hundred comments and is shared over 10,500 times.

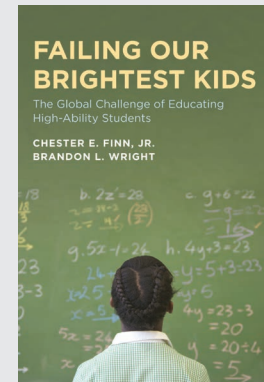


AUG

We offer "6 Themes for 2016," ready-to-borrow education ideas for the upcoming presidential election.

SEP

Checker and Brandon Wright publish *Failing Our Brightest Kids: The Global Challenge of Educating High Ability Students*.



■ SEPTEMBER 22

Research Director Dara Zeelandelaar speaks to the Washington House of Representatives about education governance.

■ SEPTEMBER 25

During his trip to the United States, the Pope visits Our Lady Queen of Angels school in Harlem, where Bernard Lee Schwartz Fellow Kathleen Porter-Magee is superintendent. This marks the first time a pope has ever visited an American Catholic school.

■ OCTOBER 1

Checker presents on the state of gifted education at the PIE-Network Summit in Phoenix, while Mike moderates a panel on career and technical education.



■ OCTOBER 29

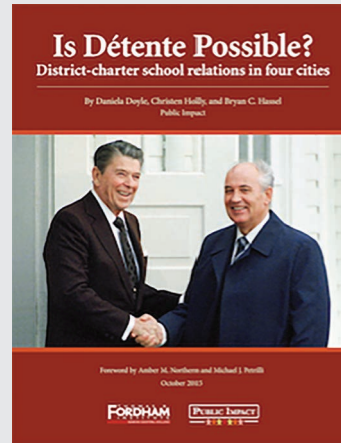
The Johns Hopkins School of Education, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, and Fordham co-host “The Excellence Gap: The State of Gifted & Talented Education” in New York City.

OCT

The Ohio legislature overwhelmingly passes HB2, the biggest charter-reform law in Ohio’s history. Governor Kasich signs the bill in November.

NOV

We publish *Is Détente Possible? District-Charter School Relations in Four Cities*.

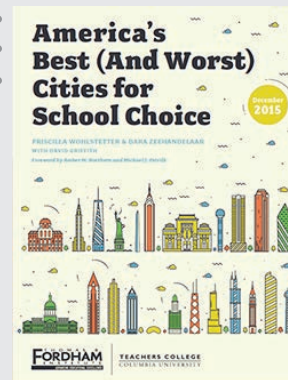


■ NOVEMBER 3

Mike’s piece “Disruptive Students Hurt High Achievers Most” is published in *Bloomberg View*.

■ NOVEMBER 5

We host “Pre-medial Education,” a panel on high school interventions meant to help students avoid remedial classes in college.



DEC

Fordham publishes *America’s Best (and Worst) Cities for School Choice*, which became the basis of a *Washington Post* editorial on mayors and school choice.

“We are not just trying to improve the institution known as the American schools; we are literally saving lives, rescuing the American Dream, writing the next chapter of the civil rights movement.”

—MIKE PETRILLI,
THE HECHINGER REPORT



@MichaelPetrilli

We need to find a balance between having strong accountability and letting teachers do their job.

OUR HISTORY AND MISSION

1959

— Thelma Fordham Pruett founds the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation in honor of her late husband, Dayton industrialist Thomas B. Fordham.

1997

— The Foundation is relaunched following Mrs. Pruett's death, with a renewed dedication to improving primary and secondary education in the United States and Ohio. Checker is named its president, and the board is expanded.

1997

— Fordham publishes its first review of state academic standards, focused on English Language Arts. Since then, Fordham has published 240 reports.

2000

— Fordham helps seed some of the first charter schools in Dayton.

2003

— Fordham opens a Dayton office to serve as the base of our Ohio operations. It's joined by a Columbus outpost in 2006, and our state-level policy work moves to the capital.

2004

— The Ohio Department of Education approves Fordham to sponsor charter schools, making us one of the first nonprofits in Ohio to take on this responsibility.

2006

— Fordham releases *To Dream the Impossible Dream: Four Approaches to National Standards and Tests for America's Schools*—four years in advance of the widespread adoption of the Common Core State Standards.

2007

— The Foundation is joined by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a public charity, which is now the face of nearly all our work.

2008

— Fordham publishes *High Achieving Students in the Era of No Child Left Behind*, which marks the beginning of our campaign to improve educational opportunities for this country's most gifted students.

2011

— Columbus Collegiate Academy, a Fordham-authorized charter school, is awarded the Gold-Gain EPIC award by New Leaders for New Schools for dramatic gains in student achievement (one of only four charters in the country to receive that accolade).

2014

— Mike Petrilli takes the reins as Fordham's second president. Checker remains as distinguished senior fellow.

2015

— Ohio passes House Bill 2—the most consequential reform measure in the history of Ohio's troubled charter sector, enacted partially in response to two revealing Fordham studies of school performance and policy woes (for more information see page 14).

2016

— Fordham releases *Evaluating the Content and Quality of Next-Generation Assessments*, our much-awaited report on the content and quality of several next-generation assessments.

THE PROBLEM WE FACE

Too many American children receive inferior education because too many U.S. schools and school systems are dysfunctional or ineffective. This situation is most dire for our neediest children, who lack high-quality education options, receive dumbed-down curricula and weak instruction, and whose school systems are too often held hostage by adult interest groups, including but not limited to teacher unions. Nor are affluent youngsters getting the education they require to succeed. As a result, U.S. students trail our international competitors, and many are ill-prepared for college and career. Particularly galling is that these problems remain even though we spend more money per pupil than almost every other country.

In order for young Americans to succeed in their undertakings and participate knowledgeably in our democracy—as well as for our nation to maintain its leadership, prosperity, and security in the world—these problems must be solved. While the United States has made modest progress in some areas since being declared a “nation at risk,” we have a long way to go to create an education system worthy of our country.

THE FORDHAM INSTITUTE’S MISSION

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is the nation’s leader in advancing educational excellence for every child through quality research, analysis, and commentary, as well as on-the-ground action and advocacy in Ohio.

WE ADVANCE

- High standards for schools, students and educators;
- Quality education options for families;
- A more productive, equitable and efficient education system; and
- A culture of innovation, entrepreneurship, and excellence.

WE PROMOTE EDUCATION REFORM BY

- Producing rigorous policy research and incisive analysis;
- Building coalitions with policy makers, donors, organizations and others who share our vision; and
- Advocating bold solutions and comprehensive responses to education challenges, even when opposed by powerful interests and timid establishments.



@educationgadfly

The only magic bullet in this work? Committed and talented people.



A Victory for Charter Quality in Ohio

OVER THE PAST YEAR, Fordham's Ohio policy team led—and won—a legislative battle to revamp charter school policy in our home state. Two late-2014 Fordham-sponsored reports focused the debate on the stark underperformance of Ohio's charter sector—and highlighted the weaknesses in state law that allowed many charters to remain open despite repeatedly posting woeful academic outcomes. The ensuing debate over school quality resulted in the fall 2015 enactment of House Bill 2. This landmark legislation passed because of several courageous lawmakers, collaborative work with national and local partners, and persistent determination to make change happen.

■ PHASE 1: QUALITY RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

In December 2014, we released two reports on the state of Ohio's charter schools and charter policy.

CREDO's analysis, *Charter School Performance in Ohio*, outlined the many weaknesses of the charter sector. It noted that charter students were receiving the equivalent of forty-three and fourteen fewer instructional days per year in math and reading, respectively, than their district counterparts.

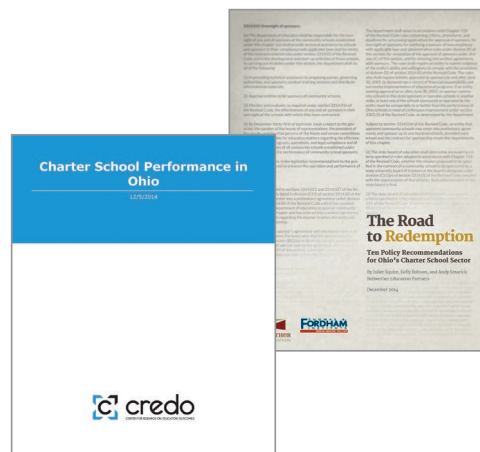
Bellwether Education Partners' analysis, *The Road to Redemption: Ten Policy Recommendations for Ohio's Charter Schools*, presented thirty-four necessary policy changes for Ohio to reboot its faltering charter sector.

■ PHASE 2: ADVOCACY AND COMMENTARY

After the reports' release, we worked to raise awareness and bring together those who shared our determination that reform was essential, and worked to advise lawmakers and other advocates of the need for these changes. Newspaper op-eds, such as this one by VP for Ohio Policy and Advocacy Chad Aldis, published in January in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, helped to make the case to the public.

"[W]e are confident that charters can work in Ohio. The state is already home to several excellent charters, including a few in the Cincinnati area. Three area charter schools—Hamilton County Mathematics and Science Academy, King Academy Community School and Phoenix Community Learning Center—earned exemplary academic ratings from the state in 2013–14.

But to allow quality charters like these to flourish at scale in the Buckeye State, policymakers will need to craft a stronger, simpler charter school law. A recent report authored by Bellwether Education Partners (supported by the Fordham Institute) painstakingly documents how, in too many ways, current charter law incentivizes counterproductive behavior, protects special interests and creates unwarranted exemptions—not the policy conditions needed for widespread academic excellence."



■ PHASE 3: HOUSE BILL 2 IS SIGNED INTO LAW

On November 1, Governor Kasich signed this historic measure. Of the thirty-four recommendations made in our report with Bellwether Education Partners, more than two-thirds were incorporated into the legislation. Below are a few key items that lawmakers adopted.

FORDHAM'S RECOMMENDATION

PROVISION OF HB 2

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR CHARTERS

Ensure that sponsors are held accountable to the state

— Education Service Centers and districts are now required to have contracts with the ODE to sponsor schools

The Department of Education will have greater ability to oversee entities charged with monitoring Ohio charter schools

Establish criteria for revoking sponsoring authority

— Sponsors that receive low ratings lose their authorizing authority

This will prevent underperforming sponsors from continuing to operate

Prohibit sponsors from selling services to schools they oversee

— Sponsors are barred from selling goods or services to any school they sponsor, unless the sponsors are school districts

Eliminates the perverse incentive that makes sponsors less likely to close failing schools from which they receive additional revenue

Reduce conflicts of interest among charter board members

— Board members must sign annual conflict-of-interest statements.
— Charter board members must be listed publicly.
— District or ESC employees may not be board members

Board members will focus on the success of the charter school rather than pursuing their own interests

Ensure that asset ownership is clearly defined in contracts

— Board-operator contracts must specify ownership of school facilities and property

This will strike a proper balance between the interests of the school and its operator

Curb “sponsor hopping”

— Restrictions are placed on the ability of low-performing schools to seek an alternative sponsor (unless okayed by department of education)

Prior to HB 2, low-performing schools could readily “shop” around for a new sponsor, thus circumventing accountability

Require closure of schools when contracts are terminated or non-renewed

— Permanent closure is required for schools with contracts that are not renewed by sponsor

This will prevent failed schools from re-opening with new operators



@educationgadfly

Differentiation works!
All you need is Hermi-one Granger's magical time-turner to teach your class 31 different times.

A Leader in Charter School Authorizing, both nationally and in Ohio

W

WE WERE THE FIRST nonprofit to authorize charters in Ohio, and remain one of the foremost authorizers the state. We're dedicated to developing high-performing, high-quality choices for kids across the state, and do our utmost to advance the educational interests of the nearly 3,200 students who attend "our" schools. We're now re-aligning our practices to meet the high standards set by House Bill 2, and to continue to set the tone for other operators both statewide and nationally.

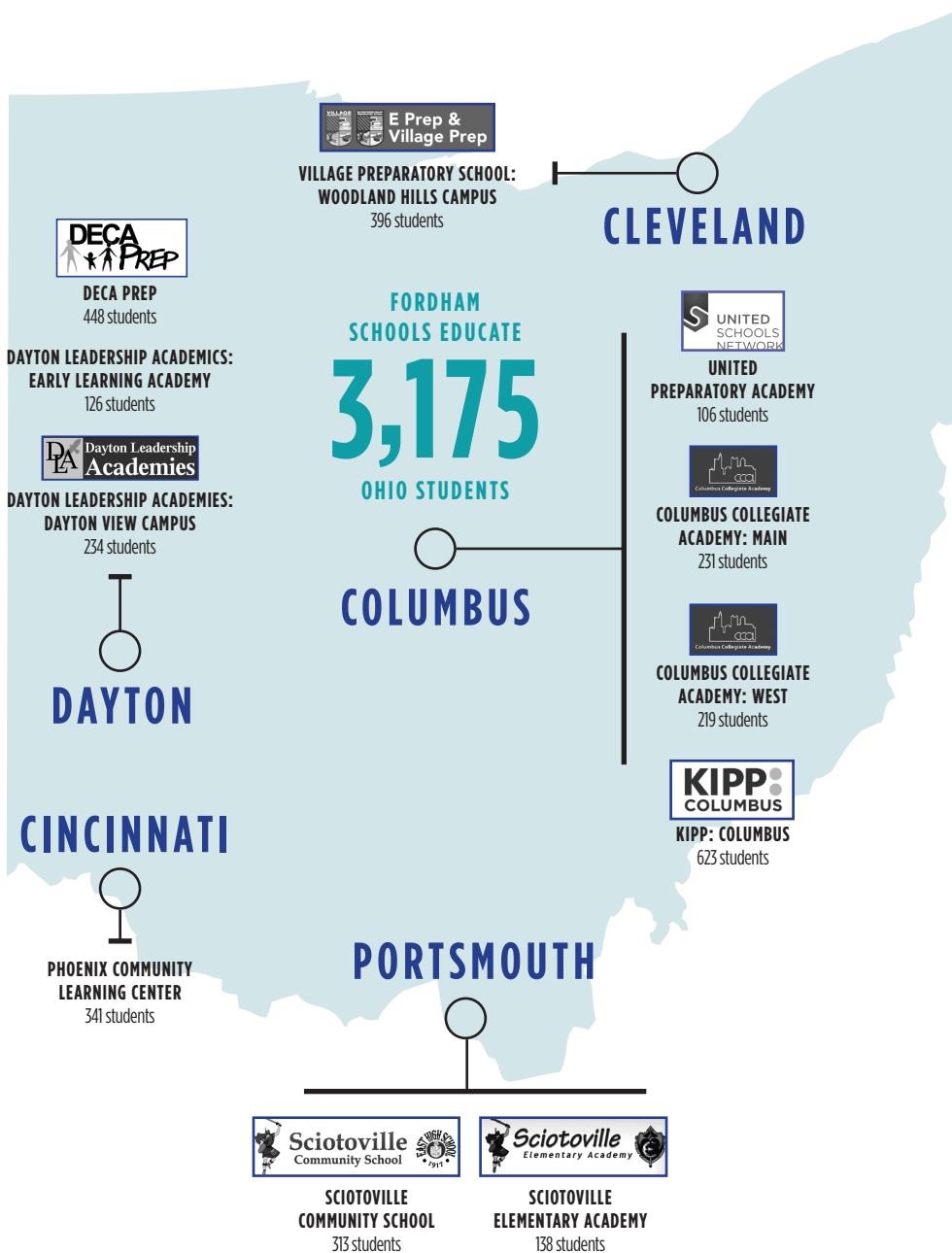


Fordham's authorizing shop received twelve of twelve points on NACSA's Index of Essential Practices, the gold standard of charter authorization. We hold ourselves accountable for meeting these expectations, and therefore pledge the following to our schools:

- AUTONOMY
- HIGH STANDARDS
- TRANSPARENCY
- INTEGRITY
- ENGAGEMENT



■ **SCHOOLS AUTHORIZED IN THE 2015 SCHOOL YEAR (WHICH IS 2014-15)**



For almost a decade, the Fordham Foundation has consistently guided, supported, and encouraged Phoenix Community Learning Center in striving to be the best we can be. There is no doubt that we stand as strong as we do today because of the high standards of accountability required by Fordham. ... We consider ourselves fortunate to be sponsored by such a knowledgeable and respected organization.

—DR. GLENDA BROWN, PHOENIX COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTER



@educationgadfly

When it comes to knowing the basics of #K12, the American public has some catching up to do.

Congress reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (at last!)

FORDHAM HAS LONG insisted that accountability for results is an essential part of any successful education reform strategy. We've promoted this at both the state and federal levels, with a focus on states being able to develop accountability systems that work for their unique circumstances. As the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act crept through Congress, we offered policy ideas—like rolling back the level of federal involvement in schools while holding tight to annual testing—via the *Gadfly* newsletter and other outlets. We're pleased with what was finally enacted, as it includes many of the improvements that we (in tandem with many others) had proposed.

Fordham publishes commentary in external outlets to reach a wider and more diverse audience. In April, senior fellow Robert Pondiscio touched upon the opt-out movement in one of his regular *U.S. News & World Report* columns.

"Opt-out parents believe they have a gun pointed at testing. They might be right. But the opt-out movement could be even more powerful if it demanded an overdue conversation about the kind of education we want for our kids, and the appropriate role of testing in our schools. By merely refusing tests, the opt-out movement gives away parent power that could be used to productively push back against the worst effects of testing, not just the tests themselves.

... There may be a better way. Instead of refusing the tests, I'd love to see parents march into the principal's or district superintendent's office with a simple proposition (or a threat, if you prefer): "You don't like tests; we don't like tests. You don't want to narrow the curriculum; we don't want that either. You hate the pressure of testing; we hate the pressure put on our children. So here's the deal. Teach our children a rich, robust curriculum – science, history, art, music, gym and recess. Don't bother with test prep. Don't narrow the curriculum to make more time for tested subjects. If you do, our kids aren't taking the test. Don't waste our tax dollars on test prep books and practice tests, because if one comes home in our kids' knapsacks they'll be staying home on test day." In short, use the threat of test refusal to return sanity to schooling, not just as an act of civil disobedience."





Besides blogging and external commentary, we also bring together thought leaders in D.C. to discuss issues critical to accountability. After the passage of ESSA, for instance, we hosted Claire Voorhees of the Foundation for Excellence in Education, Noelle Ellerson of the American Association of School Administrators, and Christy Wolfe of the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools to discuss the future of school accountability in the post-No Child Left Behind era.



@educationgadfly

#CharterPreK policies vary between states, with some acting as barriers for #charters to offer PreK.

There's a lot in this law that will let testing evolve in good ways and become a different, more effective tool.

—CLAIRE VORHEES, DIRECTOR OF K-12 REFORM AT THE FOUNDATION FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION.

As 2015 unfolded, Mike charted the evolution of ESEA's reauthorization with a series of popular and easy-to-understand color-coded tables. Here's the final iteration.

ELIMINATED
(from current law and/or Senate/House bills)


- » Mandate to adopt college- and career-ready standards
- » Adequate Yearly Progress
- » Mandate to achieve universal proficiency, or any outcomes by a date certain
- » Secretarial discretion to reject state plans unless they violate the letter of the law
- » The "cascade of sanctions" for low-performing schools (mandatory public school choice, supplemental services, corrective action, etc.)
- » Specific intervention models for low-performing schools
- » School Improvement Grants
- » Title I portability
- » Secretary's authority to put conditions on waivers
- » Highly qualified teachers
- » Teacher evaluations
- » Most small competitive grant programs (forty-nine are consolidated or eliminated)
- » Race to the Top
- » Investing in Innovation
- » Reading First

SURVIVED
(often in changed form)

- » Mandate to adopt "challenging" state academic standards
- » Annual testing in reading and math in grades 3-8 and once in high school
- » Grade-span testing in science
- » Disaggregated data
- » Mandate for state-developed accountability systems with limited federal rules around goals, indicators, and school ratings
- » Locally designed interventions for the 5 percent of lowest-performing schools and for high school "failure factories"
- » School-designed interventions for low-performing subgroups
- » A Title I set-aside to pay for interventions
- » Existing Title I formula for distributing funds
- » Weighted student funding pilot (allows some portability of ESEA formula funds)
- » "Supplement not supplant" and "maintenance of effort" (with new flexibilities added)
- » State participation in NAEP
- » Comparability as in current law
- » Some small competitive grant programs, including charter schools and a successor to Investing in Innovation
- » Codifies existing program to coordinate early education initiatives and moves it from ED to HHS



The Year of Curriculum Reform



FORDHAM HAS LONG been known for its commitment to high-quality research with real-world applicability. This past year, two studies helped prod the education field toward better assessments and curricula for students and schools. Our commentary flagged 2015 as the “Year of Curricular Reform” and made the case that high-quality teaching materials, not just high standards, are integral for preparing students for success.

■ EVALUATING THE ASSESSMENTS

One of Fordham’s biggest projects during 2015 was an ambitious, unprecedented review of several next-generation assessments developed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Our study evaluated the quality of three new, multi-state assessments (ACT Aspire, the Partnership for Assessment Readiness for College and Careers [PARCC], and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium) and one well-regarded existing state assessment (the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS). For each, we examined English language arts/literacy and mathematics assessments for grades five and eight, seeking answers to these vital questions:

1

The **CONTENT** covered by the assessments: Do the assessments place strong emphasis on the most important content for promoting college and career readiness?

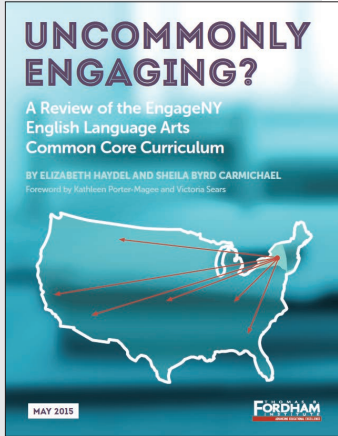
2

The **DEPTH** of knowledge asked of students: Do they require all students to demonstrate the range of thinking and skills, including higher-order thinking skills, called for by the Common Core and other college readiness standards?”

3

What are the overall strengths and weaknesses of each “next-gen” assessment?

We recruited panels of highly qualified practitioners, content experts, and assessment specialists to conduct the evaluation using a new methodology developed by the National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment (and based on the Council of Chief State School Officers’ “Criteria for Procuring and Evaluating High-Quality Assessments”). Reviews and analysis were completed in 2015, and findings from this first-of-its-kind study were released early in the new year.



ENRICHING CURRICULUM

As important as high-quality assessments is the actual content being taught to students in classrooms. In *Uncommonly Engaging: A Review of the EngageNY English Language Arts Common Core Curriculum*, we examined one of the nation’s most popular ELA curricula and found that, while not perfect, it is generally of high-quality and appropriately rigorous. EngageNY’s ELA curriculum has strong alignment to the Common Core, uses appropriately rigorous texts, and allows teachers the flexibility to tailor lessons to students. Our hope is that additional well-aligned, high-quality curricular materials get developed as alternatives to much of what teachers have been obliged to use.



Amber Northern, Senior Vice President for Research, oversaw this report.

OVERALL CONTENT AND DEPTH RATINGS FOR ELA/LITERACY AND MATHEMATICS

Below are the overall scores each assessment received from our reviewers on their content and depth.

	ACT	MCAS	PARCC	SMARTER BALANCED
ELA/Literacy CONTENT	Limited/Uneven Match	Limited/Uneven Match	Excellent Match	Excellent Match
ELA/Literacy DEPTH	Good Match	Good Match	Excellent Match	Good Match
Mathematics CONTENT	Limited/Uneven Match	Limited/Uneven Match	Good Match	Good Match
Mathematics DEPTH	Good Match	Excellent Match	Good Match	Good Match

WHILE RATINGS VARIED WITH SUBJECT AND GRADE, OVERALL WE FOUND:

- In ELA/literacy, all four assessments earned high marks for the variety of item types. But PARCC and Smarter Balanced fared best on the writing portions of the tests and, overall, better reflected the levels of cognitive demand called for by the Common Core.
- In math, reviewers found PARCC and Smarter Balanced assessments focused on the most important content of each grade; ACT Aspire and MCAS fared well on the depth of cognitive demand.

As an agency that is focused on state policy, the research and materials provided by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute are invaluable to our work. They allow us to easily keep abreast of national trends and connect with other states and organizations that are facing similar issues. Fordham helps keep Georgia connected to and engaged with the national policy conversations.

—STEVE DOLINGER, PRESIDENT, GEORGIA PARTNERSHIP FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION



@educationgadfly

The next step must be to ensure strong standards are followed by strong curricula @kportermagee.

Highlighting High Achievers

THE PRIMARY GOAL OF education reform is to offer young Americans from low-income backgrounds better opportunities. For many years, Fordham has been one of the few voices raising questions about the plight of a distinctive subset of low-income children, namely those who have been doing well in school. That's a group largely ignored and underserved by current policy—although these kids are plenty needy, too. In 2015, the publication of a highly acclaimed Fordham-authored book invigorated the debate and brought renewed attention to this critical facet of social mobility. As we move forward, we'll continue to set the agenda around education and upward mobility.

In *Failing Our Brightest Kids: The Global Challenge of Educating High-Ability Students*, Fordham's founding president Checker Finn and colleague Brandon Wright examined the educational treatment and performance of high-ability youngsters from Switzerland to South Korea and nine countries in between, and compared them to the U.S. They found that American children from low-income backgrounds are severely underrepresented in gifted classes and programs, as well as among the ranks of high-achievers and college graduates. They offered policy recommendations based on what has worked in other countries to boost America's pipeline of gifted learners and to better serve those who most need it.

The book made quite an impact, including an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* and coverage in the *Washington Post* and NPR, panel discussions at conferences of the Foundation for Excellence in Education, PIE-Network, the Philanthropy Roundtable, and the National Association for Gifted Children, and events coordinated with the Hoover Institution and Jack Kent Cooke Foundation. In 2016, we'll do our best to ensure that new state accountability systems do justice to gifted learners and their schools.



Failing Our Brightest Kids author Brandon Wright speaks on WSJ.com about the challenges of educating low-income high achievers.

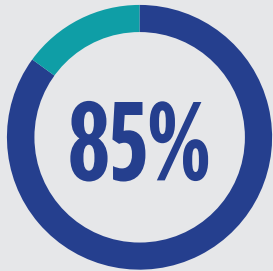
FAILING OUR BRIGHTEST KIDS

The Global Challenge of Educating
High-Ability Students

CHESTER E. FINN, JR.
BRANDON L. WRIGHT

EDUCATION FOR UPWARD MOBILITY

A focus on high-achieving low-income students is just one part of our larger effort to promote “education for upward mobility.” From curriculum reforms to school discipline to preschool, we’re taking a hard look at what policies have the strongest record of helping low-income kids reach the middle class and beyond. We don’t shy away from tough topics like school discipline. Mike took on that issue in an October op-ed in the *Daily News* entitled “The Real Moral Duty of Charter Schools”:



“[C]lassroom disruption is a major problem. In a Public Agenda survey, 85% of public school teachers said that the experience of most students suffers because of a few chronic offenders.

Addressing this challenge—enabling serious learners to learn, without denying serial disrupters opportunities to resume learning—takes smarts (finding better approaches to school discipline) and guts (making some hard choices). Unfortunately, today’s shrill debates are encouraging little of either.

... But what the school-discipline reformers never talk about is the impact that disruptive behavior has on classmates. ... Parents understand this, and the desire for orderly schools with high expectations for student behavior is a major reason they search out high-quality charter schools. That’s because earlier generations of education reformers made it impossible for traditional public schools to enforce reasonable discipline standards or to prioritize the students who come to school ready to work hard and follow the rules.”




[Finn and Wright] refuse to give up on the gifted. They identify promising developments in other countries and suggest improvements appealing even to people like me, who think most gifted classes in the United States are a waste of time.

—JAY MATHEWS, *WASHINGTON POST*




@educationgadfly

A great problem in U.S. education is that gifted students are rarely pushed to achieve their full potential.



Incubating Tomorrow's Reformers and Scholars



FORDHAM'S IMPACT in the ed-reform field goes beyond our reports and commentary—we also shape the future of the field. We do this by developing staff to enter leadership roles in other organizations, and also by teaming up with other organizations as either a policy partner or co-administrator of leadership programming.

Our research similarly has an impact on the field at large. In 2015, our research studies and policy briefs were cited in more than 244 other publications, academic journals, and articles on issues from Common Core implementation to gifted education to school finance. Our standing in the field is reflected in the company we keep: To craft the highest-quality policy research, we frequently team up with the best minds in the field to serve as authors, investigators, and advisors. This past year, for instance, we collaborated with David Figlio, Morgan Polikoff, Macke Raymond, Jonathan Plucker, and Bryan Hassel. Twenty-two of our regular collaborators were named to Rick Hess's annual EduScholar rankings.



Fordham is an essential partner to the Education Cities network. Their research is provocative and interesting, and their team provides great thought partnership to our member organizations across the country. Ed Cities and our network members are better for our friendship with Fordham, and look forward to many years of productive work together in the future.

—ETHAN GRAY, FOUNDER AND CEO, EDUCATION CITIES

FORDHAM



■ EMERGING EDUCATION POLICY SCHOLARS

This initiative, now serving its fifth cohort, is jointly administered with the American Enterprise Institute. We bring some of the best and brightest newly minted Ph.D.s to D.C. for discussions about the intersection of academia and policy. To date, we've partnered with over a dozen to lead or assist with Fordham studies, and seven were named to Rick Hess's 2016 EduScholar rankings.



■ EDREFORM101

This online course, operated in 2015 through a partnership with 50CAN, offers new reformers an introduction to education policy, as taught by some of the most prominent luminaries in the field.



■ PIE-NETWORK

Fordham helped launch this network of state-level education reform organizations in 2007 and serves as a national policy partner for members. We help to boost their capacity, particularly around school choice, standards, and assessments.



■ EDUCATION CITIES

We serve as a national policy partner for this coalition of city-level reform organizations and work together on charter authorization, communications, and governance reform.



■ FORDHAM ALUMNAE

We also have a knack for hiring and cultivating talent internally. Fordham's alumni have taken on leadership roles in federal and state governments, education reform organizations, charter schools, and urban districts.



@educationgadfly

In the age of iPads and Fitbits, how should educators harness new technology to improve students learning?

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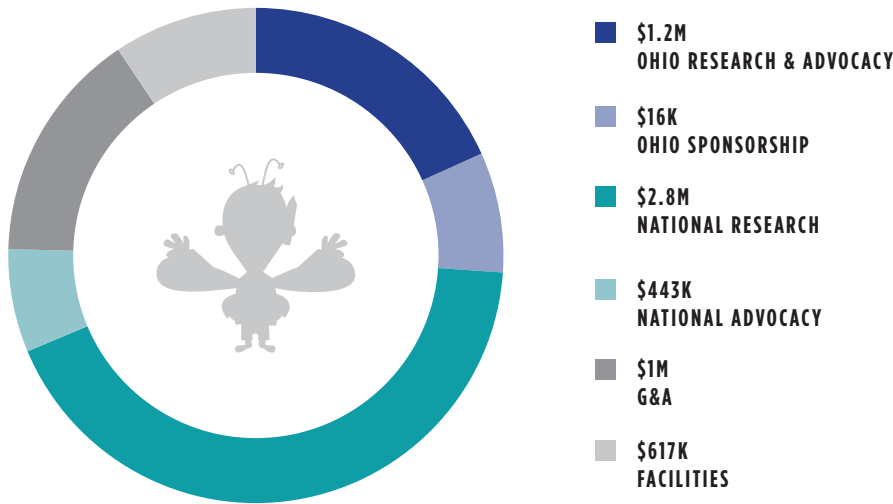


CAPRICE YOUNG
CEO, Magnolia Public Schools

Finances in brief

Fordham’s budgeted spending for 2015 was \$6.7 million dollars and is projected to be about \$6.4 million in 2016. Of that, around one-third will be supported by our endowment, and the remainder will be raised from private donors. Our charter sponsorship work is primarily funded by school fees.

BUDGET



ISN'T FORDHAM ALSO A FOUNDATION? DOES IT MAKE GRANTS?

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation is a “Type I supporting organization” controlled by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. These sister organizations are both tax-exempt public charities under section 501(c)3 of the tax code. Today, most of our work is conducted under the Institute name, ordinarily with partial funding from the Foundation’s endowment (which is approximately \$51 million).

Fordham does make a few grants each year,

but these are targeted and small. Many go toward our on-the-ground work in Ohio, where we play an active role in the state’s education landscape. Recent grantees include DECA Prep, School Choice Ohio, Teach for America—Southwest Ohio, College Promise, Learn to Earn/Ready Set Soar, and the Urban Leader of Greater Southwestern Ohio.

Fordham is audited annually by Lane & Company in Washington, D.C. Copies of our audited financial statements are available upon request. Fordham’s IRS Form 990s are also available by request or online at www.guidestar.org.

Fordham is grateful for the support of the following foundations and partners:

