

Thomas B. Fordham Institute

2020 ANNUAL REPORT



THOMAS B.
FORDHAM
INSTITUTE
ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

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President's Letter

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one of us can be blamed for wanting to erase 2020 from our memories. An *annus horribilis* extraordinaire, it brought untold suffering to families and communities nationwide, first through a savage pandemic, then via the brutal murder of George Floyd and other Black men and women, and finally in the form of a divisive presidential election and its apocalyptic aftermath.

Yet the memories will inevitably linger, especially for our kids. They will one day tell their grandchildren what it was like to live through a time of plague, donning masks and social distancing, staying home, seeing almost no friends, and trying to learn full-time through a screen. (Maybe that last part won't seem so strange by then.) The older among them will also recall protests and political divides, much as aging Boomers remember 1968.

The big question for those of us involved in education is whether such memories will be all that linger, or if today's children will be burdened by the Covid-19 aftermath for years to come. That risk extends far beyond education, of course, but at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, we are pledged to the proposition that we cannot, must not, will not allow this generation to be plagued by endless learning loss and emotional scars after the pandemic has been controlled. Our fight for educational excellence must now include addressing the Covid-19 challenge and meeting it.

To that end, we focused most of our attention in 2020 on helping families, educators, and communities cope with Covid-related crises: the abrupt shift to remote instruction, the school funding consequences of the economic downturn, the massive amount of unfinished learning, and the additional inequities that this horrendous experience has injected into the education system. Our work on these fronts—nationally, in our home state of Ohio,

and with the eleven charter schools that we authorize—is also the focus of this year's annual report, in the pages to follow. None of it would have been possible without our partners and supporters, for whom we are extremely grateful.

We are particularly proud of our speedy effort to share educational resources with families in the midst of nationwide lockdowns; to capture lessons from some of America's best charter school networks about their successful pivot to remote learning, and to support our own sponsored schools in making that shift, too; and to build the case nationally and in Ohio for policymakers to hold the line on state assessments in 2021 as we look ahead to educational recovery.

And look ahead we must. 2021 brings a fresh start in Washington, and a new focus for Fordham, as well, on helping students accelerate academically after months of lost learning time. We will continue to play our role as Education Gadfly in the year to come—but as [David French put it recently](#), always in the spirit of “good-faith disagreement” rather than “divisive provocation.”

There's been far too much divisiveness, and there's way too much to do. Let's unite in learning lessons from 2020, while also helping to ensure that our students put this terrible year behind them forever.

MICHAEL J. PETRILLI,
PRESIDENT



In Memoriam

In honor and memory of loved ones lost in 2020,
including those members of the Fordham family:

Linda Diane Anderson

Mother of Fordham's Chad Aldis

Rob Northern

Beloved husband of Fordham's Amber Northern

Doris Ponitz

Wife of longtime Fordham board chair David Ponitz,
and longtime community volunteer and champion of many
causes in Dayton, OH, and far beyond.



Fordham's Mission

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute and its affiliated Foundation promote educational excellence for every child in America via quality research, analysis, and commentary, as well as advocacy and exemplary charter school authorizing in Ohio.



Two students of United Preparatory Academies, one of Fordham's sponsored schools in Ohio, learn from home during school closures, Spring 2020

A student at KIPP Columbus, a Fordham sponsored school, learning from home during school closures, Fall 2020

In order to improve student outcomes, boost upward mobility, and dramatically increase the number of young Americans prepared for college, career, and citizenship, we advance:

- Ambitious standards in all academic subjects, strong assessments of student learning, aligned and well-implemented curricula, and common-sense accountability for schools and children across the achievement spectrum; and
- High-quality charter schools and other proven models of educational choice, particularly for the children and families that need them most.

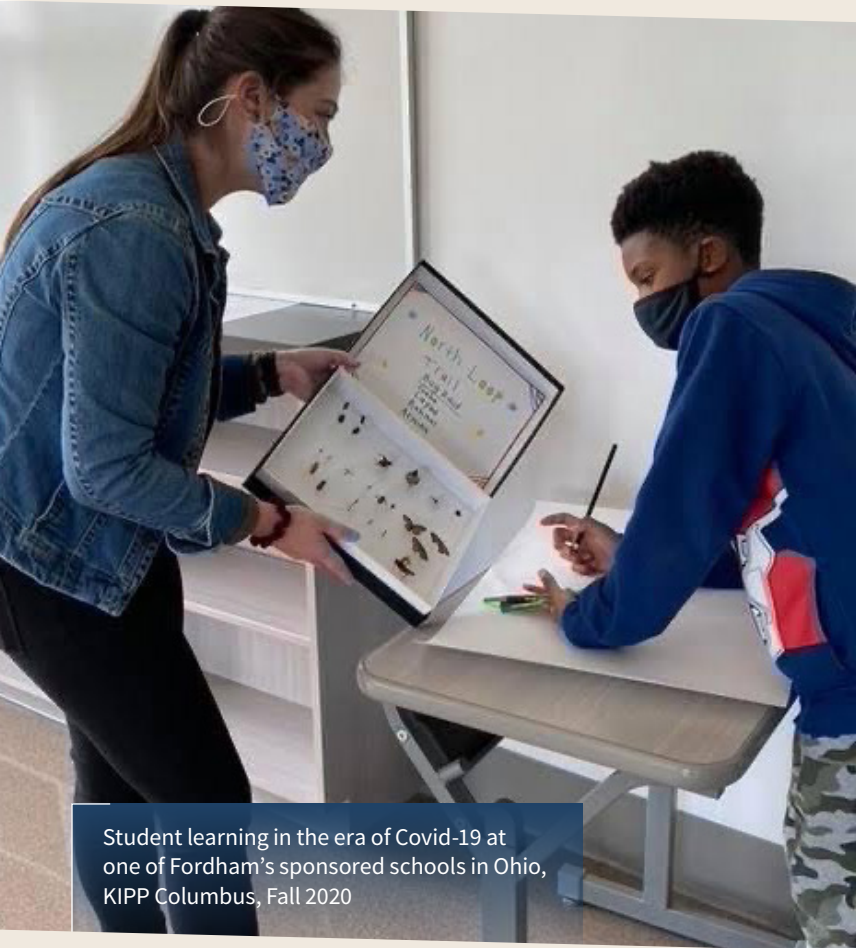
We promote educational improvement by:

- Producing relevant, rigorous research, analysis, and commentary for education practitioners and for policymakers at the national, state, and local levels;
- Incubating new ideas, innovations, organizations, and visionary leaders to advance educational excellence;
- Advancing sound policies in Ohio related to standards, assessments, results-driven accountability, equitable funding, school choice, and other important education reforms; and
- Serving as a model charter school authorizer and sharing our lessons throughout and beyond Ohio.



Photo credit: Getty Images/WoodysPhotos, smolaw11, Holly Comer

COVID-19 and Fordham's Response



Student learning in the era of Covid-19 at one of Fordham's sponsored schools in Ohio, KIPP Columbus, Fall 2020

When the coronavirus pandemic shuttered schools across the country in spring 2020, we—like many others in the education reform community—pivoted quickly to serve teachers, school leaders, and policymakers in dire need of guidance and support, as well as families searching for materials and strategies by which to keep educating their children. The challenge of swiftly transitioning to remote instruction for nearly 55 million U.S. students was unprecedented. We at Fordham helped by churning out timely and high-profile resources, analyses, and thought leadership on the myriad challenges that America faced.



Photo credit: Getty Images/FlamingoImages

Our National Work

RESOURCES

Last year, we created **a new set of resources on our website**—and published over 160 blog posts—dedicated to responding to the educational challenges posed by Covid-19. A trio of posts aggregated high-quality at-home learning resources for preschool through high school students and were especially popular:

- **Resources for learning from home during Covid-19 school closures.** By far our most successful blog post of the year, Mike's list of at home resources received over **36,000 pageviews** and was shared in Dave Pell's widely circulated newsletter, *NextDraft*. This list was also featured on multiple school district websites during the beginning months of the pandemic as schools scrambled to gather educational resources available for parents online.
- **Smiling through: Thirty-two resources for entertaining energetic preschoolers during daycare and preschool closures.** This list of educational resources for preschoolers, suggested by Fordham's Victoria McDougald, **has been accessed over 15,000 times** since publication in mid-March. This list was also circulated in a number of early childhood education newsletters that reach thousands of parents and practitioners nationwide.
- **Great YouTube channels for middle schoolers and high schoolers for learning from home during COVID-19 school closures.** This piece, written by president-emeritus Chester E. Finn, Jr.'s own high-school-aged granddaughter, included a list of educational YouTube videos appropriate for high schoolers looking to supplement their own remote learning. Since publication, this piece has received **8,300 views**.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

In addition to articles for our widely-read blog and weekly *Education Gadfly* newsletter, Fordham staff published twenty op-eds during 2020 that focused on Covid-related issues like rethinking seat time, delaying social promotion, or recommending how to allocate federal relief funds. Not all our ideas were popular, but we welcomed the occasional pushback to advance potential solutions to this unprecedented challenge.



- **Schools should consider keeping kids in the same grade this fall**
Mike's opinion piece in *The Washington Post* called upon elementary schools to consider giving students an extra year when returning to in-person instruction in order to offer them the opportunity to master grade-level content before moving on. This provocative proposal spurred over twenty op-ed responses from a variety of education policy wonks, school leaders, and commentators. Almost a year later—with many kids still learning from home—school leaders are seriously pondering the feasibility and wisdom of automatically promoting students to the next grade when (let's hope) they are back in classrooms next fall.
- **Half-time high school may be just what students need**
Another piece from Mike, in *Bloomberg Opinion*, called upon states to use the pandemic as a learning opportunity for restructuring the high school day to look more like a college schedule, with less in-person class time and more independent study. Much discussion followed about the purpose of high school and the possibilities and constraints such a model might present.
- **Test-based accountability in distressed times**
This piece by Checker Finn and Eric Hanushek, circulated in the September 2020 National Association of State Boards of Education magazine, called upon states to recognize the importance of assessment data in examining student learning losses or gains, as well as making possible results-based accountability for schools. With state assessments having been skipped in spring 2020, the issue arises again as state and federal leaders consider whether they can and should resume them in spring 2021. (And Fordham **research** shows that skipping testing for two years in a row would cause big problems.)

RESEARCH

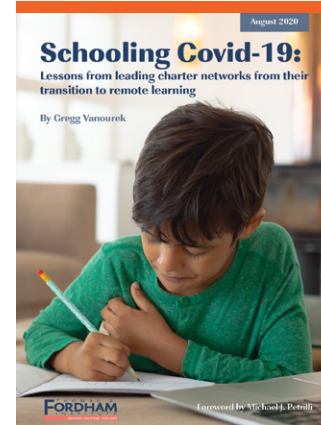
Despite the immense disruption caused by the pandemic—including remote work for Fordham's own team—we stayed busy and productive on the research front in 2020, offering timely studies with actionable guidance for education leaders on how to cope with the crisis.

- ***Schooling Covid-19: Lessons from leading charter networks***

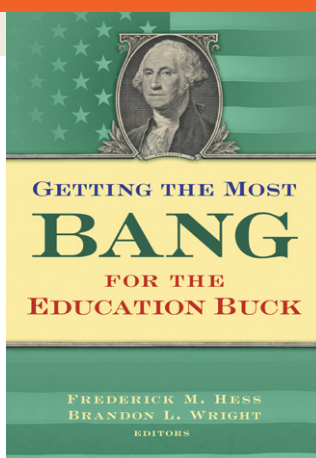
The transition to remote learning in spring 2020 was a calamity almost everywhere. Yet several major charter school networks managed to achieve remarkable success, shifting tens of thousands of their pupils quickly and effectively to remote learning. How did they do it? In *Schooling Covid-19*, author Gregg Vanourek documented their successes, while offering actionable recommendations for other schools looking for guidance in the fall semester and beyond. Among the recommendations:

- Create and enforce a typical school day for students, with a mix of live and recorded lessons and independent work.
- Prioritize student health and wellbeing, and reach out to individual pupils and families on a regular basis.
- Lean into a team approach to teaching and instruction, centered around a common curriculum.

This widely-read report received over 6,800 pageviews, 1,800 downloads, and twelve media hits. The findings were presented to the New York State Charter Schools Association, the Charter School Growth Fund, and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers. Its recommendations were also used by four Fordham-sponsored charter schools in Ohio to provide more equitable and comprehensive remote instruction supports to students.



This widely-read report received over 6,800 pageviews, 1,800 downloads, and twelve media hits.



The volume is available for purchase through [Teachers College Press](#) and [Amazon](#).

- **Getting the Most Bang for the Education Buck**

The significant financial repercussions of Covid-19 will be felt for years to come as states face tough choices about budget cuts in education as elsewhere. Yet schools have a lot of options for spending their money smarter and more effectively. In *Getting the Most Bang for the Education Buck*, co-editors Brandon Wright and Frederick Hess and twelve contributing authors provide much-needed guidance to educators and policymakers as they navigate today's fiscal challenges. Major topics include:

- Rethinking staff and management to get more value from employees, including shifting toward a team approach where educators fill a variety of crucial roles and are led by the most experienced teachers.
- Reworking pension arrangements to control costs while putting more teacher compensation into take-home pay.
- Leveraging technology as performance enhancers.
- Framing spending options differently to meet the needs and preferences of students and families.

Recommendations from this highly relevant volume were used to help craft a set of [guidelines](#) for state policymakers when making tough decisions about budget cuts in the coming school years.

EVENTS

While the pandemic ruled out in-person events, we—along with the rest of the world—quickly discovered that virtual convenings could be quite effective in generating ideas and disseminating them to even-larger audiences.



Social and emotional supports for public, private, and charter school students during the COVID-19 crisis

In May, we partnered with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to highlight notable work conducted by school leaders to serve the social and emotional needs of their students. Attended by over **1,500** teachers, school counselors, and parents, the event featured Eva Moskowitz of Success Academy Charter Schools, Kathleen Porter-Magee of the Partnership for Inner-City Education, and Juan Cabrera of the El Paso school system, which serves over 59,000 Texas students.



Leading in Uncertain Times: How School Leaders are Meeting Students' Academic and Social Needs

In August, we joined with the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and four outstanding school leaders from the public, charter, and private sectors to discuss strategies for meeting students' and staff deluge of social and emotional needs during remote learning. Over **200** school principals and staff members tuned into this webinar.

Excellence in Education 2020 EdPalooza Virtual Conference

- In December, we hosted two discussions at ExcelinEd's EdPalooza Conference. Mike's panel, "**TIME OUT: Rethinking Seat Time and Social Promotion in the Wake of the Covid-19 Crisis**," explored what state policymakers can do to address the learning loss challenge and take advantage of the "learn anywhere" opportunity, especially when it comes to regulations around seat time and social promotion. Featuring Paolo DeMaria, Ohio School Superintendent; Michael B. Horn, CEO of the Christensen Institute; and Diane Schanzenbach, education policy expert at Northwestern, this panel pushed participants to get more creative about educational recovery and reimagine the U.S. education system as we know it.
- And Fordham's Robert Pondiscio hosted a panel titled "**Getting Lit: Transforming Our Next Generation of Readers**," which explored the use of instructional time in elementary schools, whether students who spend more time on certain subjects make greater progress in reading, and how these effects differ by student characteristics. Panelists also addressed what states, education schools, and alternative teacher certification programs can do to enhance teacher preparedness and incentivize the adoption and use of knowledge and language-rich curricula, particularly in elementary schools.

REAL-WORLD IMPACTS

We work hard to ensure that our research and commentary address the needs of education leaders, practitioners, parents, and policymakers on the ground. Here's a smattering of that impact:

- In March, we played an instrumental role in removing barriers to providing remote education to students after school closures. Many districts had failed to pivot quickly due to constraints presented by special education regulations, so we worked with several organizations to inform the U.S. Department of Education's revised **guidelines** for equitably providing remote instruction to all public school students.
- Our resources for at-home learning were published on eight different public and charter school websites that offered educational materials for parents teaching their children at home.
- Fordham staff participated in dozens of webinars, conferences, and panel discussions focused on the effects of Covid-19 on education. Three of Fordham's staff were selected to participate on advisory groups to help states respond more effectively to the crisis.



Our Ohio Work

We remained very active in 2020 in our home state of Ohio. Our teams in Columbus and Dayton worked tirelessly to ensure that Buckeye State students received the best possible education during these tumultuous times.

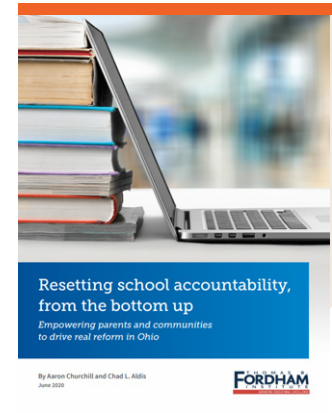
RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY

- **Resetting school accountability, from the bottom up**

This June 2020 report from our Ohio team identified the long-term impact school closures would have on student outcomes, and provided a playbook for policymakers in dealing with a year without state assessments. The **Columbus Dispatch** editorial board wrote, “[the] main message—shine a light on school performance and give parents options if they aren’t happy with their assigned school—is a good basis on which to build future policy.”

- We also produced a slew of commentary on the impact that Covid-19 was having on Ohio schools and students. Columbus staff placed several op-eds in Ohio outlets offering guidance on high school graduation policies, federal aid allocations, how to handle assessments and accountability in 2021, and much more. Our Ohio Gadfly Daily blog was similarly active, publishing over 120 blog posts in 2020, many of which focused on responding to the pandemic.
- Fordham’s clearheaded and timely work on this topic enabled us to play an instrumental role in pausing the state’s accountability system for both 2020 and 2021. By working with Ohio lawmakers, we were able both to preserve the principle of results-based accountability and give schools the grace period they needed to tackle the greatest challenge education has ever encountered.

“[Fordham’s] main message—shine a light on school performance and give parents options if they aren’t happy with their assigned school—is a good basis on which to build future policy.”





Students and teachers adjust to new normal at one of Fordham's sponsored schools in Ohio, Columbus Collegiate Academy Main, Fall 2020

FORDHAM SPONSORSHIP AND COVID-19

As authorizer of eleven Ohio charter schools serving some 5,500 students, we strove to ensure that these schools pivoted quickly and effectively to offer remote learning services to our students.

We also provided loads of technical assistance to our schools, including video trainings, resource compilations, virtual site visits, and lots of research on school-related Covid-19 issues. And we overhauled our own monitoring procedures to align with the remote or hybrid options that our schools were implementing.

Our sponsored schools also went above and beyond to support families during this challenging time. They provided their students and families with meals and technology, kept in constant contact with them, and held socially distanced or remote events to maintain a sense of community.

To share mutual lessons learned, a representative from our authorizing team participated in the National Association of Charter School Authorizers Covid-19 Advisory Committee.



Staff at United Preparatory Academy East, a Fordham-sponsored school in Ohio, provide students with meals, Summer 2020.

On Other Fronts



While we kept most of our focus this year on responding constructively to pandemic-induced challenges, we also forged ahead to advance our core issues of school choice, standards and accountability, and upward mobility via ample research, commentary, and thought leadership.



1,545,230

Website views



506

Blog posts



49

Education Gadfly Weekly
newsletters



14,300

Newsletter
subscribers



168

Radio, podcast, TV
interviews



48

Education Gadfly Show
podcast episodes



67,500

Podcast
downloads



79

Op-eds



3,500

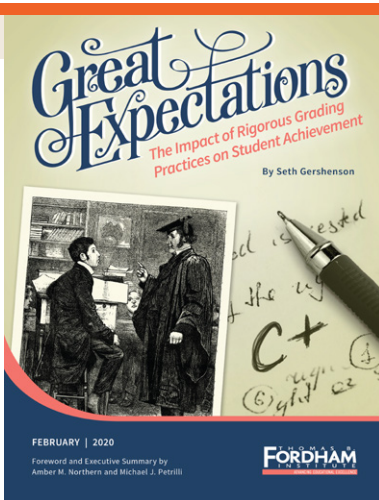
Media
mentions



57,795

Twitter
followers

2020 RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS



Great Expectations: The Impact of Rigorous Grading Practices on Student Achievement

Teachers who hold high expectations for all of their students significantly increase the odds that those young people will go on to complete high school and college. But rising instances of “grade inflation” in U.S. schools have made it difficult to know whether a “good” grade is a clear marker of acquired knowledge and skills. We partnered with American University’s Seth Gershenson to examine the extent to which teachers’ grading standards affect student success.

We found that students of all racial/ethnic groups learn more from teachers with high grading standards, and these standards tend to be higher in schools serving more advantaged students. Moreover, the impact of rigorous grading practices can improve student performance in subsequent math classes up to two years later.

Since publication, this blockbuster report has received **over 9,000 pageviews and 50 media hits**, including coverage in POLITICO’s “Morning Education” newsletter and *Forbes*, and Author Gershenson discussed the report on the *EdNext Podcast*.

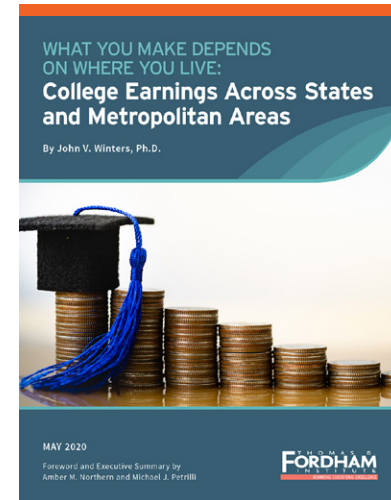
What You Make Depends on Where You Live: College Earnings Across States and Metropolitan Regions

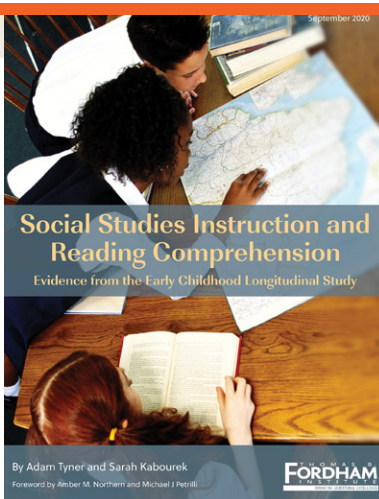
Deciding whether to invest time and money in higher education is among the most important decisions that a young adult can make. The evidence is clear that workers who went to college earn higher incomes, on average, than those without a post-secondary degree. But considering the variations in different geographic areas, do workers in some parts of the country do about as well with two-year degrees as those with bachelor's degrees?

In collaboration with Iowa State University's John Winters, we published a first-of-its-kind study that compares mean earnings for full-time workers with different levels of education in all fifty states and D.C., in over 100 metro areas and rural America.

We found that nationally, bachelor's holders strongly out-earn workers with less education. Yet there's significant variation across the country, with college earnings premiums that are substantially greater in large cities and urbanized areas, and smallest in rural America.

This report received **twenty-five media mentions and over 6,000 pageviews**, and was cited as evidence in the successful quest to **increase funding** for Idaho's career and technical education programming.





Social Studies Instruction and Reading Comprehension: Evidence from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study

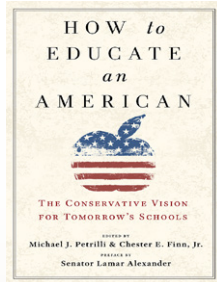
We at Fordham have long believed that a focus on academic content in history, geography, science, and other disciplines—not generalized reading skills and strategies—will equip students with the background knowledge they need to comprehend all sorts of texts and make them truly literate. In this groundbreaking report, Fordham’s associate director of research Adam Tyner and early childhood researcher Sarah Kabourek explore how much classroom time is spent on different knowledge-rich subjects, whether students who spend more time on certain subjects make greater progress in reading, and how these effects differ by student characteristics.

Among the report’s five key findings, Tyner and Kabourek find that increased instructional time in social studies—but not in English language arts—is associated with improved reading ability.

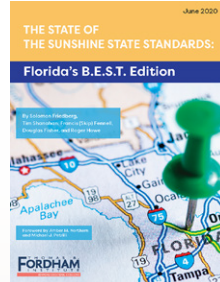
Since publication in September, this report has received **twenty media hits and nearly 19,000 pageviews**, and was circulated to educators and school leaders in school districts in Alabama, Colorado, Oklahoma, Texas, Washington, D.C., and Wyoming. Report co-author Adam Tyner presented the report to several social studies and curriculum groups, including the National Council on the Social Studies and **inquirED**.

OTHER 2020 PUBLICATIONS

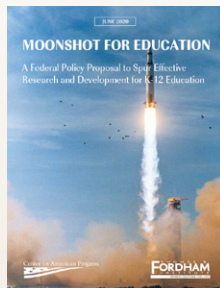
National



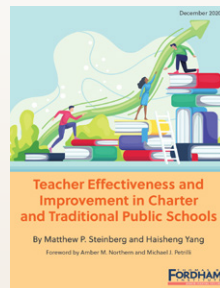
***How to Educate an American:
The Conservative Vision for
Tomorrow's Schools***
February 2020



***The State of the Sunshine
State's Standards: The Florida
B.E.S.T. Edition***
June 2020

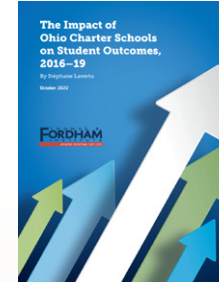


***Moonshot for Education: A Federal
Policy Proposal to Spur Effective
Research and Development for
K-12 Education***
June 2020

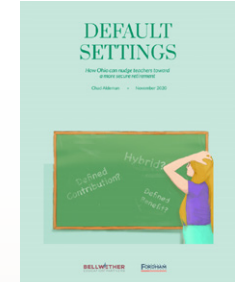


***Teacher Effectiveness and
Improvement in Charter and
Traditional Public Schools***
December 2020

Ohio



***The Impact of Ohio
Charter Schools on Student
Outcomes, 2016-19***
October 2020



***Default Settings: How Ohio
can nudge teachers toward a
more secure retirement***
November 2020



***Is Ohio's school funding system
still unconstitutional?***
December 2020

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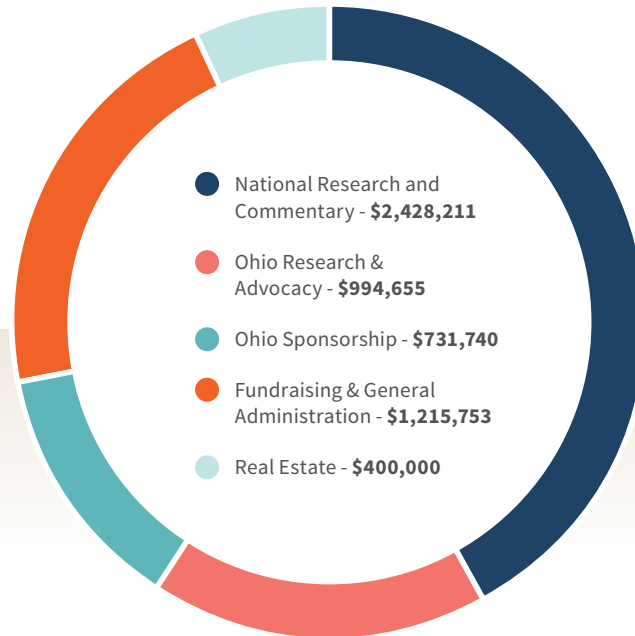
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Finances At-a-Glance

Fordham's spending was \$5.4 million in 2020, and is projected to be \$5.8 million in 2021. Of this total spending, 49% 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.



Funders

A heartfelt thank you to our funders and partners in these challenging times. We would not be able to achieve our mission without this critical support.

Bader Family Foundation

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Bluum Philanthropies

Carnegie Corporation of New York

Chan Zuckerberg Initiative

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