



THOMAS B.  
**FORDHAM**  
INSTITUTE

ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

**2021**  
ANNUAL  
REPORT

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# Letter from the President



**MICHAEL J. PETRILLI**  
PRESIDENT

**W**ell, that was disappointing.

2021 entered with such promise, what with miraculous vaccines, new political leadership in Washington, and an opportunity for greater national unity. Those hopes, however, were largely dashed, thanks to January 6<sup>th</sup>, vaccine resistance, and the never-ending—if always shape-shifting—culture war. So it was that 2021 went out amidst another deadly Covid wave, new talk of shutdowns, and Americans feeling glum and pessimistic about the state of the country.

None of this was good for our schools or our schoolchildren. School closures stretched on far too long last winter and spring, especially in blue states and cities. Studies found that remote learning was largely a failure, bringing with it massive learning loss and mental health strains. Meanwhile, school boards and legislatures became ground zero for a nasty fight over how we should teach kids about race and racism, creating more heat than light and further demoralizing our exhausted, frazzled educators.

Granted, it wasn't all terrible. Schools *did* reopen this fall and largely stayed open. Although quarantines, staff shortages, and supply-chain hiccups prevented a return to “normalcy,” most children at least got to see their teachers and peers in person and participate again in the essential rituals of school life. And the system's many failures since March 2020 awakened the sleeping bear that is parent power. This was another “year of school choice,” with big advances on the private school choice front and significant enrollment increases for charter schools.

As America's premier education-policy think tank and a leading Ohio education-reform advocacy organization, those of us at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute were in the middle of all of this. We're proud of our efforts to make some decent lemonade out of the year's many lemons, most notably by:

- Advocating for expanded parental choice in Ohio (along with partners inside and outside of government), leading to big wins on the voucher and charter school fronts. More kids are now eligible to participate in these programs, in more parts of the state and with more funding than ever before.
- Working with a broad, diverse coalition to defend and improve Ohio's best-in-the-nation [school accountability system](#).
- Supporting the [twelve charter schools](#) that we oversee as an authorizer, with a particular focus on ensuring that they all started to address their students' learning loss with aggressive academic programs over the summer.
- Leading a crowdsourced effort to provide evidence-based advice to education leaders on how to help students recover from the pandemic. [The Acceleration Imperative](#) eventually reached educators responsible for over 10,000 elementary schools.
- Demonstrating that common ground on teaching U.S. history and civics *is* possible by releasing a [review](#) of the fifty states' and D.C.'s standards in those essential subjects and showing that five of them (both red and blue) managed to do an exemplary job (many others, sadly, were woeful).
- Providing much-needed insight into the educational effectiveness of [major metro areas](#) across the nation, via an interactive website.
- Publishing other important studies on topics including [charter schools' fiscal impact](#) on traditional public schools, parents' views on [social and emotional learning](#), the long-term trajectories of Ohio's "[early high achievers](#)," the intersection between [interdistrict choice](#) and segregation, and the feasibility of using growth models to [estimate school effectiveness](#) despite a year of missing test data.

You'll find the details on these and other efforts in the pages that follow. We're keenly aware that none of this would have been possible without the generous support of our funders as well as the incredible work of our staff and partners.

Here's hoping that 2022 won't dash our hopes again. But regardless of what the world brings, we'll be ready to do all we can to help our students and our schools turn the corner.

Sincerely,



**MICHAEL J. PETRILLI,**  
PRESIDENT

January 2022, Washington, D.C.

# 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.



**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.



# Our Work This Year



The ongoing pandemic was the year's big story, of course, yet history may also remember 2021 for fights over how to teach U.S. history, for the political awakening of many public school parents, and for schools' initial struggles to address children's pandemic-induced learning losses. We at Fordham were in the middle of it all.

## PARENTS SPEAK UP

Many parents found their voice this year, prompted by lengthy school shutdowns, questionable approaches to teaching about race and racism, and pandemic-era school practices and policies. But it was also a year of school choice, as Mike explored in an article for *The 74* in [July](#). We also analyzed what parents want from schools in the realm of [social and emotional learning](#), the interaction of [school choice and desegregation](#), and the impacts (fiscal and otherwise) of [expanding charter schools](#).

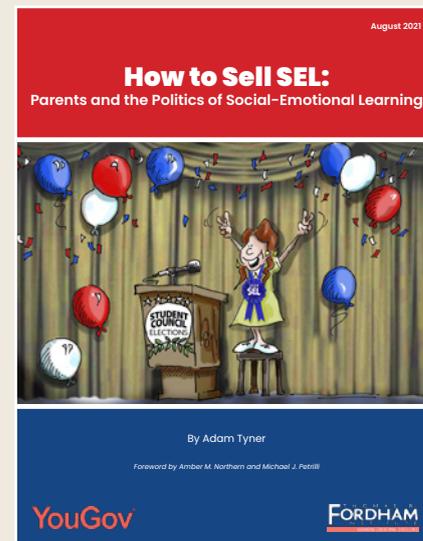
## How to Sell SEL: Parents and the Politics of Social Emotional Learning

To better understand parents' take on social and emotional learning (SEL) and to explore possible pitfalls in communicating with them about it and its place in schools, we commissioned a nationally representative poll of 2,000 parents of children in grades K–12. Though we found that parents overwhelmingly support the essence of SEL and recognize its rightful place in America's schools, few like the term “social and emotional learning” and some differences of opinion also emerge along partisan lines.

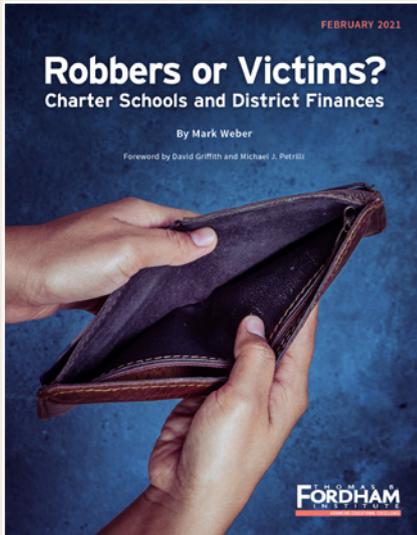
Based on these findings, Fordham's Adam Tyner recommended that schools use plain language and focus on the specifics when describing the intent of SEL, that they integrate SEL with academics, and that they honor the role that families, coaches, peers, and others also play in SEL development.

“...large majorities of parents, regardless of background or political party, agreed in the YouGov poll: They are strongly in favor of schools teaching students skills such as how to set goals, approach challenges with optimism, believe in themselves and their abilities, and control their emotions.”

– Arianna Prothero, *Education Week*



*Edutopia* ranked this **report** the most significant education research study of 2021.



“In his new report ... Rutgers University professor Mark Weber finds that the presence of charter schools does not drain resources from their host districts. Instead, district resources tend to increase significantly.”

—Terry Stoops,  
John Locke Foundation

## Robbers or Victims? Charter Schools and District Finances

Fordham engaged self-professed charter skeptic Mark Weber to analyze the relationship between the local enrollment share of independent charter schools—those not authorized by traditional school districts—and the finances of their “host” districts in twenty-one states. He found that, in most states, an increase in the percentage of students attending independent charter schools was associated with a significant *increase* in their host districts’...

- Total revenue per pupil,
- Total spending per pupil,
- Local revenue per pupil, and
- Per-pupil spending on support services.

In other words, the evidence shows that charter schools tend to help, not hurt, districts’ bottom lines.

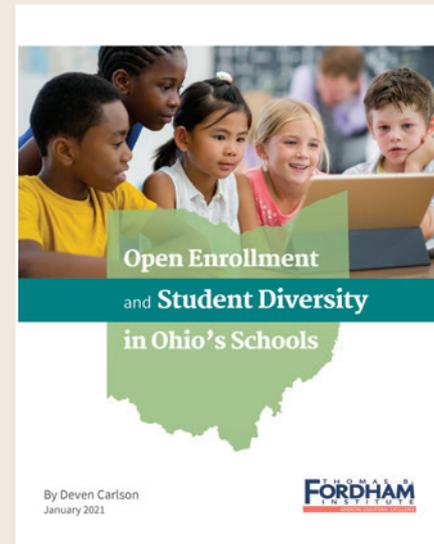
The Pennsylvania Coalition of Charter Schools leveraged the report’s findings in testimony to counter proposed cuts to charter school funding, and Michigan’s Charter School Association used the findings to advocate for turning around a Michigan Civil Rights Commission bill that would have reduced charter school funding by 25 percent.

## Open Enrollment and Student Diversity in Ohio's Schools

Approximately 85,000 Ohio students use interdistrict open enrollment to attend schools in neighboring districts. This study examined whether these transfer students result in more diverse schools or possibly worsen segregation. It found that

- Interdistrict open enrollment has virtually no effect on segregation across Ohio school districts and
- Open enrollment does not appear to impact segregation at an individual school level.

Currently, about 80 percent of Ohio districts voluntarily participate in open enrollment, yet many suburban districts have refused to accept nonresident students. To leverage the potential of interdistrict open enrollment as a tool for increasing access to quality public schools while encouraging more school diversity, principal investigator Deven Carlson recommends that all Ohio districts (subject to their capacity) participate in open enrollment.



“Most Ohio districts permit open enrollment but a large number of suburban districts do not.”

## The Year of School Choice in Ohio

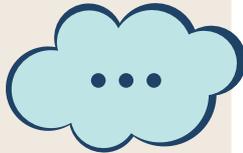
Fordham continues to advocate for quality school options in our home state. Joined by coalition partners, this advocacy helped lead to significant policy victories that will increase the educational opportunities for Buckeye students. [These include](#) the following:

- Removal of geographic restrictions on where new charter schools can open
- Doubling the amount of per-pupil facility dollars that charter schools receive
- Maintaining support for incentive funding for high-performing charter schools
- Significantly increasing the scholarship amount in Ohio's voucher programs
- Elimination of caps on the number of students allowed to participate in the EdChoice Scholarship program
- The funding of choice programs directly from the state rather than through deductions from state funds received by school districts



Tim DeRoche – Author, *A Fine Line*

Fordham also continues to bring thought leaders together in pursuit of quality school choices. In 2021 we cohosted three (virtual) events. In one of those, we joined the Buckeye Institute to host a [webinar with Tim DeRoche](#), author of *A Fine Line: How most American kids are kept out of the best public schools*. This book offers an eye-opening account of how families are denied access to desirable schools through the educational equivalent of “red-lining.”



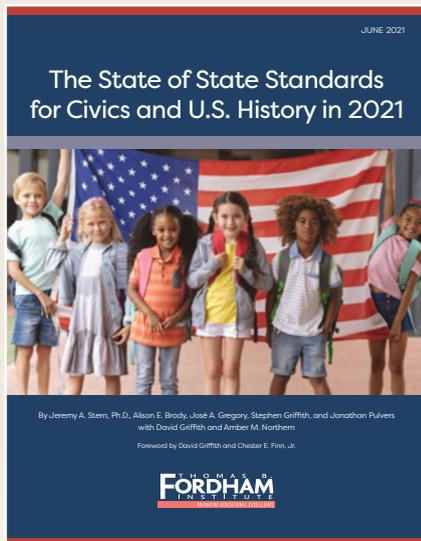
## Our Commentary on School Choice

In addition to our widely read blog and weekly *Education Gadfly* newsletter, Fordham staff published several op-eds on school choice during 2021.

- ***Charter Schools Rising***  
Mike Petrilli and David Griffith's piece in the *Hoover Digest* made an evidence-backed case for urban charter schools, arguing that they produce especially good outcomes for Black and Hispanic students.
- ***Follow the science: Charter school expansion is a rising tide that lifts all boats***  
Writing for *The Hill*, Mike pushed back against concerns that charter schools can harm student outcomes at nearby traditional public schools.
- ***Guarantee no child is denied entry to a public school***  
Aaron Churchill's piece in *The Cincinnati Enquirer* urged all Ohio school districts with extra capacity to accept nonresident students.
- ***Charter Schools Turn 30: Achievements and Challenges Going Forward***  
Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Bruno V. Manno took a big-picture look at charter schools as tools for reducing educational inequality and advancing educational opportunity.

# CIVICS AND U.S. HISTORY EDUCATION

Amid acrimonious debates over how to teach the most painful chapters of our nation's history, we were able to provide in-depth reviews about states that are doing this well.



## The State of State Standards for Civics and U.S. History in 2021

Fordham evaluated the academic standards for K–12 civics and U.S. history that have recently been adopted by the fifty states and the District of Columbia, using as criteria the quality, completeness, and rigor of their content and clarity of presentation. These reviews, led by esteemed historian Jeremy Stern, were conducted by a bipartisan team of veteran educators and subject-matter experts with deep knowledge of civics and U.S. history.

Some key findings include the following:

- Five jurisdictions were rated “exemplary” in both subjects (Alabama, California, Massachusetts, Tennessee, and the District of Columbia)
- Another ten states were rated “good” in both subjects
- Twenty states were rated “inadequate” in both subjects

The report offers several recommendations to state policymakers, including the following: students should complete a full cycle of U.S. history prior to high school, as well as a full year of U.S. history and one semester of civics during high school, and standards should clearly outline the U.S. history and civics content that students should know and what skills teachers should cultivate.

This was one of the most widely read and discussed reports in Fordham history. Policymakers in Rhode Island, Mississippi, Wisconsin, and D.C.—among others—have used its findings and recommendations to begin revising their states’ social studies standards.

“The report argues that neither imposing an ideological reading of history nor creating milquetoast and vague standards will reverse our national civic decline. Rather, all Americans need a rich understanding of American history and deep civic knowledge.”

—Jeremy A. Stern, *RealClearEducation*



Danielle Allen

Mark Bauerlein

## Seeking a Truce in the Civics and History Wars

[Educating for American Democracy](#) (EAD) brought together over 300 scholars, educators, and other experts with the goal of issuing guidance for excellence in K–12 U.S. history and civics instruction—and doing so with consensus. It’s been widely praised and sometimes criticized. Checker Finn participated in its creation and continues to play a role in its implementation.

In June, Fordham hosted a [debate](#) between Danielle Allen, political theorist at Harvard and a lead author of the EAD roadmap, and Mark Bauerlein, professor emeritus at Emory University and a frequent critic, moderated by Mike Petrilli.



## Our Commentary on Civics and U.S. History

In a polarized political climate, Fordham’s widely read blog, weekly *Education Gadfly* newsletter, and op-eds in national media offered common-sense commentary on civics and U.S. history education. Here are some highlights:

- ***Civics education—like barbecue—should not be one-recipe-fits-all***  
In an article for *The Hill*, Checker Finn and AEI’s Rick Hess offer a balanced analysis of the Educating for American Democracy roadmap.
- ***New Report Spotlights Civic Education Crisis in America, Offers Vision for Reform***  
In this article for the *Philanthropy Roundtable*, David Griffith reveals the sorry state of social studies education today and the need for reform.
- ***Illinois’ Asian American history requirement is only a first step***  
Writing for the *Chicago Sun Times*, Mike Petrilli praised Illinois’s Asian American history requirement but criticizes that state’s civics and U.S. history standards for containing almost no meaningful content.
- ***Wisconsin gets an F in civics, U.S. history***  
In the *Wisconsin State Journal*, Mike and David exposed the poor quality of Wisconsin’s civics and U.S. history standards.



## TESTING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Reports of months of lost learning led to renewed interest in state assessments, as an important indicator of student progress. This year we saw an important victory in Ohio on school report cards, and we used student test data to look at gaps among high achievers and to compare metropolitan areas on school quality.



### Ohio School Report Cards

After several years of debate, Ohio lawmakers passed a much-needed revamp of the state's school report card. The measure ([House Bill 82](#)) won overwhelming approval in both chambers, and Governor DeWine signed it on July 1. Among the reforms that we supported and that legislators included were the following:

- Decrease in the number of rated measures from fifteen to six
- Shift Ohio from the controversial A–F grading system to five-star ratings
- Maintain a clear, user-friendly “overall” rating that summarizes performance across the report card’s several components
- Ensure that students’ year-to-year academic progress counts more heavily in the overall rating

“State legislators should be commended for making these smart, common-sense course corrections.”

– Chad L. Aldis, Vice President for Ohio Policy

## Ohio's Lost Einsteins: The inequitable outcomes of early high achievers

To shed more light on high-achieving students, Fordham tracked the educational outcomes of Ohio children who scored in the top 20 percent on their third-grade math or English language arts exams. Key findings include the following:

- **Gifted identification:** Far fewer low-income and Black early high achievers were formally identified by their schools as gifted, compared to their more advantaged or White peers.
- **ACT exams:** Fewer than half of low-income and Black early high achievers took the ACT—47 and 41 percent, respectively.
- **Four-year college enrollment:** Just 35 percent of poor and 26 percent of Black early high achievers went on to enroll in four-year colleges.

To keep the U.S. competitive on a global scale and to advance excellence and upward mobility, report author Scott Imberman called on policymakers and educators to better nurture the next generation of inventors, scientists, and business leaders, especially those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds.



### Ohio's Lost Einsteins:

The inequitable outcomes of early high achievers

Scott Imberman  
September 2021

**FORDHAM**  
INSTITUTE FOR POLICY STUDIES

“We need to know why these gaps emerged, whether recent policies have shrunk them, and what can be done to make sure all Ohio students have access to the services that they need.”

—Scott Imberman,  
*The Columbus Dispatch*

### America's Best and Worst Metro Areas for School Quality



FORDHAM



U.S. Chamber of Commerce  
Foundation

## America's Best and Worst Metro Areas for School Quality

Using newly available data, Fordham ranked the nation's 100 largest metro areas on school quality, prioritizing whether their schools are actually effective at helping students learn. Miami, Memphis, and Indianapolis came out on top, while Las Vegas and Honolulu ranked at the bottom. Though some metro areas have a right to brag about the quality of their traditional public school systems and charter schools, others would be well advised to stop resting on their laurels and work harder to improve all students' academic progress.

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“Thanks, Michael Petrilli, for highlighting the progress in my hometown. I love the [Rio Grande Valley] and see its success as a case study in collective leadership.”

– Elisa Villanueva Beard,  
CEO of Teach for America via Twitter

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## Our Commentary on Testing and Accountability

Although elected officials in some places have been shying away from testing and accountability, the awful pandemic has brought growing public support for state testing systems, given the need to understand where students stand after lengthy school shutdowns. We helped to make the case for more information, not less.

- **[Kids need to be tested this year](#)**

In this article for the *New York Daily News*, Mike Petrilli explained the advantages of administering state tests during 2020-21.

- **[Five principles for K-12 testing through COVID-19 and beyond](#)**

Writing for *The Hill*, Mike Petrilli and AEI's Rick Hess set out a quintet of guiding principles for K-12 testing during the pandemic and thereafter.

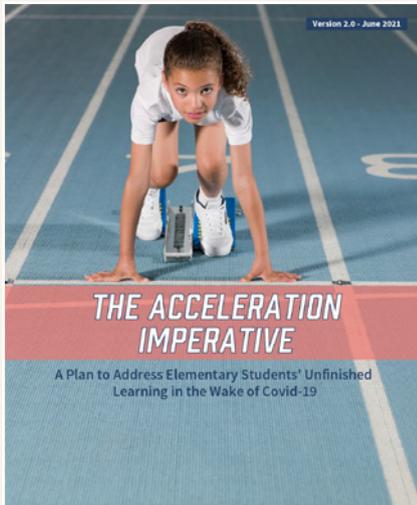
- **[Keep college admissions testing requirement](#)**

In a piece for *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, Jessica Poiner argued that Ohio should continue to require that all K-12 students take either the SAT or the ACT before they graduate from high school.



# THE LONG ROAD TO PANDEMIC RECOVERY

The pandemic has presented unprecedented and lasting challenges to student learning. Hence much of our research and commentary work has continued to focus on helping parents, educators, and policymakers meet these challenges.



## The Acceleration Imperative

Instructional leaders have been developing plans to address the enormous challenges faced by their students, families, teachers, and staff. To facilitate their planning process, Fordham presented *The Acceleration Imperative*, an open-source, evidence-based document created with input from dozens of current and former chief academic officers, scholars, and others with deep expertise and experience in high-performing, high-poverty elementary schools.

It recommends extended learning time, high-dosage tutoring, and expanded mental-health supports. Acceleration, not remediation, is the focus, meaning we should be devoting the bulk of classroom time to challenging instruction at grade level or higher while giving all students access to a rigorous curriculum in English language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, the arts, and more.

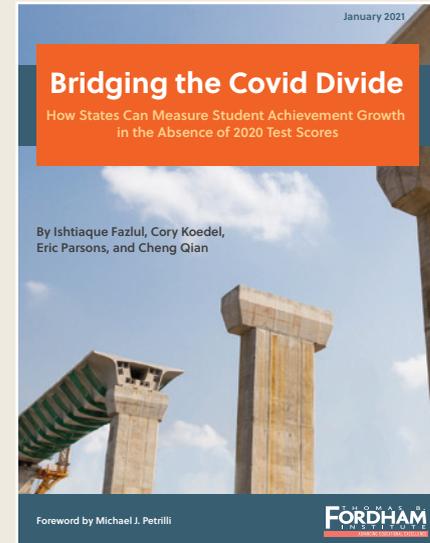
To date, leaders in more than 200 school districts (responsible for students at more than 10,000 elementary schools, many with disadvantaged pupil populations) have engaged with our wiki.

## Bridging the Covid Divide: How States Can Measure Student Achievement Growth in the Absence of 2020 Test Scores

As the Biden administration was deciding whether to waive testing requirements for the spring of 2021, we commissioned a team of economists at the University of Missouri to look at the validity of student growth measures with a one-year versus a two-year testing gap.

Their findings suggested that calculating student growth measures from 2019 to 2021 would be feasible even with the gap in testing that occurred in 2020, so long as students were actually tested in 2021. But if testing were again cancelled, it would be extremely difficult to determine how effective individual schools were doing during this challenging period.

Report co-author Eric Parsons and Mike Petrilli presented this report at the Hunt Institute webinar titled “Thinking Creatively to Evaluate Student Learning During Covid-10: Considerations for Student Growth & Skip-Year Growth Now & Into the Future.” Unfortunately, because the Biden administration allowed states to all but cancel their tests in 2021, few states will have the data to make these growth measures feasible.



## Fordham’s Sponsored Charter Schools Address Unfinished Learning

In the fall of 2021 our sponsorship portfolio included twelve schools in four Ohio cities, with total enrollments holding fairly steady at about 5,500 students. All but one of our schools started the 2020–21 year remotely, but by March most had transitioned to a hybrid schedule. It was a very challenging year for them and for American education generally. All our schools offered in-person summer school in 2021 to begin to address student learning gaps and to provide an opportunity for students and teachers to interact and pilot new routines and programming prior to 2021–22 school year.

By September 2021, all our schools were providing in-person learning five days a week. But there have been struggles, such as transportation, filling teaching and nonteaching positions, and temporary closures due to quarantine and Covid cases, among others. Our schools deserve credit for persevering and demonstrating steadfast commitment to serving their students, families, and staff. They also benefit from the flood of federal recovery funding and are using those resources for strategies to address learning gaps, including providing intensive tutoring and extra time for instruction, updating aging technology, and offering summer school.

One new school, Citizens of the World–Cincinnati, joined our portfolio in 2021–22. Next year, we are excited to welcome two IDEA campuses, also in Cincinnati. We thank the students and staff in our portfolio of schools for sharing many of the photos found in this annual report.



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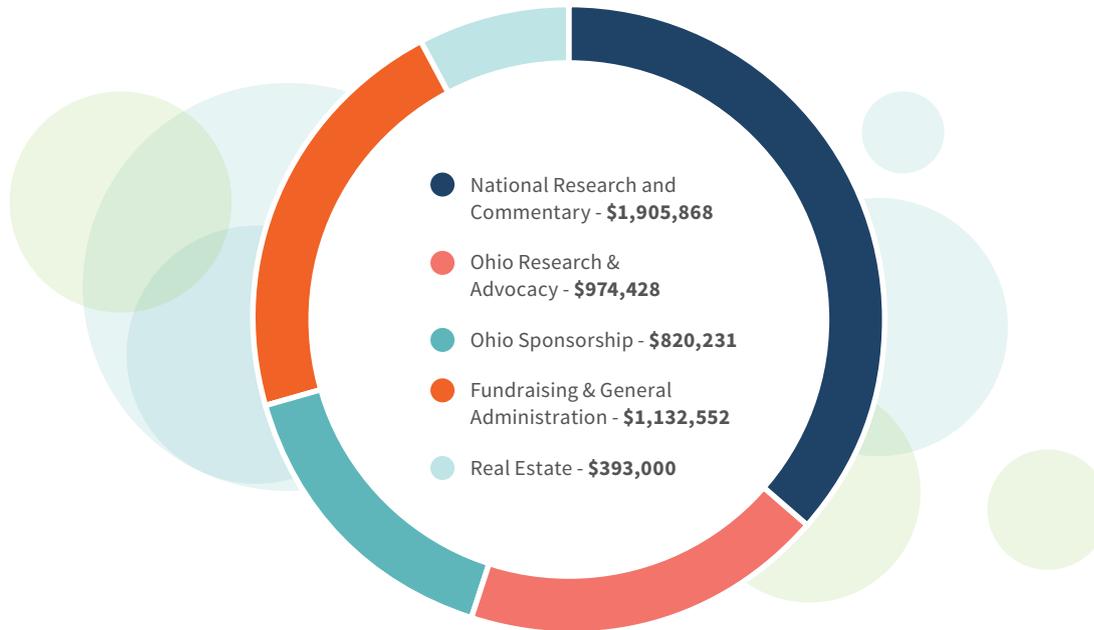
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# Finances at a Glance

**F**ordham's spending was \$5.2 million in 2021, and is projected to be \$6.1 million in 2022. Of this total spending, 45% will be supported by our endowment, and the remainder will be raised from private foundations and donors. Our charter-sponsorship work is primarily funded by school fees.



# Funders

**A heartfelt thank you to our funders and partners.**

We would not be able to achieve our mission  
without their critical support.

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