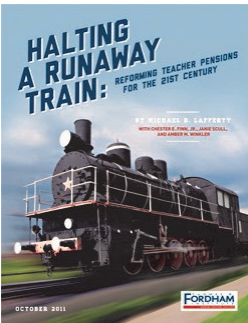


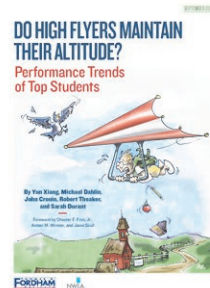
## Hot off the Press



**Halting a Runaway Train: Reforming Teacher Pensions for the 21st Century** A handful of institutions, both within and outside of education, have grappled with pension challenges and found alternative retirement solutions, such as moving to a 401(k)-style plan. This volume examines those leaders, tracing pension reform in federal, state, and local government; higher education; the charter sector; and private industry. It highlights both innovative methods of structuring pension reform—such as Utah’s hybrid model—and practical steps to ensuring a smooth transition—such as engaging workers and gauging employee sentiment before making changes. The common sense approach outlined will be useful for those considering an overhaul any pension system.

**Review of the National Research Council’s Framework for K-12 Science Education** Representatives from twenty states are hard at work developing Next Generation Science Standards—and using as their starting point the National Research Council’s recently released Framework for K-12 Science Education. This new review of that framework, by Paul R. Gross, finds much to praise in the Framework but also raises important concerns about a document that may significantly shape K-12 science education in the U.S. for years to come.

**Do High Flyers Maintain Their Altitude? Performance Trends of Top Students** What happens to high-achieving students over time? Do they remain high-achieving? Or does their performance decline relative to other up-and-coming students? This ground-breaking analysis from the Northwest Evaluation Association compares the performance and growth of individual high achievers to that of their peers over multiple years. It finds that, although a majority of these “high flyers” maintain that status throughout their years of schooling, a substantial proportion of high flyers—about 30 to 50 percent, depending on grade range and subject—lose altitude. But of those students who gain and lose high flyer status—defined as performing at or above the 90th percentile—the vast majority always perform within the top third of students. In addition, performance gaps between high, middle, and low achievers remain relatively stable over time in math; but in reading, low and middle achievers gain ground on high achievers. The study suggests that we are not doing everything we could to nurture and sustain the promise of high-achieving students and to increase their numbers. If we are truly serious about providing excellence in education for all students, then we should consider changing accountability systems to place emphasis on the growth of low-, middle-, and high-achieving students alike. This report is a condensed version of a more extensive report coming out in late Fall 2011.



**Creating Sound Policy for Digital Learning** In “Quality Control in K-12 Digital Learning: Three (Imperfect) Approaches,” the first of six papers on digital learning commissioned by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Frederick M. Hess explores the challenges of quality control. The next two installments take up the implications of this education revolution for teachers and school finance. Bryan and Emily Hassel describe how digital learning could unbundle teacher roles in ways that would reshape the field to the benefit of both educators and students. They also show how existing policies could hinder that transformation. Paul T. Hill delves into why our present school-funding system presents a uniquely serious threat to digital learning’s promise, and proposes creative yet streamlined solutions to the problem. Explore all three papers for a preview of American education’s future.

View these publications at [www.edexcellence.net](http://www.edexcellence.net)

# Happy Holidays

from Fordham



Best wishes from the Fordham team for a very happy holiday, and a safe and prosperous 2012!



# What's cooking

at Fordham

## In Development

DECEMBER 2011

### Do Great Boards Provide a Bounce? The Shaky Connection Between School Boards and Student Achievement

Last February, in collaboration with the National School Boards Association and Rick Hess, we co-released *School Boards Circa 2010: Governance in the Accountability Era*. It provided a wealth of data regarding who serves on school boards, how board members view their roles, the type of work that they do, which interest groups were influential in their campaigns, how boards are configured as governing institutions, etc. We now plan to conduct a follow-up study that would link these descriptive data about board members’ attitudes and behaviors to actual measures of student achievement in the districts these board members serve. In short, this project seeks to understand whether and how school boards differ in high-achieving versus low-achieving districts—their composition, their priorities, their knowledge, and their practices.

**Budget: \$140,000**

### A Market Research Study of the Nation’s School Parents

Analysts and advocates interested in the “demand” side of school choice have long been interested in parents’ educational preferences. But too often parents are seen as monolithic, with researchers looking to determine what the “average” or “typical” parent (or low-income parent) wants in a school. This groundbreaking study takes a different approach: It will “segment” U.S. parents into distinguishable groups, each with its own values and preferences regarding education. We plan to identify these groups and their key demographic markers, and then estimate (nationally) how many parents belong to each one. We then plan to replicate and apply the study in seven metropolitan areas in order to detect whether there are regional or local differences.

**Budget: \$230,000 for national study, and \$50,000 per metro area for seven local studies**



### Educating the Nation’s Severely-Disabled Children

Having ten years ago dipped our toes into the turbid waters of special education (*Rethinking Special Education for a New Century*), we’re ready to plunge back in, at least up to our knees. Despite good intentions and some reform efforts, special ed is still beset by a compliance-oriented mindset—one that values process over outcomes and shows no appetite for reining in costs despite darkening budget forecasts. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) will be reauthorized soon after ESEA. Fordham plans a series of research studies intended to inform thinking around the next iteration of IDEA, helping to move the legislation from a procedural to outcome-based focus—and offer fresh thinking about how to redefine the basic assumptions behind this 35-year-old legislation. It also seeks to offer guidance to local leaders about how to work more flexibly within the constraints of the current IDEA—and to do so with greater efficiency and effectiveness.

**Budget: \$200,000**

### Red Tape Fear or Fallacy: Do Regulations Discourage Private School Participation in Choice Programs?

We’ve witnessed significant growth and expansion in private-school choice programs of late. But the success of these programs depends upon a pool of high-quality private schools that agree to participate in them. As voucher and tax-credit programs proliferate, what factors entice private schools to sign on—or stay away? What factors deter some schools from participating? Is it limited enrollment capacity? Regulations surrounding how schools can admit students? Aversion to having students take state tests or report results from them? This project will examine the relationship between regulations and private school participation in voucher and kindred programs, including a close look at two of the country’s major choice programs—those in Milwaukee and Ohio.

**Budget: \$132,000**

**Stretching the School Dollar: A Research and Advocacy Initiative**

After years of non-stop increases—national K-12 per-pupil spending is up by one-third in inflation-adjusted dollars since 1995—our schools now face the near-certainty of repeated annual budget cuts for the first time since the Great Depression. And these new revenue trend levels are likely to be long-lasting, what with increased pressure on the public purse from the retirement of Baby Boomers, health care costs, debt payments, and other demands. The challenge for educators and policymakers is not only to cut budgets and spending carefully so as not to harm student learning but—preferably—to transform these fiscal woes into reform opportunities: to cut smart, replace prudently and add wisely, thereby helping our schools and students to emerge stronger than ever. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is conducting an aggressive research and advocacy effort to help identify concrete solutions to do exactly that. Our aim is to identify evidence-based solutions to the budgetary challenges facing American public education and to encourage the adoption of measures that will make our schools more effective and efficient over the long run. Initially, we'll be tackling such issues as:

1. Rethinking teacher compensation & pensions.
2. Addressing special-education costs.
3. Tapping the potential of online learning.

Studies on these and other topics will generate important new empirical evidence and insights into how states, districts, and schools can “stretch the school dollar,” which we will promote with a robust communications strategy.

**Budget: Approximately \$560,000 per year for 3 years**

**Re-Thinking Education Governance: An Agenda-Setting Initiative**

School “reforms” abound today, yet the glacial pace of changes brought about by new policies and practices demands a closer look at public education’s basic structures. Even the boldest and most imaginative of reform policies can gain little traction if the institutions charged with educating young Americans are dysfunctional and unable to effectively implement and sustain them over time. What America needs in the 21st century is a far more comprehensive approach to “reforming” K-12 education. This hinges on a thorough understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of existing structures, governance arrangements, and power relationships—which is precisely what few education reformers (or public officials) have been willing to contemplate. We’ve embarked upon an “agenda-setting” initiative designed to examine the dimensions of this problem, bring in relevant information from beyond the traditional bounds of K-12 education, and frame some bold alternatives. This 3-year effort will result in a series of events, forums, op-eds, books, reports, and more. But more than anything, it will make “rethinking local control” and other governance arrangements the next big issue in education reform.

**Budget: Approximately \$900,000 over 3 years**

**School Construction Boom and Bust: Why it Costs More than Dollars**

In 1995, school districts in the United States spent roughly \$10 billion on school construction, including new schools, upgrades, and renovations. That figure peaked ten years later, more than doubling to \$24 billion in 2005 before declining to \$14.5 billion in 2010. But where did this money come from? Local school levies? The “credit bubble”? This “follow-the-money” project will address these questions and more. Remarkably little is known about how much schools spend on facilities and other capital expenses; we intend to fill that gap. We’ll dig into facilities expenditures in a dozen districts and explore their impact on teacher salaries, class size, etc.

**Budget: \$125,000**

**Public School Choice**

Is school choice enabling urban centers to attract affluent families? Leading to greater inequity? Changing housing patterns? Encouraging the public schools to improve—or speeding up their decay? We propose a series of case studies of 5-10 cities to examine the intersection between school choice and urban renewal. We envision featuring these papers at a prominent national forum, and to publish them together as a book. Our intention is to determine the ways that school choice helps—and hinders—efforts to revitalize our great cities.

**Budget: \$147,500 - \$215,000 (depending on number of case studies)**

**Underway**

Fully funded projects underway and projected release dates for their findings:

**Evaluation of Digital Learning**

Projected release January 2012

We can be smarter about the next major phase of education reform: taking high-quality virtual and hybrid schools to scale—and to educational success. This series of papers (launched with this summer’s contribution by Frederick M. Hess) will build on the ongoing work of the Jeb Bush-led Digital Learning Council to dig into some of the thorniest issues related to online learning. For example: How should states hold virtual and hybrid schools accountable? Fund them? Prepare their teachers? Papers will be released on a rolling basis.

**The State of State Science Standards in 2011**

Projected release January 2012

Using criteria developed by respected scientists, this report will examine and grade each state’s K-12 science standards as well as the frameworks that drive several national and international exams, including the TIMSS, PISA, College Board, ACT, and National Assessment.

**The Future of Teacher Pensions: Impact of Pensions on School District Budgets**

Projected release June 2012

This study is intended to accurately portray the impact of unfunded pensions on districts, schools, teachers—and ultimately students—and to offer solutions.

**Teacher Union Strength in America’s “Laboratories of Democracy”**

Projected release August 2012

This study—the first of its kind—is being conducted jointly with the Center for Reinventing Public Education and Education Reform Now, and will examine teacher union strength, state to state, from multiple perspectives.

**Do High-Performing Charters Spend Money Smarter Than Traditional Schools?**

Projected release April 2012

We know that the “average” charter school receives about 20 percent less in funding than its district counterparts. But what about the charter sector’s high flyers? Do high-performing charter schools spend money smarter than typical public schools? Where do they find cost savings? And could these spending patterns be replicated in the American education system writ large?

**The Elites: Examining America’s Selective Public Schools**

Projected release Fall 2012

This study will map the elite public school landscape, examine how these schools have evolved, the types of instruction and learning that take place in them, and how they’re dealing with myriad political, policy and cultural challenges (e.g., accountability, diversity, choice). The report will also analyze these schools’ role, importance, and influence in contemporary America and suggest policy recommendations.

**Teacher Pensions and Teacher Quality: Examining the Effects of Florida Teacher Retirement Policies**

Projected release December 2012

Before we can institute pension reform and introduce alternative retirement plans into the traditional education system, we need to understand the impact that such options might have on the teaching force and, ultimately, the success of our students.

**Monitoring Implementation of the Common Core**

Ongoing

This four-part project will monitor, evaluate, and report back on whether states that adopt the Common Core standards actually implement them in a way that is faithful to their intent and rigor.

