

# FORDHAM AT TEN

*By Jim Bencivenga*



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## Executive Summary

On the occasion of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation's tenth anniversary, the organization wanted to know, "How are we doing, and how can we do better?" Enter Jim Bencivenga, a former editor at the *Christian Science Monitor* who conducted a three-month-long review to answer these two questions. Bencivenga was given free access to Fordham's records. He met with staff and board members; read through the organization's writings, both public and private; and conducted numerous interviews, especially in Dayton, Ohio, and Washington, D.C. His findings and recommendations are presented in four areas:

**I. Research and Publications:** An aggressive style and logical analysis are the hallmarks of Foundation research and publications. While the Foundation is able to garner media attention, it can do better.

- To strengthen credibility, the Foundation should peer review its reports and more explicitly identify the research methods it employs.
- The Foundation has largely ignored the role of the courts in education; it should no longer.
- The Foundation should become the "go-to" organization for NCLB-related questions and topics.
- The Foundation appears to have given up on schools of education. Instead, it should engage promising young researchers in these institutions and seek to influence their work and their thinking.

**II. Dissemination:** The Foundation's one-two punch—eclectic slaps through small publications such as *The Education Gadfly* coupled with knockout blows delivered through in-depth reports to specific policy issues—has proven effective for getting its work before the public. To improve upon this, the Foundation should:

- Tap its website's success by registering users and collecting their personal information.
- Be aggressive in pointing its website users to work it agrees with at other education policy organizations.
- Cultivate its ties to the media by making the rounds to editorial offices in major national and regional newspapers.
- Publish a quarterly summary of its publications.
- Harness new technologies, especially video.

**III. Dayton:** Fordham's work with charter schools in Dayton has made it a big education policy player in Ohio. By placing vice president Terry Ryan in Dayton, the Foundation reaffirmed its commitment to Ohio and earned goodwill from locals who were initially suspicious of Washington outreach. Fordham can continue building upon that goodwill by reaching out to the people affected by its charter schools and highlighting on its website the human-interest stories that would bolster support for its efforts.

- An annual "letter from the president" to the Fordham community would solidify the impression of personal concern and support for parents and teachers.
- Fordam should offer online forums that allow for greater interaction with local students, parents, and teachers.

- Until satisfactory facilities are available for charter high schools, Fordham should consider alternatives such as intensive remedial tutorials or programs such as AP for select students.

**IV. Personnel:** Fordham earns the highest marks of all in this area. Its workers are committed, collegial, energetic, respectful, and mission-driven. Comments about the Foundation—and its president—showed admiration for the high-level of talent in Fordham’s offices. It appears to have the beginnings of a succession plan in place (through its three-vice-presidents structure); it could certainly work to diversify its staff, especially in Washington.

## **Fordham at Ten**

By almost any standard, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation can lay claim to significant success. But like any endeavor, it could do better—and in more than a few instances, significantly better.

Peter Drucker pointedly and repeatedly states that two of the greatest challenges nonprofits face are complacency and drift from original mission. He advises foundations to monitor and evaluate their efforts continually. To that end, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of its modern incarnation, this report by an outsider critiques Fordham with the aim of encouraging self-improvement across the range of its activities. This report points out shortcomings, either of commission or omission, and suggests ways to redress them. It is meant for the Fordham family: the committed individuals, both in Washington D.C., and Ohio, who sit on its board; plan its policies; supervise its grants; write, edit, and publish its reports; and execute its programs, even as they keep an eye on and seek to influence educational and legislative trends related to school reform.

My methodology is that of a reporter who, over a three-month period, had full access to Fordham's records; met with staff and board members; and took advantage of any and all writings, private and in the public domain, by or about Fordham (limited only by the constraints of time and what one person, even a tested Checker alumnus' could read). I conducted numerous interviews seeking points of view and observations from a range of "players," especially in Dayton, Ohio, and Washington, D.C. These interviews were by email, phone, or in person with Fordham partners, supporters, competitors, grant

recipients, project cofunders, education officials, researchers, education reporters, media analysts, and even some Dayton parents. In short, individuals who were willing to answer specific questions at length about what Fordham had accomplished, for good or bad, in its efforts to reform U.S. elementary/secondary education.

This "self-improvement" report is divided into three major sections, on research and publications; dissemination; and Dayton; and one minor section on the personnel.

### **I. Research and Publications**

Step back ten years. Climb the highest K-12 mountain and see what is taking place in American schools. To the farthest horizon the view is a public education system flawed in its core mission—academic achievement. Deficient levels of learning fester in each of the fifty states. Entrenched mediocrity is the norm in a majority of the more than 14,000 school districts. A hydra-headed malaise—ignorance of and indifference to weak scholastic standards reinforced by the absence of widespread testing and accountability—prevails.

Business leaders, legislators, and governors grow more and more antagonistic to social promotions that allow students to leave school ill-prepared for a global information economy. They beg for local, state, and national reform. But, at best, the governance of America's vast public school enterprise can be described as fragmented and ineffective.

Teacher unions, their political enablers, school administrators, state education officials, and college professors of education willfully refuse to accept responsibility for the disconnect between the phras-

es “academic excellence” and “American schools.” For this crowd the word “reform” morphs into a mantra for higher salaries, reduced class size, and an ongoing accountability vacuum.

Perhaps, more than any other single deficiency, the inability to hold anyone accountable for poor student performance galvanized a troop of researchers, educators, business leaders, parents, and policymakers to collectively make the case for academic reform. Loosely organized at first as the Education Excellence Network under the leadership of Chester E. Finn, Jr., and Diane Ravitch, this core shared “at its heart” a credo: commitment to high academic standards, good teaching, sound tests, and results-based accountability. After gaining standing outside purely academic circles, they disbanded in 1996.

Enter the modern Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. It hit the policy beaches of Washington like a commando raid in broad daylight, establishing an ideological beachhead on standards-based education. From the get-go, Fordham’s tone and approach set it apart: a self-assurance, a confidence that it could make a difference in the marketplace of ideas while at the same time influencing legislators, government officials, foundation sponsors, and key allies in the education community and media to buy into its reform policies—now.

A stream of high-quality K-12 policy papers, books, monographs, newsletters, and reviews, both domestic and foreign, poured from its offices. These were not tomes for the ERIC warehouse. They were “marching orders” meant to “force” change upon a bloated, encrusted, and recalcitrant education establishment.

### *Major debut*

In 1997-98, Fordham marched into the national spotlight when it confronted educators and legislators with a state-by-state appraisal of woefully dismal academic standards in English, history, geography, math, and science. Fordham gave very low or failing scores to the overwhelming majority of states. Governors, state legislators, chief state school officers, and editorial writers took notice. Numerous editorial writers asked why their state fared so poorly.

This “coming out” publication documenting the absence of high state standards epitomizes the way Fordham puts in play the broader goals it seeks from written research and analysis. It defines Fordham’s signature research practice—a call for higher standards by first documenting their absence while simultaneously offering criteria that represent high-standards which, if adopted, would fix the problem of low standards. Fordham points out a vacuum and then conceptually fills it. The weight of its argument provides leverage for, and forges alliances with, like-minded educators and policy makers by empowering them to call for the type of reforms that Fordham seeks.

Though certainly not the only one calling for higher standards as a means to substantive education reform, Fordham can take a healthy measure of credit for the findings in a report issued earlier this year by *Education Week*, in “Quality Counts at 10: A Decade of Standards-Based Education” (Jan. 5, 2006). The study found “a steady increase in the number of states embracing content standards and tests linked to those standards over the course of the past decade.”

In keeping with its aggressive style, Fordham continues to publish state standards evaluations for all

fifty states. It posts the results for all to see on its website in a user-friendly, interactive map linked individually to each state, facilitating easy comparisons.

A similar approach of pointing out the absence of a measurable standard, while at the same time defining what that standard might look like, can be found in a brief sampling of other high-impact publications by Fordham easily accessed on its website. Here are a few that stand out.

- *The Teachers We Need and How to Get More of Them* (1999), a policy statement aimed at governors, legislators, and reform-minded educators that sets forth principles and policies “to guide states as they prepare to hire a teaching force for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”
- *Ready or Not: Creating a High School Diploma that Counts* (2004), a collaborative effort between Fordham, Achieve, Inc., and The Education Trust that underscores the dubious value a high school diploma represents for the readiness of a graduate to undertake college study leading to a quality job. It documents the lack of connection between high school graduation requirements and the real world of high-skill, high-quality jobs.
- *The Mad, Mad World of Textbook Adoption* (2004), exposes the irredeemable flaws in the ways by which twenty-one states select the textbooks that teachers and schools must use. It makes the radical call to let teachers and districts choose their own textbooks, as college professors do. A district with high academic standards and rigorous tests can soon learn if the books selected are imparting real knowledge.

Fordham sets significant goals for the papers, reports, studies, analyses, and books it publishes. Each publication has some bearing on

education reform. Topics include charter schools and educational choice; testing and accountability; teacher and principal improvement; curriculum and instruction; as well as a catch-all potpourri on school governance, federal and state policies, No Child Left Behind and the like. Given its size, admiration approaches awe for Fordham’s prodigious, high-quality publishing output.

## **Strengthening the Credibility of Your Work**

### *The coin of the realm*

For any nonprofit seeking influence in the education policy arena, success comes with a continuous stream of useful, timely data, ably researched, intelligently written and widely distributed. Fordham has proven itself not only capable but able to excel at this again and again. Invariably its reports display common-sense thinking that both informs and empowers legislative and educational decision makers at the local, state, and federal levels.

However, “pure” research by policy-driven foundations or think tanks (unlike a government agency or government-funded study as noted in Fordham’s recent study, “Feedback on Influence”) elicits a degree of skepticism. A priori, the source of the funding suggests a predetermined, hence compromised, outcome, regardless of the credentials of its researchers.

Fordham, along with the Heritage Foundation, the Brookings Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, the NEA, the AFT, and even the Hoover Institution (despite its stellar list of scholars and refereed journal *Education Next*), confront what I would call the “Caesar’s wife” test. They do not spend money on research that leads to findings in conflict with, refutes, compromises, or counters

the validity of their core mission. This is compounded for Fordham because its president is highly visible and known for the fierce defense of his positions in the relatively small orbit of education policy. Legislative staff on state and federal education committees, education reporters, and many editorial writers know Checker Finn is a forceful player. [Note: The Education Sector, more than any other education policy group I looked at (albeit my search was not exhaustive), wants to wear the white hat here and be the “honest broker,” assuming the mantle that Ernie Boyer once wore.]

Fordham’s record of producing high-quality, timely, nonshrill research is and has been the best remedy to any such charge of bias. Fordham argues from evidence. It isn’t as if it doesn’t spell out the credentials of its researchers and give detailed information on the methodology used in studies it commissions. So why raise the issue at all? One doesn’t want to appear to “protest too much.” I raise the issue primarily because No Child Left Behind (NCLB) reauthorization looms over the horizon. It will be the focus for a research agenda. It will be very high stakes.

**Challenge:** For the next two years, studies and evaluations of NCLB will stream forth from the education research community. A number of these will overflow wonkish channels and spill into a broader public policy debate. Fordham will be a player in both producing papers and critiquing the papers of others, even as it advocates numerous and specific NCLB reforms. The more transparent it makes its research, the greater heft its positions and recommendations possess. This is not a call for Fordham to do anything very differently from how it already does things, just to state even more

overtly for possible skeptics, especially in the press, the balance and objectivity of its research.

**Solution:** One approach could be highlighting in the executive summary (but not the press release) legitimizing statements on methodology and fact finding from qualified researchers not involved directly in the study. Ideally one or two of them would be recognized as likely to disagree with conclusions drawn (or would even disagree). Reporters writing about the study may or may not directly consult with these corroborating researchers. But by listing them, Fordham signals its confidence in the accuracy and integrity of its study.

Fordham should emphasize, even more pointedly than it already does when it releases its research reports, the degree to which it went in determining the topic its report covers, and that it casts its net in wider, deeper waters than itself. Obviously, it taps the considerable expertise of its board and staff in choosing a topic. Its practice of convening conferences and inviting participants to thrash out topics on reform is a masterful way not only to survey the scope of a given issue and its relevance to a research effort, but to point out to all parties the specific take it wants to investigate on an issue and the reason it is looking at a problem the way it does.

## **New Research Topics to Explore**

*It’s the courts, stupid*

**Problem:** One shortcoming in Fordham’s research and analysis that I found baffling is a failure to examine the intrusive role of the courts in running schools. The confidential draft shared with me by Kathryn Mullen Upton, an *amicus curiae* filing on an Ohio charter school constitu-

tionality case (since won by charter schools), was fascinating. Certainly there is fertile ground for a blockbuster report or project on the role of the courts in education. The courts have said schools are special places. But when superintendents and building principals nationwide routinely, almost daily, need to call attorneys to ascertain if they can do something as simple as play tag during recess, then the ramifications of that “special place” label need to be explored and spelled out in much more detail than is common knowledge.

**Solution:** A place to start might be Fordham’s examining and explaining line by line the thirty-five page contract the state of Ohio requires it to sign with each charter school it sponsors. Many eyes would be opened to see what is covered and not covered, required and not required, in the running of a charter school.

*NCLB is the fat boy in the canoe of education reform*

If Archimedes were an education reformer, NCLB reauthorization is the spot he would place his lever. NCLB is Fordham’s fulcrum for establishing a national curriculum and some form of national test to measure achievement.

Peter Drucker said there couldn’t be enough written about the Internet and its effect on business and American society. He never retracted that statement. I would echo him by saying there can’t be enough written about NCLB and its effect on American K-12 schooling. Twenty, thirty, or fifty years from now, the successor to Diane Ravitch as major doyenne of U.S. education history will look back on NCLB as the big bang or big bust of education in the twenty-first century. And while Fordham is off to a better start than most

policy organizations on this subject, there are miles to go before it can rest.

Preliminary jockeying and positioning in light of the 2008 reauthorization of NCLB by think tanks, foundations, and the raft of policy-related education associations in response to the 2008 reauthorization of the NCLB will soon be as intense and widespread across the education world as the two national political parties in positioning their prospective candidates for the presidential election of 2008. Just as there will be information overload aimed at voters, especially those in critical swing states, there will be report/study/data overload for state and federal education policy-makers. In the end, individual citizens will have an up or down vote for one or the other presidential candidates. This cannot be said of NCLB. Any number of possibilities might derail it.

Given that the amount of information surrounding NCLB will be so great as to overwhelm all but the most hardy policy wonks, Fordham should be first out of the gate with a primer on the process of reauthorizing NCLB, a Civics 101 look at how such a bill becomes law. Fordham should also take the lead in forging an alliance with other organizations and call for a conference (similar to the charter school conference it organized in Ohio) and/or a series of papers to identify the critical issues and to suggest workable parameters, benchmarks, outcomes, and expectations for a reauthorized NCLB. Fordham’s recently announced PIE Net initiative jump-starts what I am suggesting. It lays the foundation for a trusted collaboration that can present relevant information to state and federal policymakers. (More on this in the dissemination section of this paper.)

There will be no single definitive study of what the public needs to know about NCLB and its reauthorization. Fordham should aim to produce a series of papers on the subject; *Margins of Error: The Education Testing Industry in the No Child Left Behind Era* by Tom Toch of Education Sector offers an excellent template.

Fordham's role managing and critiquing the tidal wave of NCLB information to the public from varied and numerous sources—credible and not so credible—will be just as critical as anything Fordham itself publishes.

### **Expanding your audience**

*Fordham is from Mars, so don't leave schools of education on the dark side of the moon*

Fordham is steadfast in its hostility towards conventional schools of education, along with the routinely limp research they (and their research arm, AERA) predictably produce and the ineffective classroom and teacher preparation practices they espouse. The recent Fordham publication *Fwd: Teacher Education: Coming up Empty* depicts the split between what education professors think important in schooling and what parents, school boards, and legislators think important. The effect rivals British Restoration satire. The poet John Dryden intended the target of his pen to be so neatly sliced as to not know his head had been severed until, turning to walk away, it hit him on the foot. Many professors of education felt headless when they read news coverage of the study. It evoked how GM workers bought Toyotas because they were better built; how a larger percent than the general public of Chicago public school teachers who live in Chicago sent their

children to better private schools, not where they taught; and Fordham's recent, *Fwd: Where do Public School Teachers Send Their Kids to School?*

**Problem:** The stubborn fact is that schools of education possess a near monopoly in teacher licensing in all fifty states. This situation is unlikely to change. It can be argued that open, constant hostility to schools of education crosses a line. It creates an implacable foe. It eliminates Fordham's having any chance of changing, except at the margins, ed school practices (and the enormous public resources spent on these practices), which, to any sane observer, beg for significant reform.

Looked at another way, if the proverbial Martian on a mission to see how earthlings improve schools disembarked from his spaceship and headed straight to the Fordham Foundation, he would upon additional study find one huge disconnect. There are more than 650 schools of education through which pass thousands of future K-12 teachers. The Martian would ask: How can this foundation, knowing how critical good teaching is to school reform, intent on teacher development and training, operate with so little influence or even contact with these schools of education?

Shouldn't Fordham rethink how it might constructively and more publicly tap the minds and imaginations of a greater number of the Ed.D. and masters degree candidates at these schools? True, there should not be compromise with the devil. But the Sicilian adage to keep one's friends close, and one's enemies even closer, certainly bears consideration.

**Solution:** One approach might be to dangle scholarship aid to education graduate school

candidates in a competition soliciting research topics on education reform (say, NCLB related). Submissions would tap current thinking on a nationwide scale and put Fordham's name before an enormous pool of future educators, researchers, and policymakers. The effect of driving traffic to Fordham's website would be no small bonus. Think of a major reason many college professors subscribe to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*—salary comparisons let them follow the money.

*'Smile and murder while [you] smile'*

Being open to research proposals from a broad spectrum of school of education sources puts Fordham in a nonadversarial and nonideological light without compromising control for setting its research agenda. A comment made by a Gates Foundation program officer is relevant. In answer to questions: Did she think Gates received value for its money invested in Fordham? Anything Gates might have done differently? she was unequivocal that Gates had received value for its money. But she stated that she was sorry Gates had funded Fordham first to run a conference on charter schools in Ohio. There was the suggestion of an agenda. This caused some perception "problems" for Gates. A bit of damage control was needed in being clear that Gates had no predetermined agenda—as Fordham does—and that Gates was committed to overall education improvement and would pursue it wherever it found good ideas and programs.

By actively soliciting and then financing research topics from an unlikely partner or partners in schools of education, Fordham mitigates knee-jerk accusations that it does not even con-

sider the possibility of alternatives to, and remains set in, a narrow, preconceived agenda.

The recent study comparing international math standards in Singapore and the announcement by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics that it again recommends computing and memorization practices it had abandoned are excellent examples of how vested interests can move themselves off the dime. Perhaps there are international comparisons of teacher preparation that make sense to Fordham that differ from the current cache in most ed schools. And wouldn't it be even better if some doctoral candidate from an ed school suggested the topic? John Dryden lives.

## **Heads Up**

### *Trojan horse - NCLB*

Here, let me examine a conservative criticism leveled at Fordham: support of NCLB is a strategic maneuver fraught with contradiction and unacceptable risk.

At a time when information technologies level the world, grabbing top-down structures by their information throats and flattening them (Thomas Freidman's populist "the world is flat" thesis), NCLB raises an Olympus. It more closely approximates a French statist's solution: centrally authorize standards and achievement in our nation's schools.

School reform in the states via charter schools stems from a leveling of elites. Choice in education equalizes decision making, enabling all participants to act more independently. This current cannot be dammed. By pushing NCLB, Fordham places the cargo of education reform in a vessel with no precedent in American history. Somehow Fordham must navigate between the Scylla of a

federalism that allows states to be laboratories and individually opt in on good practices, and the Charybdis of a dramatically increased role for the federal bureaucracy in setting and administering standards and testing. It risks shipwreck. Like shoals and stormy seas, the law of unintended consequences has not been revoked.

Not-too-distant history (and personally painful memory to some at Fordham) shows what happened to the idea for a National Institute of Education in the Nixon era. NIE was hijacked by schools of education, which legitimized for the most part the very obstacles to sound schooling and quality education it was founded to overcome. What guarantee is there NCLB will not suffer a similar fate and be co-opted by status quo interests? Fordham's own "race to the bottom" polemic highlights the potential for abuse, resulting in a neutered NAEP via the stroke of some anonymous state education bureaucrat's pen lowering the bar for acceptable performance, perniciously defining deviancy down as Senator Moynihan would put it.

One cringes at the near-miss disaster for public education had not Ronald Regan won in 1980. A second Carter term would likely have made the Department of Education a wholly owned subsidiary of the National Education Association. NCLB reauthorization is a rough beast slouching away from Washington. Who will own it? By whom and how will a bill be written? At this stage of a multiyear campaign to reform American education, the co-optive nature of bureaucracies and the egalitarian tendencies of the Democratic party make placing so much in one piece of sweeping legislation at best very

risky, at worst, a mistake. Conservative mistrust and opposition to such a federal incarnation is and will continue to be great. Democrats simply will not buck the wishes of the NEA and the AFT, neither of which will link test scores to accountability or merit pay for its members.

Fordham desires states to opt into a uniform set of high performance standards in K-12 education and then rely on national testing as the way to gauge if these higher standards take root in schools. Where is the firewall protection from the conflagration of unsound federal policy? Fordham, repeatedly and demonstrably, will have to prove such a firewall exists to skeptics on either the left or the right.

## Summary

This must be said, even though I was warned against an overemphasis on praise when writing this paper:

I found little criticism and much praise bordering on envy from education analysts, reporters, and foundation officers across the spectrum of Fordham's research and publications, especially its selection and timely analysis of topics prior to their showing up in the news or on the policy community's own radar. Fordham's influence necessarily spills over to the broader public. Its role in leading and/or directing discussion on education reform was the single-most-often praise that I heard. The recent study, "Turning the Corner on Quality: Policy Guidelines for Strengthening Ohio's Charter Schools," masterfully depicts the role and impact of research on policy and legislation.

There exists a cumulative effect resulting from Fordham's calculus in the selection, timing, and

publication of research topics. Each effort, linked to its overall mission, adds credence to the widely held perception that Fordham is a place of coherency, cogency, and lucidity. Through its opinions, ideas, research findings, and policy recommendations—always done without compromise—Fordham reinforces for the entire policy community the high value rightly vested in the principle of academic freedom.

## II. Dissemination

The reformation of elementary and secondary education rests on the bedrock of publishing and disseminating useful information about the absence of meaningful standards and the changes needed in American schools to foster higher academic achievement. Fordham steadfastly rejects any solution that would simply add resources to routine practices by the organizations already responsible for the sorry plight of learning.

Just as an experienced teacher takes the measure of what a new class of students knows at the outset of a course and proceeds to backfill any core concepts that are lacking, Fordham began a decade ago to articulate for the American people, in particular business leaders and legislators, a clear account of the widespread and systemic deficiencies in American schooling, especially pitifully low academic standards. Fordham knew that once citizens took stock of how bad things were, they would call for sweeping education reform. It trusted the public to embrace well-conceived policies (backed up by research and held accountable by testing) to improve schools—in effect, the very programs and legislation Fordham would champion.

## The Intelligent Boxer

Fordham's dissemination philosophy neatly fits a political premise practiced by two former Speakers of the U.S. House of Representatives, Democrat Jim Wright of Texas and Republican Newt Gingrich of Georgia. "Never underestimate the intelligence of the American people. Never overestimate what they know about a given policy or issue." Neither of these politicians patronized citizens. They knew politics "ain't beanbag," and that in a political contest victory often goes to the side where voters understood the issues. Fordham understands this. School reform is a series of complex policy battles, and winning the hearts and minds of citizens requires winning the war of ideas.

### *One-two punch*

One way a boxer fights is with jabs and counter-punches. Not meant as knockout blows, they soften up an opponent while holding his attention—bloodying his nose, if you will. *The Education Gadfly* fits this role perfectly. It polemically stings like a good left jab. On a daily basis it allows Fordham to raise, target, and respond to issues, positions, and points of view current in public thought. Its forte is speed and timeliness.

*Gadfly* evolved from the pre-Internet, quasi-news-clipping publication, "Selected Readings on School Reform"—a carryover from the Education Excellence Network. "Selected Readings" provided easy access to an eclectic compendium of already published articles. Fordham's role in the creation and spin-off of *Education Next*, which commissions articles and requires peer review, can be seen as a more substantive approach than "Selected Readings." *Education Next*, like *Gadfly*, seeds media interest, especially more thoughtful editorials, on ed reform topics.

Punch number two is where a fighter lands a blow that significantly influences the outcome of the fight. Fordham packs this wallop in the timely, substantive, research-driven publications it has and continues to produce. These reports spell out the extent of a problem, what needs to be done to correct it, and the best ways to bring about what needs to be done on a given reform issue. Rather than the eclectic slaps delivered by *Gadfly*, formal studies are a strategic strike, like the fifty state standards studies. Fordham's current publishing plan calls for the release of one such study a month, with four or five a year labeled blockbusters. This allows adequate time to prepare extra dissemination strategies. A boxer must pace himself. Punching flurries will wear him down needlessly and accomplish little.

#### *Knockout blow*

There are times when a seasoned fighter moves in for the "kill." His opponent is against the ropes. Fordham's knockout punch is its ability to deliver a policy paper at the opportune time to a select official or legislator, host a conference, or give testimony at hearings by a state or federal education committee that tips the debate and results in favored legislation or administrative regulations and policy. Examples would be the agenda-setting conferences Fordham sponsors, such as that in 2001 (with financial assistance from the Gates Foundation) to discuss the formation of charter schools in Ohio; or the recent paper Fordham/Ohio issued addressing specific legislative steps affecting charter schools, "Turning the Corner to Quality: Policy Guidelines for Strengthening Ohio's Charter Schools."

While not a knockout blow, the conference held on December 12 in Washington to consider "NCLB in 2007" plays to the new Democratic majority in the House and Senate. It is a sparring match for the NCLB fight to come.

#### **Tapping the Web's Potential: From "show me the clips" to "bookmark my website"**

For policy wonks, "Show me the clips" is the equivalent of a professional athlete telling his agent, "Show me the money." Fordham's "got clips," in news coverage of its major reports, editorials, columns, op-eds, and ultimately, final legislation that it influenced from magnum works like state-based academic standards in all fifty states. *Gadfly* zingers daily point out critical and/or overlooked studies, stupid and harmful policy ideas, positive and negative classroom practices.

**Challenge:** How to better tap the website's (particularly *Gadfly's*) success.

**Solution:** Fordham should insert a one-time-only registration page granting access to first-time visitors to *Gadfly* or any part of its website. User-tracking software has improved immensely since Fordham first launched its words-only website years ago. The practice of requesting that readers share some information about themselves in exchange for free material they obviously want is standard. By requiring registration for full access to its website, Fordham will better understand who it is that it reaches, and can then in turn tailor more of what it offers to this identified audience.

A range of reader information can be requested, especially data Fordham covets (e.g., Are you a legislative staffer on an education committee? A

school board member? College professor, teacher, school administrator, elected official?). Fordham might only require registration when an individual wants to download a PDF—leaving the website totally free and open to casual drive-bys. Either way, once a person has registered, and a cookie is placed on his computer, data mining begins. [Note bene: Fordham’s privacy policy for those who register should be clearly published. It should set standards at or above the privacy policy levels of Ed Trust, Ed Week, Ed Sector, Eduwonk. And once registered, users should have an easy two-click opt-out option.]

#### *To link is to receive*

Fordham should aggressively link to reports or studies it agrees with (or at least can live with) by education policy players or disseminators in whose web orbit it wishes to travel—e.g., Ed Trust, Ed Week, Ed Sector. There are a number of benefits that come from this.

**First**, it helps readers and makes Fordham’s site more useful to folks.

**Second**, the gesture will likely be reciprocated.

**Third**, Fordham could more accurately determine *from where* and *to where* traffic patterns. Knowing traffic patterns is helpful in determining if Fordham is a first stop for people, or if another site is a major sender of visitors to Fordham (Google immediately comes to mind). Do people take its advice to go elsewhere and read more on a given subject? If so, Fordham could then consider if additional research or collaborations on that subject were warranted.

**Fourth**, the Holy Grail of dissemination is a high ranking on a Google search. Google software

places great value on directing browsers to sites that other, high-quality sites are linked to. Fordham needs to keep this in mind when issuing big reports.

**Fifth**, offering an RSS feed for *Gadfly* updates makes sense. In simple terms, RSS means a user gets the URL of the latest *Gadfly* automatically downloaded to his browser in the way and location of his choice. Since policy wonks scan multiple news articles and reports, having the *Gadfly* feed is more efficient for that individual and increases the likelihood that Fordham’s material will be read.

#### *Increased Web traffic*

Each major newspaper has a website. It’s becoming fairly standard practice online that when a news maker and/or his organization is mentioned in an editorial, a link to that individual’s website/organization is provided. If Fordham is specifically cited and the paper links to Fordham, increased traffic should result. Concurrently, it is possible to track (registration format in place) from which publication a reader came. This is pretty standard data mining. Big play for a leading regional paper on Google that writes about a Fordham-cited subject is also likely to drive traffic to Fordham’s site. Obviously, those publications that generate the most traffic to Fordham’s website are the ones it might work with more regularly.

In addition, Fordham can develop a similar list of the top ten or twenty portals that are not solely news organizations. Do any of them have education sections? Do they link to education sources? If they do, Fordham should be a site on their links list. This can be accomplished from D.C. with little need to travel.

## **Being the Media's Go-To Guy**

*Meet the press, earn frequent flier miles*

Fordham should better develop and exploit the preeminent stature and role its president holds in education policy circles. One way to do this is to visit the editorial offices of leading national and regional newspapers as well as select policy magazines and Ohio papers.

This would be time consuming but essentially an opportunity cost (see expenditure graphic). Much of Fordham's dissemination budget already resides in personnel expenses. The potential for reward is great. The Heritage Foundation perfected this technique in the 80s. It would involve Fordham's media relations person (who could be a contractor) contacting a cluster of publications in a given area and then scheduling editorial board meetings or sessions with known education writers.

Consider Boston as a jumping off point: *The Boston Globe*, *The Boston Herald*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, even *The Providence Journal* or *The Hartford Courant*. The drill is to contact someone from the editorial board of each publication and arrange an appointment (obviously within one or two days of each other) with the offer to discuss and outline for editorial writers—who are always pressured by not knowing enough but having to write on deadline—the major education reform issues, including NCLB reauthorization, that these publications will necessarily write about. Incentives are mutual, as they are when a publisher gets an advance copy of its book to the book editor so as to get a review in the paper. The paper gets Fordham's expertise, and Fordham gets face time with editorial boards/writers on education reform issues in a relaxed setting, all

the while establishing its *bona fides* as an expert on NCLB and education reform.

Do this in ten or more major regional centers and Fordham's influence will expand exponentially. Checker travels well, so have him travel. The editorial archipelago of Seattle, Portland, Boise, Salt Lake, Denver, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Austin, St. Louis, Louisville, Knoxville, Memphis, New Orleans, Atlanta, Miami, Charleston, S.C., Charlotte, N.C., Minneapolis, Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland has at the very least influence on education issues equal to that of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, or the major television networks.

Fordham goes in the personal Rolodex® (or the computerized contact list shared with all staff in a newsroom) of editorial writers nationwide, who when writing on deadline will be more inclined (familiarity helps on this score) to call Checker or someone at Fordham. Newspapers welcome "visits" from D.C. experts who "happen" to be passing through. Add value to the trips by identifying and offering to stop in for an on-air, radio call-in interview with market-leading talk show hosts or outlets that give special attention to education coverage (e.g., university-based NPR stations).

Lead newspapers gravitationally capture local TV station programming. Lemming broadcasters routinely cover that morning's page one or editorial (still leaving ample time for traffic accidents, shootings, and fires).

### *Political bonus to hitting the highways*

Though a road trip seems physically exhausting, doing it in late 2007 and early 2008 before the presidential and congressional campaigns kick

into high gear has an added bonus. Interviews are two-edged swords, with good interviewees—Checker, Mike, or Terry—learning as much from the types of questions asked as they inform with their answers. After a nationwide swing, Fordham could discreetly let key political strategists and/or candidates in any of the 2008 presidential or congressional campaigns know that, as a result of extensive travels and face-to-face exchanges with editorial boards, Fordham folks have a pretty good take on the American pulse *vis-à-vis* education issues.

Terry certainly could do the same in Ohio as he travels around the state.

### **Play to Your Strength**

*Weatherchannel and midwife for the mother of all education reform: NCLB*

When hurricane season begins in late summer (and it lasts approximately four months, or 25 percent of the calendar year), every TV and radio weather show covers any and all hurricanes. All weathermen/women (the policy makers of weather, if you will) cover these storms. They trump all other weather reporting. Everyone turns to the National Hurricane Center based in Florida, with its cool planes that fly right into the eye of the storm. Federal legislation on the scale of NCLB trumps all education policy. It is the equivalent of an education-policy hurricane, and Fordham has the human equivalent of that storm-flying plane, Checker, to fly into the center of the national debate on any aspect of NCLB, e.g., backsliding on testing, insufficient funding, dumbing down standards, or limited school and teacher accountability.

Fordham should decide if it wants to be the NCLB hurricane center for information and analysis, or if this pending storm is too great a reach for its current staffing and resources. In the latter case it would be better to consider, in collaboration with a few other groups pooling assets, a.k.a. PIE Net, creating a megaportal to disseminate timely, high-quality information on NCLB reauthorization issues. The recent Pie Net collaboration should be given time to gestate to see if it, and therefore Fordham, play a central role. Possibly PIE Net members would have a box on the megaportal with a link back to their individual websites. The megasite could provide a forum for all credible players in the NCLB debate, much like an op-ed page.

Regardless of venue, Fordham is positioned to actively—vigilantly—monitor, manage, and even counter the massive flow of information on NCLB. This is Fordham's midwife role. Checker and *Gadfly* can provide commentary on any specific NCLB issue on Fordham's website and then link to this megaportal.

It is not too early to address ways to ensure a leading role for Fordham's website. I would recommend that Fordham—with the seating of the new Congress in January '07—develop for its own site a simple work-flow model, with online interactive graphics (like the U.S. map it employs when it releases the fifty state standards), explaining how the bill works its way into law, what happens if it is or is not reauthorized, even who the leading legislative players and their staffs are. A Civics 101 work-flow posting would serve as a reference point for the general public and mainstream media on what to expect and would have an active shelf life of up to two years. It would give Fordham first-out-of-the-gate status on NCLB.

### *Collaborate on NCLB*

NCLB is a pure policy play. A workshop for education reporters, editorial writers (print and broadcast) on the scope of what reporters need to know to cover NCLB's impact on every classroom in every school is a natural, and Gates is a logical funder of such a workshop, along with PIE Net and perhaps administered through the Education Writers Association, EWA. Fordham gets equal time to present its approach to NCLB. This keeps Fordham out of an adversarial competition with The Education Sector, The Education Trust, and the like for preeminent coverage of this issue.

### *Quarterly summary of publications*

Ed Sector has a new Web product, ES Review in PDF format. I strongly recommend that Fordham create something similar. It compiles on a quarterly basis a concise summary of Ed Sector's recent publications in a user-friendly style. For first-time and regular visitors to Fordham's website, this would be a helpful overview of the content of Fordham's work. It should have nice play on the entry page. Done quarterly, it could develop into a regular press release and mass emailing to interested parties, thus proactively keeping Fordham's name in circulation.

## **Reaching New Audiences**

### *Why not a cruise?*

Policy-shaping efforts should go to sea: promote the NCLB cruise (or conference for landlubbers, e.g., the way Burger King funded school principal conferences). Face-time with policymakers, reporters, analysts, commentators, legislative staff, and/or legislators is highly desirable. Fordham, piggybacking on PIE Net, could put together a program with formal

papers, presentations, and discussions. And though at first this sounds a bit hokey, it would attract attention and high-value participants. If somehow Bill and Melinda Gates and/or Warren Buffett were recruited for any part of the cruise, the program would be fully booked. (Gates and Buffett have been appearing together on C-Span talking with college students about national and international issues.)

### *Action, camera*

Movies and short videos are not part of Fordham's DNA. They should be. A film or video is a better medium to inject passion into an issue for parents, students and local community members than a policy paper.

It is fair to ask: Wouldn't creating a compelling movie with a theme calling for high academic standards and rigorous testing challenge even Stephen Spielberg? Not necessarily. It has already been done!

If you haven't seen the documentary "Spellbound" think again (and go to the local Blockbuster Video and rent it, better yet, buy some copies to have in hand for loan at Fordham). It provides an in-depth look at a bunch of 10-14 year olds passionate about spelling and driven to compete and win the national spelling bee.

The show was one of the highest-rated specials on ESPN (a Disney-owned cable network). It is impossible to watch this show without being humbled by the standards of excellence internalized by these kids. And they know they face a Darwinian test with only one winner.

Funding for film or video projects would likely come from multiple foundations. Fordham could agree to pay for the initial script ideas if it found some interested foundations. (National Geographic on studying geography? NOAA on the math of thunder and lightning storms?)

### *Youtube joins the new ABCs*

To its credit, Fordham is experimenting with podcasts. Some videos (linked to Youtube, Yahoo, or Myspace) would add new media to the website experience, leavening its word-driven heaviness. Slightly more difficult than podcasts but still doable are 5–10 minute webclips (in color or grainy black-and-white) of real students and real teachers talking about the role of high educational standards in their lives. The challenges they face maintaining these high standards might be the way to go, especially if the students were in India, Singapore, China, Israel, or Costa Rica, and of course, Dayton.

Being a fly on the wall while a select group of high school guidance counselors and college admissions officers animatedly and spontaneously hammer out what they look for in academic achievement would be riveting to parents who want their child to graduate from college, especially parents who never attended college, as well as a reality check for any student seriously considering attending a high-quality college.

Making copies of short videos available to teachers and parents in all Fordham-sponsored charter schools would further reinforce a commitment to excellence. (See the Dayton section for more on this topic.)

### *Summary*

Fordham's expanding dissemination efforts required the addition of a full-time communications manager to the payroll as well as a newly hired writer for Ohio. This complements the already full-time D.C.-based writer, thus giving editor/reporters for both the national *Gadfly* and the Ohio edition.

Even the briefest overview of its website shows Fordham's maturation from a text-only electronic newsletter to a robust cyberpresence anchored by *The Education Gadfly*, now produced for both a national and an Ohio audience. A weekly podcast advances the progress and effectiveness of its electronic outreach efforts.

When it comes to dissemination, success is palpable: Fordham directs a steady stream of solid research, witty commentary, and sharp rebuttals on multiple fronts. It has the ability to intensively engage in issues it considers important. And the current strategy of twelve publications a year, one per month with four or five being blockbusters, is practical and doable, as well as digestible by the media and broader education policy public.

Answering questions in a timely way, calling back on deadline, goes a long way towards creating a favorable perception with a reporter. Reporters will grow to love Checker, Mike, and Terry, especially when a major study is released. They're just good copy. The nature and quality of what they know and say trump personality. And general reporters will learn, as education reporters already know, that *Gadfly* waits to set the record straight if misquoted or misrepresented.

*Gadfly* gives Fordham a means to respond at a news-deadline pace to any and all developments it sees fit to comment on. Actually, *Gadfly* is a stroke of genius. It had become a must-read for anyone I visited or spoke with. One can't be considered in the know in the education policy world if one doesn't routinely check out *Gadfly*. Sweet.

### III. Dayton

#### *Moving back home*

Writing about roots, Robert Frost offered the telling insight that “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” His words characterize the initial take on Fordham by most of the established interests in the Dayton Public Schools (DPS) a year or so after the foundation’s rebirth in 1997. Fordham’s roots were unequivocally in Dayton, and Fordham was coming home.

But questions arose: Was its reconstitution in Dayton little more than the necessity of meeting legal requirements of the trust it managed while the real show took place in Washington? Would Fordham stay active for the long term, faithfully committing itself to Dayton and not the careers of the executive team? How would Fordham meet community needs, and on what terms? Even giving Fordham credit for meaning well (and money flowing into Parents Advancing Choice in Education, PACE, garnered widespread kudos), would its efforts in fact do well for Dayton? Yes, Fordham had done and meant to continue doing good in the community, especially in the learning and cultural arenas. The business community certainly acknowledged this by its participation in PACE. But as Fordham began to make its intentions and presence felt in the school-choice policy debates, not just school officials but hometown folks were more than a little curious about the direction its reconstitution was taking.

One way to describe the initial relationship would be one characterized by traditional town-gown tensions. A homey, Checker was clearly running things. Though a Dayton native son, he had left town more than a generation ago, resided in Washington, and traveled in the nation’s high-

est education policy circles. Locals weren’t quite sure about his pedigree. Teacher union interests, on the other hand, knew they faced an implacable foe to their status quo and sinecure.

This is why it remains critical that Checker make personal visits to individual charter schools as often as his schedule allows, pressing the flesh and commenting forthrightly on successes and failures. An annual “letter from the president” to the Fordham community, at either the beginning or closing of the school year, with particulars nuanced by Terry, would solidify an impression of personal concern that remains a *sine qua non* of the kind of support parents and teachers in school systems look for from school leaders anywhere in the U.S.

Ten years later, no one is questioning Fordham’s commitment to Dayton. It is a proven fact that Fordham embraces its roots, seeking to remedy and support in Dayton all things educational, especially the barren soil of urban schooling. The best evidence I came across to back this up was this admission by DPS staff, including all but the most implacable union ideologues: five years ago, had a Fordham-sponsored charter school failed they would have been gleeful; today, such a sentiment is considered entirely mean-spirited. No one wants kids in the schools Fordham has helped midwife to suffer the consequences of a meltdown. A failure for Fordham (e.g., Omega school) would now be seen as a failure for kids first and thus a failure for Dayton, and only secondarily a failure for Fordham.

#### *Early lessons*

Passionate, visible reformers in any field of endeavor always raise expectations and run the risk of failing to meet them. Fordham was clearly

surprised by the forces it set in motion when it initially began planning tuition scholarships for families and students to attend schools of their choice. Tragically, parents knew DPS were miserably failing their children. What Fordham hoped to offer represented the number of lifeboats on the Titanic: far too few scholarship seats, far too many children left to go down in failing public schools. This is still the case, not only in Dayton but across the U.S. wherever choice scholarships are given directly to families.

Fordham learned it needed to share this project. Some told me less flatteringly, not “hog the spotlight” by putting its name on these scholarships. Partnering with other funders, especially local business leaders, and changing the initially conceived name from Fordham Scholarship to PACE soothed ruffled feathers. It resulted in many more students getting a shot at a decent education and highlighted the desire of parents, irrespective of race or income status, to become involved in their children’s education. Oversubscription for tuition scholarships by minority and low-income parents dramatically and poignantly made the case for alternative education in Dayton.

At the outset Fordham didn’t fully have the big picture on what it would do in Dayton, but as it learned, its focus sharpened on what it should and could do. One burr that remains under the saddle of some school officials is that Fordham gets more praise for its efforts than the DPS does and the belief that Fordham still tries to take more credit for any learning/testing improvements than it deserves.

### *Boots on the ground*

By basing Terry Ryan in Dayton lingering charges of carpetbagger or interlocutor ended. Terry was

not there to fulfill a legal requirement. He was not an operative to use the community’s charter schools like lab-rats for Washington policy battles. He was proof positive of a thinking, caring individual (and by extension the organization that paid his salary) who lived in the community and had a real stake in improving the lives of kids by improving their schools. Embodying Fordham around him sooner (or a similar viceroy) would have eliminated suspicions of Dayton being used as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. This is 20-20 hindsight. Chalk it up to Fordham’s learning curve.

Academic progress is taking place where before there was none. More is needed. Continued success will draw in more and more students, parents, and legislators. Like a loving yet stern parent, Fordham rightly reserves its highest praise for good test scores. It should make more overt efforts to signal that its praise is not only for the children and teachers in schools it sponsors, but also for children and teachers in the DPS who are on the road to educational excellence.

Fordham’s Dayton efforts have not been a straight line to outstanding schools. Hard lessons needed to be learned. Fordham made grants to schools that turned sour. Early efforts to work with DPS never got off the ground, as irreconcilable differences surfaced—Fordham wanted to raise the bar by yards, DPS was tentative about inches. The rise and fall of the statewide, and thus administratively unwieldy, Ohio Community Schools Center tempered progress. Working with Keys to Improving Dayton Schools (k.i.d.s.), a Dayton-based nonprofit education reform organization (funded in part by national and local foundations, including Fordham), proved a win-

ner. K.i.d.s. assists schools with people knowledgeable in financial management, facility management, and academic services. It gives hands-on operational support and guidance to administrators and charter school board members. Fordham's recent more decisive and proactive dealings with the festering wounds at Omega School in Dayton and W.E.B. Du Bois School in Cincinnati reflect nitty-gritty lessons picked up as its sponsorship learning curve rose.

## **Building Good Will**

### *More pats on more backs*

Five years ago the choice train pulled out of the station in Ohio. Fordham was already on board. DPS didn't even make it to the station. Today, with the exception of Katrina-wracked New Orleans, more children per capita travel the charter school road in Dayton than in any other city in the U.S. When classroom doors swung open in September 2006, about 28 percent of public school students attended a school of choice.

Fordham did not mince words or coddle DPS where so much of what was happening was by any standard poorly serving the most needy children in the city. But Fordham must watch the nuances of the way it speaks to the community about DPS. Foes would attempt to tar it as preaching "my way or the highway." Fordham should just stay on message: it simply wants (and offers) an alternative for Dayton's children. Parents ultimately decide which is the better school for their child to attend.

That said, Fordham should never give up its aggressive drive to change American schooling. Competition is good for schools. Animal spirits unleashed in blunt policy discussions, disagree-

ments, and debates likewise further its goals. At the national level folks are not only aware of this, they embrace a war of ideas as a fact of life. However, local schools and the people that work in them are by disposition more fragile than policy wonks. They take things more personally. School districts and the vast majority of educators within them strive to avoid clashes over policy, legislation, and practices.

Just as Fordham keeps shrillness out of its research studies and reports, it can keep shrillness out of the human relations component of its activities in Dayton by annually acknowledging a few clear successes taking place in noncharter schools. Maybe it can offer a cash award to a given school or a study grant for a teacher to use as that teacher sees fit. Fordham should actively and publicly recognize some DPS teachers, principals, and practices.

Establishing an awards committee would further these ends. This would be an inclusive gesture that takes nothing away from Fordham's focus on the larger goals of high academic standards and measured achievement.

### *All schools are local, so local online forums make sense: Sponsor essay contests, solicit videos by teachers, students, and parents*

Now that Fordham/Ohio has its own full-time writer and *Gadfly* columnist, it should offer online forums that allow for greater interaction with local students, parents, and teachers. This is not a recommendation to open discussion on any and all topics, which, if done, would likely degenerate into shouting and name calling, as well as wasting staff time and resources. It is a call to place on the entry page of the Ohio section of Fordham's website specific

topics about which parents, teachers, and community members are invited to make constructive comments or suggestions (e.g., The best ways to use a library; Doing homework before watching TV is a good practice). These must be filtered and allow for critical but constructive (and civil) points of view on school reform. The blog on education that *Dayton Daily News* reporter Scott Elliott maintains illustrates the potential to both inform the public and gain support for charter schools by giving empty nesters and singles without kids a forum to share concerns and experiences about educating children.

Many charter school families will not have online access in their homes. This is a serious obstacle not easily solved that must be addressed. But it doesn't trump the need to establish online communications about charter education in Dayton in order to draw people from surrounding towns and suburbs into the world of what Fordham does.

#### *Let me show you a picture of my granddaughter*

There is a tremendous appeal, for parents as well as adults and seniors without children in schools, in seeing kids being kids as they learn something. A simple link from Fordham to a Youtube video created by kids or their parents about good things going on in charter schools—a child explaining how he/she passed a difficult test, demonstrating a special project, whatever—will give people not directly connected to charter schools a better idea of what takes place in them. Google paid \$1.65 billion for Youtube because it knows simple camcorder videos are approaching email and family photo album status in the public cybersquare. Use this (free) cyberentity to spread examples of how students embrace an ethic of excellence.

#### *Tell me how your teacher is good*

Soliciting essays from students and parents alike on “my favorite teacher and why” and then posting the better ones guarantees a civil dialogue in the community. The postings will be read, and often the reasons—“tough love,” “made me learn,” “believed in me and wouldn't let me turn in shoddy work”—engagingly support the standards Fordham is trying to establish in schools. Offer winning essays for publication in Ohio newspapers. You can bet teachers will read what's posted!

#### *A voice for teachers*

The beauty of cyberspace is that real estate is endless. Give retiring teachers and principals a venue for a thousand-word swan song—their best moments, their worst moments, the changes they've seen in schooling since they first entered a classroom. These narratives have tremendous human appeal and at the same time offer an historical overview that will foster civil discourse about schools and likely reinforce positive role models for teachers and students.

In a small way such stories honor and say thanks to these individuals, something that resonates in beleaguered urban schools. They're also a means to get mainstream public school teachers and administrators to visit Fordham's website—desirable traffic. Ground rules for postings must be clear: e.g., no diatribe or personal attacks, just memories of high (and some low) points in a career dedicated to educating and helping kids.

A similar link open to first-year teachers, presenting their take on the reason they choose to become teachers, their expectations, and the tempering of those expectations as they experience

the reality of the classroom, would also be effective. A blog or two by an articulate, competent teacher who insightfully shares what it is he does every day in this complex social organization we call school will attract a following.

#### *A repository for Fordham papers*

The decision lies in the future, but it is never too early to consider where Fordham will house its documents. They are and will be worthy of scholarly examination. Since Dayton is Fordham's home, I should think Dayton University—aided by a matching grant from Fordham, perhaps—would be a logical place to house the Fordham collection. This “Fordham library” could extend the materials it hosted to a full range of writings on education reform.

#### *Court the media but challenge them when they miss it*

The power of the press lies as much in what it does not say as in what it does say. This is the gatekeeper role.

Writing in his widely read and highly popular “Get on the Bus” blog this past August, *Dayton Daily News* education reporter Scott Elliott commented on the “stop the presses” positive change in the ranking of DPS by the Ohio Department of Education. DPS jumped two rungs, from the bottom designation of “academic emergency” to “continuous improvement.” Elliott wrote that the change is “crucial politically for Gail Littlejohn [chairman] and the school board. Gail and company absolutely bet the farm on serious academic gains on their first day in office ... It will make a HUGE [his emphasis] difference for her to be able to say to potential community partners that the district is out of academic emergency and making big gains in the state's accountability ratings.”

Elliott rightly applauds what this means for the seventeen thousand children in DPS. They are learning more! But it would have been more informative, more accurate, and just plain more decent if he had mentioned somewhere, anywhere, that the pressure of competition from charter schools was *the* most significant factor as to *why* the publicly elected school board had to “bet the farm on “serious academic gains.” The *sine qua non* of Fordham's efforts at school reform in Dayton has been academic improvement. That Fordham's bottom line is now DPS's bottom line means a sea change has taken place. Can anyone doubt that Fordham's efforts to create and nurture the options for educational choice in Dayton (and all of Ohio) spurred DPS to shift its focus to “serious academic gains?” Fordham's riptide presented DPS (and writ large the entire public school enterprise in the U.S.) the option of either being abandoned by parents, who would pull their kids out of failing schools to take advantage of an alternative educational opportunity, or of changing course and raising academic standards.

Ten years after Fordham aggressively entered the world of Dayton K-12 education, it continues to demand “serious academic gains” and provide alternative means for children to achieve them. Local reporters, radio and TV announcers, and talk show hosts should be held accountable to tell this side of the Dayton story.

#### *Illegitimis nil carborundum*

Fordham must contend with foes of charters who try to leverage the closing of any failing charter school into proof positive of a waste of public funds and justification for the closing of all charters. And despite numerous court decisions finding that charter schools are legal public entities created by state

legislatures, such foes will continue to file nuisance lawsuits wherever they find a receptive judicial venue. Fordham will continue to fight them in the courts, in the legislature, and in the public policy arena so that parents may continue to vote by choosing schools that best serve their children.

## **Turning Experience into Policy Prescriptions**

### *Fordham Institute elevates charters to the next level*

With the twenty-first century just over the horizon—and no educational rainbow in sight—legislators, civic and business leaders, and ordinary concerned citizens knew that many of the Buckeye State’s public schools were failing. Big-city schools by almost any measurement were academically bankrupt. More minority children dropped out of urban schools during their teenage years than graduated. Fordham’s most people-intensive activities occur in Dayton. In creating the Fordham Institute, the foundation gave itself a vehicle to exploit the perfect storm of charter school legislation passed in Ohio in 1998. Fordham seized the opportunity presented by the urban school crisis in Ohio to bring about meaningful school reform. It was instrumental in providing a rationale and framework for the creation and resulting rapid growth of charter schools in Ohio in general, and Dayton in particular.

The institute is a legal means to attract funds and grow staff for an operating arm that could sponsor quality alternative schooling for children in Dayton, Columbus, and Cincinnati. Fordham’s current involvement with charter schools would not exist without a parallel institute. And without charter school involvement, especially its sponsorship role, Fordham would exist as a nearly

pure policy/research entity. Many of the reforms that it champions would be in the hands of others. Not so with charters. One Gates program officer said it was specifically Fordham’s rolling up its sleeves and getting its hands dirty in running (and salvaging) charters that tipped the balance in favor of funding Fordham.

Just what the right number of charter schools in Ohio that Fordham should sponsor remains to be seen. Should the decision be made to increase sponsorships, especially a high school, the institute allows for a timely and flexible response.

There is no better example of the blending of advocacy, research, and practical policy recommendations born in the forge of running actual charter schools than Fordham’s latest Ohio-based report, “Turning the Corner to Quality: Policy Guidelines for Strengthening Ohio’s Charter Schools.” It both preempts and sets the agenda for legislation with impeccable timing, given a possible change of parties in the governor’s office. For this writer, the report is the quintessential and defining product of what Fordham is about in Ohio. It spells out clearly and authoritatively a new, higher baseline of what is needed for charter school equity and educational success. A critical concern in Ohio is what happens to charters should Republican control of the legislature or governor’s office give way to Democratic rule. This report is a blueprint for what should be done to improve charters regardless of which party is in power.

### *Looking ahead: How Dayton fits into broader national reform.*

Fordham’s experience with charter schools in Dayton suggests a prologue to the next stage of school choice. In “Fund the Child: Tackling

Inequity and Antiquity in School Finance,” Fordham sets a course of action. The study points out the structural disconnect in how money is spent to educate children. “Money does not follow children to the schools they attend according to their needs. Instead, money flows on the basis of staff allocations, program-specific formulae, squeaky-wheel politics, property wealth and any number of other factors that have little to do with the needs of students, the resources required to educate them successfully, or the education preferences of their parents.”

The nub is for public funds to travel with children to the schools they attend rather than go directly to the schools. The funds can be cashed only at a state-certified school. From the schools’ vantage, funding is guaranteed only if students show up at their doorstep. Fordham is confident that parents and students will spend their education vouchers on schools that offer meaningful parental involvement, sound academics, and a healthy, robust preparation for full participation as economically self-sufficient and politically mature citizens. Ten years from now, Fordham’s success in influencing this policy change will be the subject of another retrospective.

#### *The blob that shouldn’t devour Cleveland: Horror flick rerun charter-school-style*

As their numbers grow, charter schools remain on a steep learning curve when it comes to collectively centralizing administrative tasks. In k.i.d.s, Fordham seeks to better handle purely administrative functions required to run charter schools and leave teachers and principals free to teach. It sees value in doing such. Just as a cluster of pub-

lic schools in a given geographic area benefits from central purchasing or maintenance, so might charter schools benefit by centralizing custodial services (snow removal, plumbing repairs, a new roof, and so forth).

This is a subject for detailed study. But Fordham, being a player in sponsoring charter schools, must do more than study centralization of services. It should be vigilant that this development does not balloon into the blob, a derisive word for a centrifugal siphoning of resources from the classroom and direct instruction into supervision that is ever more distant and unrelated to academics.

#### *Keep pointing out and pointing out and pointing out regulation creep*

When it comes to sponsoring charter schools in Ohio, Fordham signs a thirty-five page contract with individual schools. The public, and most policymakers, I’m sure, are unaware of the complicated nature of the laws governing sponsorship. Walking folks through this legal process in a reader-friendly document might leverage simplification of future requirements. It would complement the earlier suggestion in the research section that Fordham study legal issues and the influence of courts over schools by spelling out in a practical way how intrusive legal prescriptions can be.

### **Entering the High School Space**

#### *A contrarian caution on charter high schools*

Fordham wants charter high schools in Ohio. It wants them to be so good that they are seen as college preparatory schools. The needs and aspirations of high school students are so much more complex than those of elementary school students

that Fordham enters these waters at its peril. The economic law of diminishing returns is in play here and needs to be carefully assessed in light of Fordham's desire to sponsor a charter high school.

Fordham cannot succeed in trying to bring about the creation of charter high schools unless school districts turn over existing high school facilities; or, after a given high school is declared academically bankrupt, the state invites bids for qualified parties to restore and run the high school in the existing facilities. Otherwise, facility duplication in the city would be an easy target for critics. They would claim resources are being wasted. They would be even higher than that involved in the current sponsoring of the Omega School, with its prospect of continued enrollment decline and potential revenue shortfall drawing down Fordham funds that might go to other projects. It is critical not to underestimate the conventional view parents and students hold of a high school. It is a sparkling facility with gyms, computer labs, libraries, and a safe, friendly campus. Raising expectations for urban students to attend such a school and then failing to provide one would parallel the earlier experience of offering private scholarships and not being able to meet demand.

Until satisfactory high school facilities can be secured, Fordham should consider the alternative of adding intensive tutorial and remedial programs as well as AP classes for select students (during regular school hours when possible, after school when not). Academic credit for these classes must be accepted by the public high school a participating student attends.

Offering SAT prep courses is another approach. Contrary to the *zeitgeist*, over the years

the SATs fostered high standards and measured results. A healthy demythologizing of the tests has occurred, yet they still remain an important, no longer solitary (if they ever were), indicator of a student's learning and knowledge. SATs still identify a school district's cumulative performance by average scores and number of students accepted at elite colleges. Knowledgeable parents, students, and educators know how to draw inferences from a district's performance on SATs. If they have the money they move to towns with high scores.

### **Summary (And Praise Again)**

#### *Keep your bite*

Critics still say that the charter school record is not a proven one, that it is still too early to claim success for improved academic performance. Balderdash. The impact in Dayton has been tectonic—for all students. Much is made of the analogy between how privately run Federal Express and United Parcel Service forced improved performance on the federally run United States Postal Service. In Ohio, and especially in Dayton, the same can be said of charter schools and the Dayton Public Schools (DPS, albeit both are public entities).

But until charter schools reached a critical mass, changes in public education were for the most part introduced top-down. Federal and state governments, as well as national foundations, treated the educational system as if it were one vast Gulliver. All they needed to do was tie it down through specific reforms and better schools would result. Teacher unions, professional education associations, and businesses that sold products and services directly to schools promoted nonstructural changes. They never supported programs that

jeopardized their monopoly control over what was taught, who did the teaching, and who picked up the tab (taxpayers). In their hands, education reform was simply nibbled to death by ducks.

Research (and common sense) indicated that parents and local communities were fed up with the inability to bring about meaningful change. Research published by Public Agenda made clear that “parents want schools to focus more on academics, teach traditional knowledge and skills (i.e., math facts, mental computation, grammar, spelling, etc.), raise standards for learning, and base promotion on standardized tests.”

Fordham was not interested in a Lilliputian role in Dayton. If there was to be a tether on Gulliver, Fordham wanted it to be that of a parent choosing to send his or her child to a better school than what was being offered by DPS. This would let Gulliver stand up and walk in a direction that lead to high academic standards backed up by rigorous testing.

By becoming a sponsoring agency for charter schools, Fordham crossed its Rubicon. In placing Terry Ryan in Dayton, it accepted the challenge of making theory and policy walk and talk the reality of reform. Real kids in real schools situated in historically neglected communities are getting a shot at a decent formal education. And thanks to the reach of Fordham’s publications, these schools serve as research lab, incubator, and change agent not only for Ohio schoolchildren, but for schoolchildren nationwide.

#### **IV. Personnel is Policy**

##### *Commitment to mission*

Where there is no vision, personnel perish. Fordham has a vision and the people to make the

vision a reality—from its board of directors, its president, and staff, to outside contractors and consultants and a myriad of formal and informal fans, advisors, funders, and collaborators. I encountered nothing but laudatory perceptions from peers in the education policy community, foundations, charter school operators, and news reporters.

There is an art to ably deploying human resources. When done right, it means people policies that are coherent and compassionate and that promote excellence in the pursuit of common goals. Along with this comes a high energy level, a collegiality that is infectious yet disciplined and concentrated on mission accomplishment. Fordham has mastered this art. Of all the aspects of Fordham that I looked at, this was the easiest and most clear cut to grade and grade high.

In considering personnel matters at Fordham, and I lay claim to no special HR training, I found myself in a simple universe: very good internal dynamics, clearly defined and logical organizational roles, all passionately tied to Fordham’s mission by those who are “slightly overworked” in D.C. and Dayton. Proof positive comes from my firsthand observations in every conversation and interview I held with staff in D.C. or Dayton. The focus on any given project was so internalized to that individual’s sense of purpose and self-worth that I feel comfortable using the term avocation to season accolades such as commitment, professional excellence, and high motivation, in describing Fordham staff.

##### *The king is dead, long live the king*

Fordham is not unique in having a dominant founder central to its success. Businesses and non-profits alike face the shooting-star challenge: what

to do when the founder, a dominant personality and thinker who blazes a great light across the heavens only to find when the founder departs the scene the light quickly fades leaving behind a glimmering trail with no fixed orbit. Before I even started research on this report I knew the most important staffing consideration at Fordham was not the role of its president, Checker Finn, but policies and personnel in place to succeed him if, and ultimately when, the need might arise. (The NEA and teacher education colleges muse on such a prospect as VC day, victory over Checker day.)

Suffice it to say, I found the critical issue of succession—of preserving and extending institutional values, performance standards, organizational memory, and culture-transfer—addressed and secure in Fordham’s structure. Three vice-presidents, all in their mid-thirties, continue to learn under the president’s oversight and to establish *bona fides* in their respective areas of responsibility in the broader world of educational reform.

#### *Mostly nice things said about Fordham*

In addition to Checker, there was much external praise of Fordham personnel. The highest, in my judgment, was explicit remorse over not hiring some of the staff “before Checker did.” Two executives asked me point blank if I knew anyone like Mike Petrilli or Terry Ryan so they could hire them.

What minimal rap on Fordham folks I did hear concerned personality and style and had little to do with substance. First, and of some surprise to me was little criticism of Checker, both his bark and his bite. I was expecting a Yogi Berra experience, “*déjà vu* all over again” with accusations of “verbal bully,” “take no prisoners,”

“relentless to the point of ruthless in pursuit of a goal,” “micromanager.” This did not occur. (I heard the same, at much higher volume, when I first covered Checker giving a talk at Brown University in 1983 following the groundswell over release of a “Nation at Risk.”)

Today, for leaders in the education policy arena, especially in Washington, Checker approximates an elder statesmen—albeit one who carries a cane and may use it for more than just walking. He is a force to be reckoned with and has been for more than three decades. He is obviously the biggest asset Fordham has in making its case for education reform. A homely analogy for those in the know would be if Checker were to ask them if they wanted to go fishing with him, they might be inclined to find an excuse not to, and then immediately ask, by the way, where was he going and what bait would he use because they knew he would catch fish.

For those who only know him at a distance, mainly through his writing and testimony before commissions and legislative committees, respect trumps all other sentiments. No one questioned his erudition, understanding of government and the policy, and unbending commitment to improving U.S. education. *National Review* type conservatives just thought he was wrong on NCLB.

A quiet efficiency appeared to permeate the administrative routine and office tasks in both D.C. and Dayton. Obviously capable and overqualified individuals had the trains running on time. Youth and energy were everywhere.

Growing people out of their jobs into more demanding positions is a hallmark of think tanks, and Fordham’s record on this score is better than

average. I did not have time to check on the advanced degrees held and in what fields. Regardless, encouraging such pursuits as a masters or doctorate comes with the nature of the work. I did take notice, as one would expect, of a tilt toward teaching backgrounds.

One could ask where were individuals of color and senior women in the D.C. side of the organization, but I'm not one to ask such a question. It would be noted by PC bean counters.

In Dayton, the perception of Fordham's people is now quite simple: BR and AR, before Terry Ryan and after Terry Ryan. He is the face of Fordham in Dayton. Haughtiness and arrogance were descriptors used when recollecting the first forays of Fordham in Dayton in the late 1990s, also that it was somewhat cavalier about the feelings and aspirations of low-income residents. The example already given for this was the introduction of the Fordham scholarships (which evolved into the highly regarded PACE program). Hopes and expectations were raised without recognizing how high the demand would be and that it could not be met. This created a lot of disappointment and some resentment that these Washington elites were "using" Dayton locals for other agendas. No one wants to be a means to someone else's end. Parents and their children want to be an end in themselves. However today, the good news is no one I spoke with in Dayton doubts that Fordham treats educating children as an end in itself.

*A Maoist "back to the farms" approach to staff development.* Staff development is a given at Fordham. Here is something to consider. One way, say every three years, would be to ship the willing to Dayton for

a two to four week stint teaching, serving lunch, being a teacher's aid, taking attendance, just doing whatever the principal needs doing. Grounding the Fordham policy experience in the "rag and bone shop" of a local school in Dayton is good for all kinds of reasons. Getting a sense of the spirit of a place always lends perspective. I guarantee the "free" help to the individual school (say an Omega principal, short on funds who could count on regular postings) would be welcome. By analogy, a midcareer international news editor who never gets out of the newsroom and hasn't filed a story in years risks two things: first, leeching the blood and sweat, the squirm of daily life, out of the copy he edits; and second, losing the respect of writers in the bureaus. A back-to-the-farm experience showing how theory and practice meet would energize staff to think through policy issues in a way attendance at multiple conferences never could.

#### *Nice digs*

Fordham's office space in Washington and Dayton is open, airy, and more than adequate. Each locale reflects recent growth in staff. Each has room for added growth if and when required. K Street is a commanding D.C. address. Dayton's neighborhood has more charm than K Street developer types could even imagine.

It's beyond my pay grade to comment on renting or buying one's office. Real estate prices in D.C. make such a prospect daunting, I'm sure. But Dayton real estate costs seemed more than attractive. In the world I come from being the landlord is always better than being the tenant.

*In sum, a great place to work*

Combine academic rigor with editorial skill, nurture the craft of writing, throw in an instinct for breaking news, an understanding of the academic and legislative years, hone a sense of cash value for deliverables, then infuse with the élan that comes to like-minded people committed to a noble cause, and you have Fordham. Not a bad place to pursue a thought adventure for the young, and not so young.