

## APPENDIX A: Methodology

For *Yearning to Break Free*, the universe of 610 K-12 local public school district superintendents in Ohio was invited to participate in an online survey; the findings in this report are based on 246 completed surveys. The quantitative findings are supplemented by additional interviews conducted with 25 regional superintendents from Educational Service Centers (ESCs) across the state, as well as 44 charter school leaders. The survey was conducted by the Farkas Duffett Research Group (FDR Group) for the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. It was fielded between January 6 and January 30, 2011. The margin of error for the sample of 246 district superintendents is plus or minus seven percentage points; it is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups. The survey was preceded by three focus groups with district and regional superintendents and 14 in-depth interviews with a variety of people knowledgeable about K-12 education in Ohio.

### The Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was designed and programmed for the Internet and contained approximately 45 items. All data collection took place online. Each superintendent and charter school leader was provided a confidential and unique survey link to ensure authenticity of the data and that each potential respondent could take the survey only once.

In crafting the survey instrument, it became evident that including views of other education leaders – specifically, regional ESC superintendents and people running charter schools – might provide interesting

perspectives. To that end, virtually all regional ESC superintendents and charter school leaders in Ohio were invited to participate in the online survey. The findings show few substantive differences.

### Fielding the Survey

Multiple approaches were used to reach school leaders and to ensure the highest possible rate of participation. Several barriers to reaching potential respondents were encountered. Internet firewalls at some school districts blocked e-mails. Also, many of the e-mails reached their recipients' SPAM folders and remained there unopened. The sensitivity of the questions, the importance of confidentiality, and the local nature of the project all required a personal touch on the part of the researchers that is unusual in survey work in general but was essential for this particular survey to succeed.

It became clear early on that more than an e-mail campaign would be required to reach district superintendents in sufficient numbers. To that end, a systematic telephone calling campaign was implemented. Each district superintendent who had not completed the survey was contacted by phone, and provided with a description of why the survey was important and a request that they take part at their earliest convenience. In addition, a letter from the FDR Group describing the research was sent to all non-respondents in the hopes that receiving something in writing would lend credibility to the research effort and encourage more superintendents to participate.

### Step-by-Step Accounting of the Fielding Process:

December 2010 - January 2011	Fordham conducts outreach to key lawmakers and regional ESC superintendents, and shares information about the survey at superintendent-attended events.
January 4	Executive Director of the Ohio ESC Association sends message via e-mail to all ESC superintendents alerting them to the survey and asking them to encourage their local district superintendents to participate.
January 6	FDR Group sends e-mail with survey link sent to all district superintendents, ESC superintendents, and charter school leaders (n=949).
January 10	FDR Group conducts in-depth telephone interviews with several ESC superintendents who completed the survey to gather information on how it is being perceived and how to make the appeal more effective.
January 11	Terry Ryan, Vice President for Ohio Programs and Policy of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, sends e-mail to all superintendents, ESC superintendents, and charter leaders, encouraging participation.
January 12	FDR Group sends follow-up e-mail with survey link to non-respondents (n=811).
January 18-26	Fordham staff reach out via telephone to district superintendents who had not yet responded, encouraging participation in an effort to improve response rate (n=449).
January 21	FDR Group sends letter via U.S. mail to district superintendents who had not yet responded in another effort to improve response rate (n=414).
January 6-30	FDR Group responds to approximately 95 requests for the survey link from superintendents replying to an e-mail, telephone call, or letter.

As a result of these efforts, approximately 95 district superintendents contacted the FDR Group directly to ask questions about the survey and/or to request that their unique survey link be re-sent so they could participate.

The comprehensive lists of district superintendents, regional ESC superintendents, and charter school leaders were provided by the sources listed below. Also shown below are the response rates for each group, which are calculated by dividing the number of completed interviews by the number of total records.

Type	Source	Total Records	Number of Completed Surveys	Response Rate
Local district superintendents	Ohio Department of Education's Ohio Educational Directory System Interactive, <a href="http://education.ohio.gov">http://education.ohio.gov</a> , accessed December 15, 2010.	610	246	40%
Regional ESC superintendents	Same as above.	55	25	45%
Charter school leaders	Same as above.	284	44	15%

Non-sampling sources of error could have an impact on survey results. To mitigate this, the survey instrument used in this study was pre-tested with superintendents to ensure that the language was accessible and appropriate. Also, questions were randomized and answer categories rotated in an effort to minimize non-sampling sources of error.

The FDR Group crafted the questionnaire, managed the online programming and fielding, and is solely responsible for the interpretation and analysis of survey findings contained within this report.

## **Focus Groups and In-depth Interviews**

Prior to the design of the survey, three focus groups were conducted, one each with: Dayton-area district superintendents, Columbus-area and southeastern Ohio district superintendents, and regional ESC superintendents.

The purpose of the focus groups was to gain firsthand understanding of what superintendents were think-

ing, to develop new hypotheses based on their input, and to design the survey items using language and terms these education professionals were comfortable with.

Quotes in the report are drawn either directly from the focus group discussions or from verbatim responses entered for open-end questions in the online survey. All of the focus groups were moderated by Steve Farkas of the FDR Group. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute recruited potential focus group participants through its relationships with school districts throughout the state.

In addition to the focus groups, 14 in-depth interviews, mostly via telephone but some in-person, were conducted with various individuals who are familiar with Ohio K-12 education, including district and ESC superintendents, a former state government official, and other experts in the field. The information gathered in these interviews was used to inform both the survey instrument and the fielding process.