



School of Education, University of Colorado at Boulder
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
Telephone: 802-383-0058

NEPC@colorado.edu
<http://nepc.colorado.edu>

RESPONSE TO STEVE FARKAS ON THE REVIEW OF *YEARNING TO BREAK FREE*

Catherine Horn and Gary Dworkin, University of Houston

*On May 3, 2011, the National Education Policy Center published a review of *Yearning to Break Free: Ohio Superintendents Speak Out*, a report produced by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the Farkas Duffett Research (FDR) Group. . The original report can be found [here](#), and the NEPC’s review, by Catherine Horn and Gary Dworkin, can be found [here](#).*

On May 11, Steve Farkas, President of the FDR Group, published a [response](#) to the review by Horn and Dworkin. Here, Horn and Dworkin take into consideration Mr. Farkas’s response.

In consideration of Steve Farkas’s comments, we want to offer just a few thoughts. First, while a 40 percent response rate is typical in educational research using cross-sectional surveys, it certainly doesn’t constitute good. The U. S. Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences (IES) has identified, for example, that cross-sectional surveys conducted for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) should have at least a 70 percent response rate (http://nces.ed.gov/statprog/2002/std2_2.asp).

Second, while the answers to dichotomous questions may be interesting and may indeed tell us “something,” we should be very careful in drawing policy conclusions that assume the respondents themselves accept the same dichotomy that motivated the question-writer. The example of choosing between lunch with Lady Gaga or President Obama is a great one in making this point. The work of improving student achievement is complex; good superintendents both know and incorporate this reality into their work every day. A survey that doesn’t allow them to reflect on that complexity reduces the conversation to the margins rather than to the heart of the issues.

Finally, the study’s publishers were not merely neutral conduits of information. The foreword, for example, describes that “readers of these pages should understand that untying such state

mandates is not solely about granting flexibility to administrators or saving money . . . While many policy or legislative changes could save money in Ohio's education system, undoing mandates related to personnel policy is key to changing the academic trajectory of its students. And superintendents believe that it's possible: By an overwhelming majority (72 percent) they say that more authority—especially over staffing—would result in not just great efficiency but also in real achievement gains.” The viewpoints of the Ohio superintendents who responded to the survey were included, but so too were those of the Fordham Institute.

*The **Think Twice** think tank review project (<http://thinktankreview.org>), a project of the National Education Policy Center, provides the public, policy makers, and the press with timely, academically sound, reviews of selected think tank publications. The project is made possible in part by the support of the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.*

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