

Departing remarks to the National Assessment Governing Board
Andrew Ho, July 30-31, 2020
Remote from Arlington, Massachusetts

Formal remarks (July 31, 2020)

Thank you, Governor. In my brief remarks over our online celebration last night, I stressed what I'll stress first here: This has been the most rewarding service experience of my career, and I cannot imagine it will ever be topped. I will miss the importance of our mission, the quality, dedication, and humanity of our staff at NAGB and NCES, and my fellow board members.

Like last night, I want to acknowledge and thank the NAGB staff, Lesley, Lisa, Sharyn, Munira, Michelle, Laura, Stephaan, Donetta, Tessa, Angela, and Tony, and the NCES staff, including Lynn, Peggy, Holly, Pat, Dan, Enis, Bill, Grady, Taslima, Eunice, and Sam. Last night, I took the time to call out Sharyn and Peggy in particular, with whom I have worked so closely, and for so long, to negotiate effective policy with technical accuracy. I will miss them. I will miss you all. I can only leave without tears now, because I am confident that we will meet again.

I wanted to spend a few minutes offering my colleagues a charge and a wish. The charge is related to, you guessed it, trend. The wish is related to testing and measurement expertise on the board. I hope these are helpful for you as you carry NAEP forward through this period of, I can say without exaggeration, unprecedented uncertainty and turbulence in its history.

So, let me get into my charge. I'll start with David Driscoll, who was chair when I joined the board in 2012. Dave articulated the core tension on this board, between "pushing the envelope" and "sticking to your knitting." We see this tension play out in everything we do. In ADC as we advance new frameworks. In COSDAM as we advance new methods. In R&D as we advance new reporting strategies. Some of us want to push the envelope. Some of us want to stick to our knitting.

When we push. When we knit. I think it is important for us to ask, why? Why do some of us want to push the envelope? What is the envelope, and why should we push it? Why do some of us want to stick to our knitting? What are we knitting, and why is it so important?

It is not simply that some of us are more innovative, and others are more cautious. I think it is because we believe in different purposes of assessment. Some of us want NAEP to measure progress. And others want NAEP to signal worthy goals. Should we measure progress? Or should we signal worthy goals? So, what do I mean by signal worthy goals? My adviser and former COSDAM chair Ed Haertel distinguished between the signaling purpose of assessment by emphasizing that in its purest form, signaling worthy goals does not even require results. An assessment. Can make a difference. Without ever reporting results. How? By sending a powerful signal. Of rigor. Of transparency. Of standards. Of control. Of commitment. And of public accountability.

Of course, accountability ultimately requires results. Results can trigger the hard accountability of explicit sanctions and rewards. And results can trigger the soft accountability of transparent, public reporting. Because of this, any attempt to signal worthy goals without supporting the measurement of progress will ultimately be revealed to be hollow.

To me, every core debate in this board is explained by whether folks want to signal worthy goals or measure progress. We can take two examples just from today, the 2021 debate and the reading framework. The reading framework is an opportunity to signal worthy goals of what reading is or could be

to the nation and states. And it risks measuring progress. If we test in 2021 in an ongoing pandemic, that is an opportunity to signal worthy goals about the role of testing and learning. And it risks measuring progress.

I think you know my position. As I said, the critical questions are, "how much has achievement changed?" and "how equitably?" We must have an answer to these questions about educational progress. At the extreme, I do not want to waste time and money on symbolic political gestures that produce unusable numbers. More diplomatically, I do not want to signal worthy goals purely for its own sake, without also producing usable numbers that answer questions about educational progress.

On the one hand it seems surprising to have to debate this. After all, the name of the assessment is NAEP, the National Assessment of Educational **Progress**. It is not the national assessment of whatever folks happen to think is important right now. NAEP Law says, explicitly, that we must provide "a fair and accurate measurement of student academic achievement and **reporting of trends** in such achievement." Let us not ever subjugate trends for the signaling of worthy goals. Signaling without measurement is hollow. Our integrity rests on accurate assessment of progress.

Last night at our informal celebration, I received this cape from my colleagues. You'll see that it says, "Protector of Trend." I hope my remarks indicate I am proud of earning this reputation, but there are many who could wear this cape, including Lamar Alexander and H Thomas James, whose 1987 study group did among other things, result in NAGB's creation, and also emphasize, as its first recommendation, to "maintain continuity," in that case referring to the long-term trend. That report in 1987 was published with an addendum from the National Academy of Education that was more forceful. They said, "the ability to link future data with past results is essential and must be preserved. The **most important feature of NAEP is its ability to compare results over time**. Although the content and techniques of assessment will evolve with social and scientific progress, **a consistent baseline must be maintained in order to index change**." These are the original wearers of this cape.

At the same time, I hope I have shown that compromise is important. As one example, achievement levels are a pure definition of setting worthy goals. They do very little to help measure progress. They can be misused to misunderstand achievement. But I support them because I recognize that setting worthy goals matters to others on this board and, by extension, their constituents in the American public. Similarly, frameworks must certainly rely on current science and be informed, though of course not determined solely, by state practices. If we rely only on the past, we risk measuring progress on knowledge, abilities, and skills that are not relevant.

So, I recognize and want to call out that our desire to measure progress and/or signal worthy goals is embedded deep in our roles, our experiences, and our constituencies. From governors to researchers, teachers to legislators, we balance in our lives the signaling of goals which may not need evidence, with the measurement of progress toward our goals, which does require evidence. My charge to you as I leave this board is, simply, to remember that you wear this cape. Ask what Lamar Alexander and H Thomas James would do, what the authors of the law that binds us have asked for, and what I would do. I'll say again, that any attempt to signal worthy goals without supporting the measurement of progress toward those goals, will ultimately be revealed to be specious. Let us uphold our integrity. Let us do our job. Take up this cape. Be a protector of trend.

That was my charge. What is my wish? I wish for more testing and measurement expertise on this board. We already have an amazing group of board members who may not arrive with measurement expertise but gain or improve that expertise through wonderful interactions, formal and informal, with fellow board

members and NCES. But I hope for more, so we can all appreciate the opportunities and limitations of an assessment as unique and as valuable as NAEP.

I hope that our nominations committee, our breakfast club, will look for measurement experience and expertise not just for testing and measurement experts but for all roles. Of course, testing expertise is neither expected nor required in other roles, and heaven forbid we create a board full of psychometricians. But I would also be happy if future reauthorizers added a fourth slot for testing and measurement experts. Historically, the Alexander-James study group originally asked for 2, and Congress saw fit to add another. As NAEP's role not to mention other tests have grown since the 1980s, another slot may be useful. One way to do this might be to distinguish between two **scholars** in testing and measurement and two **state or district experts** in testing and measurement.

Of course, this is a two-way street. Testing and measurement experts who join the board should be prepared to speak English words, not just Greek equations, at least to the best of our ability. Such experts must weigh policy matters, not just technical matters, and think about practical significance, not just statistical significance. I commit to do my best to train and support such future experts at Harvard and elsewhere, and I hope that you call on testing and measurement experts with such communication and policy skills in the future.

Finally, one way to give the Board access to testing and measurement expertise without changing its composition would be to staff a standing technical committee comparable to, but complementary to what NCES has with its Design and Analysis Committee and its NAEP Validity Studies panel. Such a committee could advise the board on technical matters related to board activities, perhaps subsuming the ad hoc technical panels on standard setting convened sporadically, as well as informing such efforts as the NAEP preparedness research from years past.

In closing, I'll reiterate my charge to you all, to take up the cape, to protect our trend, that we would lack integrity without. And also my wish, that measurement expertise continues to grow on the board, both through nomination and selection, and also through your continuing interactions, as board members learn from each other.

It is ultimately that, learning from each other, that I will miss most on this board. I predicted last night that I saw fewer unanimous votes ahead of us, and this afternoon, that has already been proven correct. But it remains true that we share common goals and common commitments to the students and the educational system in this country. Let that always unite us, and let that always motivate us to listen to each other, and to learn from each other, to achieve our goals.

Informal Remarks (July 30, 2020)

One thing I've learned from online teaching this spring is that I should be chunking remarks online, to keep things briefer than I would ordinarily. So, I'll save some of my more substantive points for my official remarks tomorrow and speak for a few minutes, more about how I feel, and what I'll miss most about this board.

Simply put, this has been the best service experience of my career. In spite of the fact that I have a few years ahead of me (for those of you counting, that's enough years so that Jack Buckley can still get me carded when I order a drink), it is hard for me to imagine how any other service experience could top this. As I reflected on why I felt this way, I came up with a few things, and these are the things I will miss most as my term ends on NAGB.

First, I will miss the mission: assess educational progress, the story of national educational progress, in context, over time. That mission unites us all, the board, partners, and staff. It sounds crass to call this a product and a brand, because what NAEP is, is a national treasure, worth protecting, and worth advancing.

When I came on the board in 2012, as the Common Core was still rising, folks wondered, will there still be a need for NAEP? Let's never ask that again. Variability and volatility are baked into our 50-state system. So, we will always need NAEP. Because of this, I come to every meeting excited to do this important job. Every year, my dean asks each of our faculty members, what is the accomplishment you are most proud of? As I reflect on this important question each year, NAGB and protecting NAEP is always near the top of my list (and in the case of transitioning to DBA, was at the top).

Second, I will miss the staff. From the leaders past like Bill, Mary and Cornelia and Ray and Lily, to Lesley and Lisa and Sharyn, and of course Munira, Michelle, Laura, Stephaan, Donetta, Tessa, Angela, and Tony, they are committed, dedicated civil servants. They help to keep the board coherent, integrated, and effective, which is not easy given our many perspectives, day jobs, and other commitments. And Sharyn, most of all, who joined the board just after I did in 2012, I will miss our collaboration and our shared commitment, not to mention your artful and expert guidance of COSDAM as its chair forgets something again, or contradicts himself, or can't find his dial-in information. You are both an incredible advancer of COSDAM priorities and, we should never forget, a respected expert in testing and measurement yourself. We, the board, the staff, and this country, are so, so lucky to have you, Sharyn, in this role.

Third, I will miss working with NCES. As many of you know, I identify far more with the S in NCES than I do with the G in NAGB. And so it has been such an honor and a pleasure to work with Jack and Peggy first, then Lynn and Peggy later, and the stalwart team supporting them, including Holly, Pat, Dan, Enis, Bill, Grady, Taslima, and Sam. To borrow a metaphor that Peggy has used before, it is a difficult **dance**, to negotiate effective policy with technical accuracy, and I will miss working closely with you to produce high-quality, relevant data about educational progress. And I want to thank Peggy in particular. *As Peggy mentioned*, I first met her as a green assistant professor at the University of Iowa, and she has been patient with me as I learned how to be an effective scholar, then an effective board member, and that patience has endured even as becoming an effective board member may have led to productive disagreement with NCES about how to best achieve the goals of the NAEP program. For that I will always be grateful.

Finally, I will miss my fellow board members. I have learned from every one of you, your different perspectives, your different constituencies, your differing expertise. It is clear that the next few meetings and likely the next few years will be difficult, not just for assessing progress but for agreeing upon how best to assess progress. Know that I could not be more confident in the enduring magic recipe of NAGB, a half cup of governors, tablespoons of teachers, a pinch of testing experts, etc., to support civil disagreement and ultimately chart the best path forward. In these challenging times, I do not expect all of our votes ahead of us are likely to be unanimous, but I trust that our commitment to our mission will be. Thank you. I will miss you.