



**Remarks From former Governing Board Executive Director Charles Smith  
25th Anniversary Working Dinner  
February 26, 2014**

Under almost any circumstance, a 25th anniversary is a significant event. In Washington—where the political process and federal bureaucracy often chew up government-created entities—it may be some kind of miracle. Yet here we are, celebrating a quarter century of successful service by the National Assessment Governing Board.

And it's not about just passing the test of longevity and survival.

This Board has earned the role of a prominent and respected player in the national world of education. Its product is viewed as the gold standard in the world of educational assessments. Its impact on educational improvement across the nation is well-documented.

It's worthy of note that while we celebrate today, Common Core assessments have become a flashpoint for a major educational debate in many states and at the national level. Significantly, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) stands above the fray, untouched by the sometimes bitter criticism of the testing world in general. In fact, NAEP is frequently being cited in the debate as a positive and credible reference point.

How have this Governing Board and NAEP stood the test of time in such an impressive way? A few keywords come to mind as I seek the answer to that question—words like “wisdom,” “vision,” “tenacity,” “continuity,” “integrity,” “commitment,” “dedication,” “stability,” and “loyalty.”

The Governing Board came into being 25 years ago as the result of the wisdom and vision of now Sen. Lamar Alexander and the Blue Ribbon Committee he co-chaired. That committee recommended the unique structure of the Board, the elaborate process for selecting its members, and the effective protections from political interference.

The structure is sheer genius. It levels the playing field for all Board members, providing all selected stakeholders with an equal voice and specific responsibilities. The selection process for members is an innovative gem. Sophisticated in design and meticulous in practice, the process has produced quality members consistently for a quarter century. It provides balance.

As for political independence, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of the language that ultimately became the law. Sen. Alexander and his committee wisely anticipated the pressure points that would confront the Governing Board. Their ultimate blueprint has stood the test of time. And the safeguards from political interference have actually worked. In short, Sen.

Alexander's recommendations and the federal legislation that followed should be required reading for anyone seeking to establish an independent governing board in a political setting.

Tenacity and commitment were ever present as Congress shaped the language that put into law the recommendations of Sen. Alexander's committee. From day one until now, this Governing Board has enjoyed strong bipartisan support. The late Sen. Ted Kennedy led the way to passage of the law creating the Board, and served as the key protector of its independence until the day he died. One of the great joys of serving as executive director for two terms was working with the staffs of Sens. Kennedy and Alexander. They always had our back. Anytime there was even a hint of political interference, they quickly slapped it down.

The bipartisan leadership to support and protect our independence can't be overstated. Continuity, stability, loyalty, integrity, and dedication are key descriptors of the pillars of strength that have sustained this Board for 25 years. Think about it. How many 25-year-old major agencies have had only six chairs, three of whom have served 20 of 25 years, only three executive directors, and three key staff members who have served from the beginning?

These chairs have given this Board incredibly strong, stable leadership.

Maintaining NAEP as the gold standard in the world of testing has consistently been front and center on their agendas. Protecting the Board's independence has always been a top priority. So, why are we here today celebrating 25 years of success and positive impact? Stated simply, our creators got it right.

Our political leadership has consistently provided bipartisan support and protection. Our Board's leadership and members have provided continuity, stability, and loyalty. Our staff has stayed the course. The look back is refreshing. But we also have to look ahead. What will the next 25 years bring?

Finding a clear crystal ball in these times of political turbulence inside and outside of D.C. is no easy task. My thoughts about the challenges and opportunities ahead follow: So long as the Governing Board's structure, selection process, and political interference protections stay in place, the quality and integrity of NAEP should be sustained. Overall, my view of the Governing Board's future is optimistic.

However, there are some clouds of concern that hover over us. I will reference three. First, anyone with any interest in good government has to be concerned about the lack of civility and the growing dysfunction in the federal government. Who knows how bad it will become. In this kind of environment, no agency or program can be secure.

Second, the current state of disarray in Congress could not have come at a worse time for the Governing Board. Why? The leaders who were involved in the birthing of the Governing Board are increasingly leaving their posts. The loss of Sen. Kennedy created a huge void in congressional support. He steered the Governing Board legislation to passage. Then he spent the rest of his life supporting and protecting all that we did.

The other key player—Sen. Alexander—is in the twilight of his career as a political leader. Most observers believe his next term will be his last. Many other congressional leaders who have been with the Governing Board from the beginning are leaving Washington. The magnitude of the impact of this congressional void on the Governing Board’s future is difficult to assess, but without question it has to be a source of concern.

Third, the Common Core movement will likely have some impact on NAEP. Whether it will be positive or negative is still somewhat an unknown. At the outset, it appeared that it could place the future of NAEP and the Governing Board in jeopardy. That would have been true had the movement attracted all of the states and produced a single national assessment. That didn’t happen; and it’s not likely to happen in the foreseeable future.

Instead, most states are strengthening standards, making them more NAEP-like. At the same time, multiple assessment choices are being adopted by states. These circumstances clearly suggest that the need for NAEP will become even more important in the years ahead. Tracking student achievement over time is what NAEP does well, with credibility. And NAEP remains the only game in town in providing valid state-by-state comparisons.