

*Interdisciplinary Journal of
Research on Religion*

Volume 3

2007

Article 3

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the Achievement Gap

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Abstract

Using analyses of the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) and meta-analysis, I present data that indicate that in religious, mostly Christian, schools, the achievement gap between white and minority students, as well as between children of high- and low-socioeconomic status, is considerably smaller than in public schools. I then undertake statistical analyses to indicate why this is the case, including examining school culture, the encouragement of religious commitment, and an emphasis on the family. One of the most notable findings that emerges from this study is that using the NELS dataset, when African American and Latino children who are religious and come from intact families are compared with white students, the achievement gap disappears. Other findings indicate that religious schools have more racial harmony, fewer drug problems, and a more demanding curriculum than do public schools, features that probably help to explain the smaller achievement gap.

Over the last four decades, one of the most persistent debates in education has been on how to close the achievement gap between white students on the one hand and black and Hispanic students on the other (Green 2001; Simpson 1981). This achievement gap exists in virtually every measure of educational progress, including standardized tests, GPA, the dropout rate, and the extent to which students are left back a grade (Conciatore 1990; Gordon 1976; Green et al. 2000; So and Chan 1984). The United States was founded on the principle of equality. As a result, Americans tend to feel uncomfortable when unequal results emerge, and American educators have frequently tried to reduce those inequalities (Green 2001; Osborne 1999).

The intractable nature of the difference in academic outcomes that exists between students of certain races of color and white students and those of low versus high socioeconomic status, has been of considerable concern to educators and the American public (Rayburn and Hayes 1975; Roscigno 1998). Ronald Roach (2001: 377) recently asserted that “in the academic and think tank world, pondering achievement gap remedies takes center stage.” Given the persistence of this gap, the government has launched a plethora of initiatives designed to eradicate it (Green et al. 2000; Jones 1984; Rumberger and Willms 1992). These initiatives include Head Start, the school lunch program, President Clinton’s national standards program, a host of affirmative action programs, No Child Left Behind, and various other programs. Moreover, copious private programs have been initiated by various academics, research institutes, foundations, and other organizations (Navarro and Natalicio 1999; Ross, Smith, and Casey 1999; Slavin and Madden 2001; Trent 1997). These efforts have focused on multicultural teaching, attempting to raise students’ self-esteem, parental involvement, requiring school uniforms, community partnerships, and so forth (Henderson 1975; Slavin and Madden 2001; Vail 1996).

Of all the inequalities that exist in the American education system, researchers have probably tried to address racial inequality more than any other (Haycock 2001; Orfield et al. 2000). And while there was a period during the 1980s when the achievement gap did show some reduction, which some social scientists credit to the Back to Basics movement (Green 2001; Haycock and Jerald 2002; Jerald and Haycock 2002), it remains adamantly wide even to this day (Cross and Slater 2000; Haycock 2001; Hedges and Nowell, 1999; Lindjord 1998; Orfield et al. 2000; Slater 1999). Although researchers and educators acknowledge that an achievement gap exists, social scientists differ widely in their suggestions about how to bridge the gap. One such solution includes religious commitment of students.

Increasingly, particularly over the last two decades, social scientists have examined the influence of religious commitment, religious schools, and family structure on the educational outcomes of students of color (Jeynes 1999, 2003b).

Various studies using a variety of analytic approaches, including meta-analyses, nationwide datasets, and qualitative techniques, have found a consistent positive relationship between variables such as religious commitment, Christian schooling, and intact parental family structure and school success (Jeynes 2002a). These trends exist not only for American students generally, but specifically for students of color (Jeynes 1999, 2003b). For example, students of color who are religious (defined by both intrinsic and extrinsic measures) outperform their counterparts who are less religious (Jeynes 1999, 2003b). Minority students attending Christian or other religious schools achieve at higher rates scholastically than do their counterparts at public schools, even when the study has adjusted for socioeconomic status (Jeynes 2002b). Finally, students of color from intact families excel at higher levels in school than do students from less traditional family structures (Jeynes 1999, 2003b).

Although religiosity, attending religious schools, and being raised in an intact family have ameliorative influences on scholastic outcomes for minority students, research results only suggest the possibility that these factors reduce the achievement gap. Given that these three factors are also associated with improved grades and scores for white students, it is conceivable that these factors could benefit white children more than children of color. In this scenario, these factors could actually benefit young people overall but exacerbate the achievement gap. Therefore, it is important to assess not only the effects of these factors on the educational outcomes of children of color, but also their effect on the achievement gap.

The possibility that Christian and other religious schools could serve to reduce the achievement gap appears consistent with the religious emphasis on providing succor for the downtrodden. When one looks at some of the poorest sections of U.S. and European cities, the vast majority of the shelters that minister to the poor are religious. While some secularists talk of the need to give to the poor, it is usually religious people who are the ones reaching the poor in the trenches of homelessness and poverty (Deck, Tarango, and Matovina 1995; Greenway 1992; Henry and Hancock 1979; Nicholls and Wood 1996; Perkins 1995). Considering the strong impact that religious and family variables have on people's lives, there has been a puzzling dearth of studies examining the influence of these factors on the achievement gap (Jeynes 1999, 2001, 2003b). The need for the research presented in this article is particularly noteworthy (Jeynes 1999, 2003b) for three reasons.

The first reason is the debate surrounding the idea of school choice plans that include private schools. If attending religious schools improves the educational outlook for low-socioeconomic-status (low-SES) children, this enhances the argument in favor of including private schools in a school choice system. However, if attending private religious schools does not improve these children's

academic results, then the argument in favor of a choice program that would permit them to attend private religious schools is substantially weakened. Nevertheless, one should note that there are other nonacademic reasons why school choice may be laudable. The second reason is that educators, parents, and sociologists need added insight into how to raise the accomplishments and aspirations of low-SES students (Jeynes 2003a, 2003b, 2005b). The third reason is the importance of ascertaining whether public school educators can benefit by examining the religious school model (Hudolin 1994). To the extent to which low-SES children perform better in religious schools, this strengthens the argument that public school educators can learn from some of the practices of religious schools (Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993; LePore and Warren 1997; McEwen, Knipe, and Gallagher 1997). Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) and other researchers note that many theorists do not favor school choice but still assert that educators can learn from the religious school model (Schmidt 1988). Other social scientists contend that religious schools do not do a better job than their public school counterparts in educating low-SES children (Noell 1982; Willms 1985). Given this disparity of perceptions, it is important to resolve this issue.

Moreover, Kozol (1991) and other researchers assert that low-SES children represent the children it is most crucial for the U.S. educational system to reach. These researchers argue that low-SES children consistently trail high-SES children in educational outcomes (Ogbu 1992). Consequently, it is crucial to uncover what works in raising these children's school achievement (Ogbu 1992). Perhaps almost as important as the answers to the above questions is that if religious students, religious schools, and intact families do have a positive impact on achievement, it is important to determine some of the reasons why. In this way, social scientists can maximize the benefits of learning from these influences to broaden their impact in the educational arena.

METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

To assess the extent to which religious commitment, religious schools, and family factors could influence achievement, two types of statistical analysis were undertaken. The first type of analysis involved using an esteemed nationwide sample (the National Education Longitudinal Survey, abbreviated NELS88) of 24,599 students from 1,052 schools that was representative of the nation's student population. The second analysis involved completing a meta-analysis. A meta-analysis statistically combines all the relevant existing studies on a given subject to determine the aggregated results of said research (Hedges and Cooper 1994).

From the nationwide sample (NELS), a broad list of variables was examined, including the effects of religious commitment, religious schools, and family structure.

Religious Commitment

Whether a student was classified as “very religious” depended on whether each student described herself or himself as all of the following: (1) very religious, (2) actively involved in a religious youth group, and (3) attending church at least three or four times a month.

School and Student Identifying Variables

In addition to distinguishing between religious and nonreligious schools, various school variables were measured, including assessments of (1) school atmosphere, (2) racial harmony, (3) level of school discipline, (4) school violence, and (5) amount of homework done. Achievement tests in mathematics, reading, science, and social studies (history, civics, and geography) were also given to the students. Additional academic measures included assessments of whether a child had been left back a grade and whether the child had taken the basic core set of courses identified by the National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP). This basics program consisted of four years of English courses; three years of social studies courses, three years of science courses, three years of math courses, two years of foreign language courses, and half a year of computer science courses. Measures of socioeconomic status, race, and gender were also taken.

Family Structure Variable

Students were distinguished on the basis of whether they were living in an intact family. A total of 398 black and Hispanic adolescents were defined as coming from backgrounds in which the student was highly religious and from an intact family.

Low-SES Versus High-SES Analyses

Two sets of analyses were completed to examine the achievement gap between low-SES and higher-SES students. The first involved comparing low-SES religious school and public school students via SES quartiles in the NELS. The second involved a meta-analysis of the existing studies that compared the academic outcomes of low-SES students attending religious schools to those of low-SES students in public schools. The analysis was based on a literature search in twenty-five databases in which more than sixty studies were found that examined the relationship between religious schools and academic outcomes. Of these, thirteen specifically examined the effects of low-SES students attending religious schools on academic outcomes; those thirteen studies are synthesized in

this report. Measures of academic achievement included both standardized and nonstandardized measures.

RESULTS

According to the findings, students of low socioeconomic status and students of color especially benefit from attending religious schools.

Examination of the NELS Dataset

The results of the NELS dataset analysis indicate that (1) children in the lowest SES quartile who attend religious schools achieve at higher levels than do children in the lowest SES quartile who attend public schools and (2) children in the lowest SES quartile benefit from attending religious schools more than do students in the other SES quartiles. Low-SES students attending religious schools outperformed their counterparts in public schools on both standardized and nonstandardized measures. Among the standardized tests, the religious school students' scores varied from 7.8% higher for the Test Composite to 5.4% higher for the Science test. The religious school advantage was even greater for the nonstandardized Basic Core measure, at 8.2% higher.

Table 1: Effects (in Percentage Score Increases) on the Academic Achievement of Twelfth-Grade Children by SES Quartile (NELS Dataset: N = 20,706)

	Lowest SES Quartile	Second Lowest SES Quartile	Second Highest SES Quartile	Highest SES Quartile
Reading Achievement	7.6%	6.8%	5.8%	5.2%
Math Achievement	7.0%	6.2%	5.6%	5.0%
Social Studies Achievement	6.8%	5.8%	5.2%	4.6%
Science Achievement	5.4%	4.0%	3.4%	3.2%
Test Composite	7.8%	6.6%	5.4%	4.8%
Left Back	5.8%	5.0%	4.4%	3.8%
Basic Core	8.2%	6.6%	5.8%	5.2%

The results listed in Table 1 show how the religious school advantage differs by SES quartile in the student sample. For all the academic achievement measures examined, students from the lowest SES quartile showed the greatest academic

benefit, as measured by percentage gain from attending religious schools compared to their counterparts in public schools. This advantage was greater than that experienced by students in the other three socioeconomic quartiles. The increase for students in the lowest quartile was 3.0% higher than the increase for students in the highest quartile for the Test Composite and Basic Core classes and was at least 2.0% higher in every academic category. The religious school advantage was inversely related to the student's socioeconomic quartile. For all measures, students from the lowest SES quartile benefited the most from attending religious schools, followed by the second lowest quartile, and so on, the high SES quartile students benefiting the least from attending religious schools.

When we examine the racial achievement gap, the effects of religious schools are similar to the pattern found for SES. Table 2 indicates that the standardized test scores of African American and Latino students varied from 8.3% higher than those of their public school counterparts for Math, Social Studies, and Test Composite to 6.0% higher for Science. When SES and gender were controlled for, the standardized test scores of African American and Latino students varied from 5.2% higher than their public school counterparts for the Social Studies test to 2.0% higher for the Science test. For all the academic measures, whether SES was controlled for or not, African American and Latino students benefited more than whites did from attending religious schools. For the standardized tests, African American and Latino students gained 2.5% more than white students for the Social Studies test and 1.8% more for the Science test. When SES was controlled for, African American and Latino students gained 1.8% more than white students for the Social Studies test and 0.8% more for the Science test.

Table 2: Effects (in Percentage Score Increases) on the Academic Achievement of Twelfth-Grade Children by Race (NELS Dataset: $N = 20,706$)

	Considering SES and Gender		Not Considering SES and Gender	
	<i>African American and Latino</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>African American and Latino</i>	<i>White</i>
Reading Achievement	8.2%	6.0%	4.6%	3.4%
Math Achievement	8.3%	6.0%	4.2%	3.0%
Social Studies Achievement	8.3%	5.8%	5.2%	3.4%
Science Achievement	6.0%	4.2%	2.0%	1.2%
Test Composite	8.3%	6.0%	4.8%	3.8%
Left Back	5.1%	3.7%	3.0%	2.0%
Basic Core	8.3%	6.5%	3.4%	3.0%

Meta-Analysis

The meta-analysis indicated that low-SES students benefit more than moderate-SES and high-SES students do from attending religious schools. These results held across all the standardized and nonstandardized measures. The difference in the advantage, measured in standard deviation units, was largest for the Basic Core set of courses (2.7%) and least for Math test and being left back a grade (1.7%). These differences are similar to those found by using the NELS dataset. As indicated in Table 3, the meta-analysis showed an advantage of 5.1% in favor of low-SES students attending religious schools over their counterparts in public schools. The religious school student advantage was somewhat higher for standardized tests (5.3%) than for nonstandardized measures (4.8%). This trend also held for the high school level, where the religious school advantages for standardized tests and nonstandardized measures were 5.7% and 5.0%, respectively. At the middle school level, this pattern did not hold. In this case, the religious school advantages were both 5.2%. Another pattern that emerged was that the effect sizes for overall achievement for middle school (5.2%) and high school (5.4%) were greater than those for elementary school (3.1%).

Table 3: Meta-Analysis Advantage for Low-SES Children Attending Religious Schools Versus their Counterparts in Public Schools by Level of Schooling

	Combined Standardized and Nonstandardized Results	Standardized Test Results	Nonstandardized Results
All Levels of Schooling Combined	5.1%	5.3%	4.8%
High School Level	5.4%	5.7%	5.0%
Middle School Level	5.2%	5.2%	5.2%
Elementary School Level	3.1%	3.1%	N.A.*

*N.A. = Not applicable.

These results suggest that the advantage for attending religious schools is greater at higher grades, that is, at the middle school and high school levels. One might interpret these findings as indicating that religious schools do a particularly good job of aiding high school and middle school students. However, another possible explanation is that, at least for the students who begin attending religious

schools at a young age, the larger effect sizes may simply be a reflection of giving sufficient time for the religious school advantage to be manifested.

Additional Thoughts Based on the Results

The results of this study support the argument that attending religious schools is associated with higher levels of academic achievement among low-SES students. The studies from which this meta-analysis drew generally took into consideration gender, race, and various other factors, including parental involvement and the extent to which a school's program was demanding. One intriguing finding is that the effect sizes tended to be smaller for the meta-analysis than for the analysis examining the NELS dataset. One of the primary reasons for this difference is that a number of the studies that were included in the meta-analysis controlled for variables such as parental involvement and the extent to which the school had a demanding curriculum, which a number of researchers assert are some of the very reasons why students at religious schools perform better than their counterparts in public schools (Coleman 1988; Coleman and Hoffer 1987). In undertaking the NELS analysis, given that the goal was to determine whether and how much low-SES children benefited from attending religious schools, controlling for some the very factors that provide explanations for that advantage seemed unwise. Another reason for the difference in overall results is that the NELS analysis included only high school students, who tended to benefit more than younger students from attending religious schools.

WHY ATTENDING RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS REDUCES THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Although it is apparent that religious schools reduce socioeconomic and racial achievement gaps, the question that emerges is about what features of religious schools help to explain the alleviating of these achievement gaps. Social scientists commonly propound three reasons to explain the achievement gap.

First, they believe that the culture of the religious schools contributes to the abating of the gap (Gaziel 1997). Some social scientists argue that to the extent to which this is true, religious schools do a better job of helping disadvantaged students (Coleman 1988; Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore 1982; Gaziel 1997; Marsch 1991; Morris 1994). In terms of the outward manifestations of this culture, theorists note several differences that can be objectively measured by using the NELS dataset. Some social scientists believe that the religious school advantage is due to the school atmosphere (Lee and Bryk 1986; Morris 1994). Another possibility is that religious schools require students to do more homework (Mentzer 1988). Other researchers believe that religious schools are

less likely to have violence or threats of violence, which can often serve as major distractions for students trying to learn (Hudolin 1994; Irvine and Foster 1996). Still other social scientists believe that a higher level of racial harmony exists at religious schools because of the common thread of faith and Christian brotherhood (Irvine and Foster 1996) Finally, some social scientists believe that religious schools are likely to have modes of discipline that make them more prone to success (Morris 1994; Sander 1996).

A second factor, family factors or a broader sense of what Coleman described as “social capital,” results from both family-based and community-based sources (Coleman 1988; Coleman and Hoffer 1987). Educators, sociologists, and psychologists have been quick to point out that religious people are more likely to remain in intact families, become engaged in their children’s education, and provide an upbringing and community that encourage an atmosphere of morality and self-discipline (Jeynes 2005a, 2006, 2007).

Finally, a third possible factor is the fact that religious schools promote Christian, Jewish, or other form of devotion (Irvine and Foster 1996). This, in turn, yields positive effects.

Each of these three factors is explained further in the following sections.

Culture of the School

The first factor to which social scientists point in helping to explain the religious school student advantage is school culture. This study sought to statistically examine many aspects of school culture. First, the study focused on five aspects of school culture: (1) school atmosphere, (2) racial harmony, (3) level of school discipline, (4) school violence, and (5) amount of homework done. The results demonstrate that religious schools outperform nonreligious schools in all of the five school trait categories and in nearly all of the individual questions that make up those categories. Table 4 shows the effects of attending a religious school for all the individual questions under each school trait category. In the first column, data are adjusted for SES, race, gender, and whether or not the school was in an urban setting; in the second column, data are adjusted only for race and gender. All of the differences are listed in standard deviation units, a procedure that is important for effectively comparing different measures because different assessments have different grading units and the scores vary to different degrees. Presenting the results in a standardized form makes it possible to compare the results of different tests more fairly and accurately. The effects for racial harmony and school atmosphere, on average, showed the largest advantage for the religious schools.

Table 4: Effects (in Standard Deviation Units) of Religious Schools Versus Nonreligious Schools on the Five School Variables for the Twelfth Grade (1992) (N = 18,726)

	Results Controlling for Gender and Race	Results Controlling for SES, Urban Setting, Gender, and Race
School Atmosphere Variables:		
<i>School Spirit</i>	.26****	.30****
<i>Teachers Interested</i>	.30****	.18****
Racial Harmony Variables:		
<i>Friendly</i>	.20****	.13****
<i>Racial Fights</i>	.56****	.57****
Discipline Variables:		
<i>Disruptions</i>	.17****	.11***
<i>Ignore Cheating</i>	-.05	.01
<i>Offered Drugs</i>	.13****	.20****
Violence Variables:		
<i>Many Gangs</i>	.54****	.66****
<i>Threaten to Hurt</i>	.10***	.11**
<i>Fights</i>	.06*	.03
Homework	.14****	.05**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; **** $p < .0001$.

When data are adjusted for race and gender but not for SES and for whether the school was in an urban setting, the results were as follows. The regression coefficient for fewer racial/ethnic fights occurring at religious schools was .56. The regression coefficient for students being friendly with other racial groups was .20. The effects for the school atmosphere category were .26 for school spirit and .30 for teachers being interested in the students. Statistical analysis indicated that there was less than a 1 in 10,000 possibility that each of these results emerged by chance or coincidence. The effects for school violence were also noteworthy but varied considerably depending on the question. The effect for whether there were many gangs showed a regression coefficient of .54 for attending a religious school, meaning that there were fewer gangs in religious schools. This result, based on statistical analysis, also had just a 1 in 10,000 possibility of occurring by chance or coincidence. The regression was smallest in this category for getting into a physical fight at school: .06. Going to a religious school also meant that students generally did more homework; the regression coefficient in this case was .14. The effects for school discipline were generally the smallest of the five categories. In fact, one of the three questions in this category, whether teachers

ignore student cheating, yielded near zero effects. The effects for disruptions that impede learning and drugs offered to the students at school yielded effects of .17 and .13, respectively.

When data were adjusted for SES and for whether a school was in an urban setting in addition to race and gender factors, the results showed a similar pattern, the regression coefficient rising for whether there were gangs (.66), racial fights (.57), and a school spirit (.30). Some regression coefficients decreased, including whether teachers were interested in students (.18), whether the school was racially friendly (.13), and whether the students did more homework (.05).

When one examines the effects of learning habits on achievement, the results are quite intriguing. The results indicate that the three learning habits in which religious students enjoy the greatest advantage over their public school counterparts are the learning habits that are most strongly related to academic achievement. That is, taking harder courses, diligence, and overall work habits were the learning habits in which religious school students enjoyed their largest advantage over public school students.

Table 5: Rank Order of Learning Habits in Which Religious School Students Enjoy the Largest Advantage over Public School Students and Learning Habits Most Closely Associated with High Academic Achievement

	Largest Advantage for Religious Students Not Considering SES Factors	Largest Advantage for Religious Students Considering SES Factors	Greatest Influence on Math Achievement Not Considering SES Factors	Greatest Influence on Reading Achievement Considering SES Factors
First Largest Effect	Taking harder Courses	Diligence	Taking harder courses	Taking harder courses
Second Largest Effect	Diligence	Taking harder courses	Diligence	Diligence
Third Largest Effect	Work habits	Work habits	Paying attention	Work habits
Fourth Largest Effect	Work handed in on time	Work handed in on time	Work habits	Paying attention
Fifth Largest Effect	Paying attention	Paying attention	Less absenteeism	Less absenteeism

Family, Social Capital, and Religious Commitment

A second reason that social scientists frequently cite for the achievement gap being narrower in religious schools is the fact that Christian and other religious schools emphasize the role of parental involvement more than is commonly found in public schools (Coleman 1988; Coleman and Hoffer 1987; Jeynes 2002b). Research also indicates that highly religious couples are more likely to remain married than are less religious couples and that intact families on average have children with considerably higher levels of achievement than do nonintact families (Jeynes 2002a; Sullivan 2001). Coleman (1988) and his colleagues assert that these two facts enable religious school students to possess, on average, a higher level of social capital than their public school counterparts have. He believes that social capital represents the degree to which certain key members of a society invest their time, energy, wisdom, and knowledge in an individual or institution.

According to Coleman and other social scientists, given that Christian and other religious school students are more likely to have had parents, teachers, churches, and other factors invest in them, they are more likely to excel academically. Religious school students are more likely to have involved parents, caring teachers, and other factors that have shown to be positively associated with high academic outcomes (Coleman and Hoffer 1987; Jeynes 2002c). One might ask why religious schools are more likely to be correlated with parental involvement and caring teachers. Coleman avers that religious and public schools have very different orientations that result in religious school students eventually being endowed with higher levels of social capital. He asserts that the orientation of the public schools is one that “sees schools as society’s instrument for releasing a child from the blinders imposed by accident of birth into this family or that family. Schools have been designed to open broad horizons to the child, transcending the limitations of the parents.” By contrast, the religious school orientation “sees a school as the extension of the family, reinforcing the family’s values” (Coleman and Hoffer 1987: 3).

A third factor that social scientists frequently use to help explain the smaller achievement gap in religious schools is that Christian, Jewish, and similar schools encourage religious commitment among their students. Especially since the Supreme Court decisions of 1962 and 1963 removing prayer and Bible reading from the public schools, religious commitment has not been encouraged in public schools (Blanshard 1963; Jeynes 2005a; Kliebard 1969; Murray 1982).

There are a number of reasons why religious commitment could have a positive impact on academic outcomes that could ultimately reduce the achievement gap. The first of these reasons, and historically probably the most

acknowledged, deals with a religious work ethic. This is often referred to as the “Protestant work ethic.” Recent research, however, indicates that it may extend beyond the Protestant sphere to other religious groups. For example, Mentzer (1988) has found that Catholics in the United States possess a strong work ethic. Research in the social sciences has consistently indicated the existence of a religious work ethic (Furnham 1987; Gerhards 1990; Giorgi and Marsh 1990; Mudrack 1992).

A second reason why religious commitment could positively affect academic outcomes stems from the finding of some studies that suggest that religious people are more likely to have an internal locus of control (Jackson and Coursey 1988; Shrauger and Silverman 1971). Educational researchers have found a rather consistent relationship between having an internal locus of control and performing well in school (Garner and Cole 1986; Johnson 1992).

A third reason to think that there might be a correlation between religious commitment and academic outcomes emerges from the tendency for religious people to avoid behaviors that are typically regarded as undisciplined and harmful to educational achievement. A number of studies indicate that religiously committed teens are less likely to become involved in drug and alcohol abuse (Bahr, Hawks, and Wang 1993; Brownfield and Sorenson 1991; Nylander, Tung, and Xu 1996). Other studies indicate that religiously committed teens are less likely to engage in sexual behavior or become pregnant while they are still teenagers (Beck, Cole, and Hammond 1991; Holman and Harding 1996; Miller and Olson 1988).

When one combines the third reason given for the reduced achievement gap, religious commitment, with at least a portion of the family/social capital component of the second reason given for the reduced gap, that is, family structure, an amazing result emerges: The achievement gap disappears.

Table 6 indicates that when the data are adjusted for SES and gender, black and Hispanic adolescents who are religious and from intact families do just as well academically as white students. In Table 6, the academic indicator favors African American and Latino students if the result is listed as a positive number and favors white students if it is a negative number. One can see that once one controls for SES and gender, the achievement gap essentially evaporates for all the standardized test measures except in Science. Moreover, religious African American and Latino students from intact families are actually less likely to be left back a grade and are more likely to take the Basic Core set of courses, as prescribed by the NAEP, than are white students. Even if one does not factor in SES (see the last column of Table 6), the achievement gap is quite small when religious African American and Latino students from intact families are compared with white students.

Table 6: Effects (in Standard Deviation Units) on Academic Achievement for Twelfth-Grade (1992) Black and Hispanic Children from a “More Traditional” Background Versus White Children, Using the SES Model (N = 24,599)

Academic Measure	Achievement Gap Controlling for Gender and SES	Achievement Gap Controlling for Gender but Not SES
Standardized measures		
Math	0.4%	-0.8%
Reading	-0.4%	-1.5%
Science	-2.4%	-3.6%
Social Studies	0.0%	-1.5%
Composite	0.0%	-1.3%
Other measures		
Left Back ^a	2.0%	1.1%
Basic Core ^a	6.2%	5.6%

^a Logistic regression.

The results suggest that the achievement gap might not be quite as indefatigable and pervasive as many people believe. Given the number of efforts social scientists have launched to reduce the achievement gap, the fact that the combination of personal religious commitment and coming from an intact family eliminates the gap for African American and Latino students is nothing short of magnificent. Various other comparisons of religious and nonreligious schools not only indicate that Christian and other religious schools reduce the achievement gap, but also indicate some of the most likely reasons why this is the case.

These findings concerning the reduction and even elimination of the achievement gap are especially noteworthy when we consider that schools have been inundated with programs designed to reduce the gap that have had only marginal success (Green 2001; Haycock 2001). Showing that factors as simple as religious commitment, religious schools, and family structure can reduce or eliminate the gap may inspire educators and social scientists to encourage policies that are supportive of faith and the family so that the gap can be narrowed significantly.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The results of this research have vital implications for educational policy in assessing whether school choice programs that include private schools should be initiated and determining whether educators in the public schools may have something to learn from certain aspects of how religious schools are run.

Determining Whether School Choice Programs Should Be Initiated

A primary reason why school choice attracts so much attention is the belief that it will produce an overall improvement in school quality. The late Milton Friedman (1994) epitomized this view when he stated, "Choice produces competition. Competition produces quality." This assertion gains some credence when one examines the results of this study suggesting that students in religious schools outperform their counterparts in nonreligious schools.

Although many social scientists acknowledge the educational advantage that religious schools enjoy, a significant number of them wonder whether school choice is an attractive option. The reasons that are given are as follows. Opponents of choice question whether such a program would really yield the level of competition that its supporters claim. These opponents contend that for the competition level to increase, there would need to be a large number of students willing to leave their current schools and participate in school choice programs. In reality, although the current evidence is limited, those few places that practice school choice programs have low student participation rates. Minnesota's public school choice system, for example, has about 40,000 students participating out of more than 800,000 students state-wide. (Colopy and Tarr 1994). The participation rate in Britain's school program, which includes both public and private schools, is only about 15% (Gewirtz, Ball, and Bowe 1995; Woods, Bagley, and Glatter 1998).

Nevertheless, to the extent to which religious schools promote parental involvement, religious commitment, and an overall more disciplined lifestyle, all of which relate to positive academic and social outcomes, it becomes very difficult to argue against allowing choice without sounding insular and self-serving (Lieberman 1993; Moe 2001). After all, even with low school choice participation rates, if the participant students of color are benefiting and the academic gap is reduced, it once again appears illogical and potentially racially oppressive and discriminatory to deny minority students the right to more fully reach their potential via a school choice system.

Determining Whether Educators in the Public Schools May Have Something to Learn from Religious Schools

A number of social scientists believe that it is crucial that public school educators learn from the example set by religious schools. The findings of this study support this view. The results indicate not only that students in religious schools outperform their counterparts in nonreligious schools on virtually every measure of academic achievement, but also that in religious schools, the academic gaps are reduced that commonly exist between low-SES and high-SES students as well as

those between black and Hispanic students and white students. Especially because reducing these gaps is one of the primary aims of educators, it is logical that if religious schools have learned to produce these outcomes, they have something to teach the secular educational community. Many public school educators have tried for years to reduce these seemingly unalterable academic gaps. If religious educators have developed a strategy that causes the gaps to shrink, public school educators would be wise to seriously examine the religious school model.

The primary area that public school educators are imitating is the character education emphasis of Christian and other religious schools (Bryk, Lee, and Holland 1993; Halstead and Lewicka 1998; McEwen, Knipe, and Gallagher 1997). Before 1963, character education was a major part of public school education. After state-approved prayer and Bible reading were removed from the public schools, character education ceased to be a major emphasis in many public schools (Haynes 1999; Miller 1998). Immediately in 1963, there was an ostensible decrease in most major academic achievement measures and a sudden increase in adolescent crime (U.S. Department of Education 2000; U.S. Department of Justice 1993). From 1963 to 1980, average scores on the Stanford Achievement Test, the California Achievement Test, the Scholastic Achievement Test, and the Iowa Test of Education Development, among others, decreased more than at any time in the history of these tests (Harnisfeger and Wiley 1975; U.S. Department of Education 2000). Concurrently, most measures of juvenile crime and delinquent behavior rose 300–700% (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1992; U.S. Department of Justice 1993). Social scientists differ in the extent to which they believe the absence of character education in the public schools contributed to these trends (Brunnsma 1998). Nevertheless, in the eyes of many educators, character education is important in the development of the self-discipline necessary to perform well in school and avoid harmful behavior (Edwards 2000; Ryan and Bohlin 1998; Smagorinsky 2000).

Maintaining high academic standards is a second area in which social scientists believe that public educators can learn from religious schools. Mentzer (1988) states that religious schools frequently require more homework. Hoffer (1997) and Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) observe that religious schools encourage students to take college preparation courses more than one usually finds in public schools. Research evidence suggests that disadvantaged children, in particular, benefit from this emphasis on demanding educational standards (Coleman 1988; Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore 1982; Gaziel 1997). Social scientists suggest that there may be myriad other areas in which public schools can apply the religious school rubric. These include some of the variables that were addressed in this analysis, such as ways in which Christian and religious schools increase racial harmony and reduce school fighting (Irvine and Foster 1996).

However, before one gets too excited about the potential of public school educators learning from private school educators, one caveat is in order: Some social scientists believe that this is very difficult if not impossible. Gaziel (1997) believes that the achievement gap between religious and public schools can be explained by a difference in school culture. To the extent to which this is true, it might be difficult for public schools to replicate the results that often emerge in religious schools. Carbonaro (1999) and Hallinan and Kubitschek (1999) suggest that the religious school culture that includes an emphasis on family values and personal morality plays a large role in explaining why religious school students do so well academically. Given that public school educators might not place an emphasis on these same areas, this limits the degree to which public schools can benefit from the strengths of the religious school system.

Although educators are frequently divided over the merits of school choice, there is a growing consensus that public schools can benefit by imitating some of the strengths of the religious school model. There may be limitation on just what qualities can be imitated, but the increased emphasis on character education, high academic standards, and parental involvement can be imitated (Barber 1984; Hyde 1990; Schmidt 1988). There is also a growing awareness that public schools should not inhibit religious freedom but should allow it just as they do the other freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution.

The results of this study indicate that religious education is a vibrant part of the education system in the United States. It should inspire researchers to examine more closely specifically why students who attend religious schools outperform their counterparts in nonreligious schools. It also supports the notion that including religious schools in a system of school choice conceivably could improve the overall quality of the U.S. education system. It would seem beneficial to further examine why students from religious schools outperform students in public schools.

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