WHY RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS POSITIVELY IMPACT THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF CHILDREN

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Abstract
Using the 1992 NELS data set for twelfth graders, this study assessed why students attending religious schools generally achieve at higher levels academically than students attending non-religious schools. The study examined reasons that social scientists typically give for students from religious schools outperforming their counterparts in non-religious schools. These reasons include the school atmosphere, racial harmony, the level of school discipline, the lower rates of school violence, and the amount of homework given by the teachers. The results confirm that religious schools do outperform non-religious schools in each of these categories. In addition, the effects for students attending a religious school are reduced but not eliminated when these factors are controlled for. The results of this study support the belief that religious schools do differ favorably from non-religious schools on a number of measures that would seem to support an environment of high academic achievement. The results indicate that the factors that researchers point to as possibly explaining the advantages of attending a religious school explain part of, but not all of, the academic advantage of attending a religious school.

Over the last thirty-five or forty years, a number of research studies have been done indicating that children from religious and/or private schools outperform their counterparts in public schools in academic achievement (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Lee & Bryk, 1993). In much of the earlier research of this nature, the focus was on comparing the effects of children from Catholic schools versus their counterparts in public schools (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Lee & Bryk, 1993; Morris, 1998). As the number of non-Catholic religious schools has increased, however, social scientists have acknowledged the importance of examining the effects of religious schools, on the whole, on the academic achievement of children (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Gaziel, 1997). Recent research confirms that children from religious schools outperform students from non-religious schools (Jeynes, 2000).

To the extent that most researchers acknowledge that students from religious schools perform better than other students, the question arises as to why this is the case. Some social scientists believe that the religious school advantage is due to the school atmosphere (Lee & Bryk, 1993; Morris, 1994). A second reason that is given is that religious schools may require
more homework to be done by the students (Mentzer, 1988). Third, some researchers believe that religious schools are less likely to have violence or threats of violence, that can often serve as major distractions for students trying to learn (Hudolin, 1994; Irvine & Foster, 1996). Fourth, some social scientists believe that there is a higher level of racial harmony that exists at religious schools, because of the common thread of faith and Christian brotherhood (Irvine & Foster, 1996) Fifth, some social scientists believe that there are other modes of discipline that religious schools are likely to have that make them more prone to success (Morris, 1994; Sander, 1996).

Determining the reasons behind why students in religious schools outperform their counterparts in non-religious schools is important for the following reasons. First, the answers may help solve some debates regarding the value of school choice. Within the last year, the political rhetoric regarding school choice has intensified. One of the most heated educational questions that has been addressed in political circles concerns whether school choice programs should include vouchers or tax breaks for religious schools. Naturally, part of the arguments used in this debate involve church/state issues and whether government educational policy should address the needs of only public schools. While these debates have some merit, an overriding issue exists. That is, why do students that attend religious schools actually perform better academically than students who attend non-religious schools? Researchers only rarely have examined this question specifically. Instead, usually researchers have either: 1) compared student academic achievement in private versus public school children (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Lee & Bryk, 1993) or 2) only examined the question of whether students in religious schools do better rather than focusing also on the reasons why (Jeynes, 2000). To the extent that church/state issues rest at the heart of much of the debate surrounding school choice, examining the effects of religious schools on the academic achievement of students appears to be a worthy endeavor. Even if differences do emerge, some social scientists have asserted that the differences are due to differences in socioeconomic status and racial composition (Baker, 1998, 1999; Brunsma, 1998; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Hardy & Vieler-Porter, 1995; Murphy, 1990). If there are no definable reasons why students from religious schools outperform students from non-religious schools then it would affect the merits of the argument that promoting school choice for religious schools will help improve the American system of education.

A second reason why determining the reasons for the differences is important is because identifying these reasons may help improve the