

# The Research Case for PK – 12 Christian Schools

By Dan Krause



**GRACEWORKS**  
MINISTRIES

## Introduction

Many authors have written philosophical or theological entreats imploring parents to send their children to PK-12 Christian schools. I agree with the far majority of these. This document is unique in pulling together actual research from education and the social sciences on the benefits to children of attending PK-12 Christian schools.

If it is justified, philosophically and Biblically, to send our children to Christian schools, then we would expect the fruits of this to be evident as well. In fact, that is the case. Summarized below are the key research findings of the benefits of PK-12 Christian education.

By hard research, there are four basic reasons it is wise to send children to PK-12 Christian schools, summarized as (1) Faith-Saving, (2) College / Education, (3) Opportunity, (4) Character.

### #1: K-12 Christian Schools are Faith-Saving

While about 60-70%<sup>1</sup> of formerly church-going teens are no longer going to church in their twenties. One of the largest studies of outcomes of students schooled in public, Christian, and Roman Catholic schools found:

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*ONE OF THE MOST significant findings in this study is the long-term commitment of Protestant Christian school graduates to stay within the Protestant faith. Attending a Protestant Christian school seems to impact graduates' choice to stay into adulthood within the Christian faith. Other schooling types, including Catholic schools, have no impact on the religious affiliations their graduates choose as adults. Again, it is helpful to note that these findings are significant after controls for parent religion is added; this finding supports the notion that Protestant Christian schools should be considered an important part of the child-rearing equation. Cardus Educational Survey, 2012, p. 19*

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The 2012 Cardus Education Survey is the largest longitudinal studies of outcomes based on public, Protestant Christian, Catholic, and home school results ever conducted. Chief author of the study was David Swikkik, Chairman of the Department of Sociology at Notre Dame. Research from Ed Stetzer concurred with this finding, and concluded the Christian schooling during high school was most efficacious.

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<sup>1</sup> "Two-thirds of teenagers drop out of church as young adults." Baptist Standard, January 15, 2019. See the following books as well: [Good Faith](#), [Almost Christian](#), [Already Gone](#), [Soul Searching](#), [You Lost Me](#), [Unchristian](#), [Lost and Found](#), [Generation iY](#).

Recently, Daniel Cox, of the Survey Center on American Life wrote that:

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*We have long known the importance of formative religious experiences in setting the trajectory of faith commitments throughout life. For as long as we have been able to measure religious commitments, childhood religious experiences have strongly predicted adult religiosity. They still do. If someone had robust religious experiences growing up, they are likely to maintain those beliefs and practices into adulthood.<sup>2</sup>*

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When it comes to young people staying or leaving the faith in their 20s, there is no mystery. The more intense their faith experience as children and teenagers, the more likely they are to stay in the faith. The two biggest reasons Millennials and Generation Z are leaving the faith in increased proportions is (1) Less of these generation cohorts had a deep or broad faith experience as children and teenagers, (2) Millennials are often Democrats politically, where the church has become affiliated with the Republican Right.<sup>3</sup>

## **#2: Twice the College Graduation Rate for Christian Schooled Children**

In most parts of America today, a four-year college degree is the new high school degree. What a difference a four-year college degree makes!

*(Continued on next page...)*

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<sup>2</sup> [Generation Z and the future of faith in America - The Survey Center on American Life \(americansurveycenter.org\)](#). Note that Cox did NOT ask about past enrollment in Christian schools, a significant methodological flaw in his primary research.

<sup>3</sup> See [Trends in party affiliation among demographic groups | Pew Research Center](#) (2017) and Donald Campbell et. al: Secular Surge, 2021. Christian schools are wise to remain politically neutral as much as possible.

## Life Prospects: High School Diploma vs 4-Year College Degree<sup>4</sup>

Measure	High School Diploma	4 Year College Degree
Average Income	\$40,000	\$66,000
Average IQ of children (married to similarly educated spouse)	101	109
Likelihood of living in poverty	3X	X
Life Expectancy	76	80+
Taxes paid	X	1.8X
Will Vote	X	2X
Satisfied with job	50%	60%
Percent of jobs lost in 2008 recession	80%	20%
Unemployment rate	12%	4%
Employer provides health insurance or pension	50%	70%
White females who had a child out of wedlock	40%	4%
Needed government assistance in 2013	40%	4%
Prime age males not in the labor force	11%	3%
Unmarried women in the labor force	92%	76%
Kids obtain a 4-year college education	16%	60%
Kids ages 12-18 who are obese	22%	5%
Have kids who are high academic achievers	3%	28%

<sup>4</sup> Statistics compiled from: Ilana Horwitz, [God, Grades, and Graduation](#) (2022) and [Coming Apart](#) by Charles Murray (2013).

For the far majority of young people, a four-year college degree is essential for success at life. Yet today in the United States, about half will drop out of college before completion, often saddled with significant student loans, and no better life prospects.

In 2014, a major 10-year longitudinal study of over 15,000 high school sophomores by the U.S. Department of Education (N=15,000+) found that college graduation rates for Protestant and Catholic schoolers was about twice that of sophomores in public school:

2002 High School Sophomore in:	Percent with 4-Year College Degree 10 Years Later:
Public School	31%
Catholic School	61%
Protestant Christian (and other private)	57%

*Thus, Protestant and Catholic schooled young people are about twice as likely to graduate college, with far better life prospects. Not even homeschoolers will graduate college at this high rate.*

### #3: The Opportunity of a K-12 Christian Education

Are these enhanced college graduation rates simply a consequence of higher income of parents? Income does make a profound difference in college graduation rates:

#### Income and College Related Outcomes<sup>5</sup>

Quartile in Income	Yearly Household Income (Thousands)	Attend Any College	ALL Graduate Any College (4-year) <sup>6</sup>	Abiders Graduating Any College (4 Year)	Non-Abiders Graduating any College (4 Year)	Females Graduating Any College	High Achieving Students (About 95 <sup>th</sup> percentile ACT/SAT)	Attend a Top Tier College	High Achieving Students at Top Tier College
1 <sup>st</sup> : Top 25%	\$101+	78%	60%	65%	62%	70%	34%	74%	74%
2 <sup>nd</sup> : 50 – 74%	\$61 to 100	70%	37%	47%	29%	52%	27%	17%	61%
3 <sup>rd</sup> : 25—49%	\$34 to 60	59%	22%	32%	16%	44%	22%	6%	41%
4 <sup>th</sup> : 0 – 24%	\$0 to 33	46%	15%	19%	15%	18%	17%	3%	41%

Through financial aid programs, Christian schools regularly work with students from 2nd and 3rd quartile families – 25-30% of students in our experience. These students are two to three times more

<sup>5</sup> John Hopkins School of Education Institute for Education Policy: Family Income and the College Completion Gap. March 10, 2016. Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy, University of Pennsylvania, “Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States, 2018 Historical Trend Report.” The Atlantic: Poor Girls are Leaving Their Brothers Behind, November 27, 2017. Martha Bailey and Susan M. Dynarki, “Inequality in Post Secondary Education” in *Whither Opportunity: Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children’s Life Chances*. (Greg Duncan and Richard Murnane, Eds.) Russell Sage Foundation, 2011.

likely to graduate from college than their counter parts in public schools. In carefully controlled research on this very point, Ilana Horwitz found that:

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*[For teens from] the working and middle class – the middle 50% of the population – abiders experience a huge educational advantage that lasts well past high school .... [A]mong the middle class, abiders are over one and a half times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than non-abiders, and the number is double for working class abiders.<sup>6</sup>*

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Note that Horowitz's research was with 13-17 year-old teenagers broadly, whether they went to a Christian high school or not. As with many of the indicators in this monograph, the benefits of Christianity largely accrue from *faithful practice* – not mere intellectual ascent. Horowitz defines Abiders as Protestant Christians with an active, even intense, faith.

What about gender differences? If you are concerned about the significantly lower graduation rates of men, once again an Active Christian faith is the great equalizer. For men and women who are abiders, the number of men and women who have 4 – year college degrees is 45% and 46% respectively. Just one percentage point! The discrepancy is far larger for non-abiders: 30% and 35% respectively.

What about race? Analyzing an extensive sample of over 200,000 students in a longitudinal study, *Carpenter and Rameriz found that Hispanic students from Protestant and Catholic K-12 school were nine times more likely to attend college. Nine times more likely!*

In other words, if you care about opportunity in America, get kids into Christian schools! If your own economic situation is humble, find a way to get your child(ren) into a Christian school.

In short, Horatio Alger is alive and well in Pk-12 Christian schools! *Research-wise, this issue is settled.*

William Jeynes has conducted two major meta-analyses on this topic. A meta-analysis is a “study of studies” meant to settle issues in social science. Jeynes two meta-analyses involved every relevant peer reviewed journal article for the last 30 years – about 220 studies altogether. Here's the two most important findings:

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<sup>6</sup> *God, Grades and Graduation*, p. 87. Horowitz found higher 4-year college graduation rates for Abiders in all four economic quartiles, but these differences were small at the highest and lowest quartiles.

Do Christian schools overcome traditional achievement gap issues?	Do Christian schools perform better than Charter or Public schools?
<p>Jeynes (1999, 2002a, 2002b, 2003b) analyzed the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) and found that not only do religiously committed African American and Hispanic students to better scholastically their less religious counterparts, but that when one examines these religious minority students who are in intact families, the academic gap versus white students disappears (Bryk, Lee &amp; Holland, 1993; Demo, Levin, &amp; Siegler, 1997; Gaziel, 1997)</p>	<p>Many people, even this researcher, expected public charter school students to perform somewhere in between the levels achieved by students attending faith-based schools and those attending traditional public schools, given that they were trying to mimic certain aspects of private religious schools.</p> <p>To the extent that neither traditional public schools nor charter schools are succeeding on a broad scale, it appears that the best hope for American education is religious private schools.</p> <p>Not only are they considerably more economically efficient, but their students also achieve better academic and behavioral results.</p> <p>The nation should therefore rethink its strategy of espousing charter schools and overlooking the benefits of faith-based education.</p> <p>William Jeynes, 2012 – “Meta Analysis of Effects and Contributions of Public, Charter, Religious Schools.”</p>

While 10 to 33% of students at the average charter school would otherwise be enrolled in a private school, the national data on charter schools shows results very similar to public schools. For example, the CREDO National Charter School Study<sup>7</sup>, based on a 95% sample of all charter school students in 2012, detailed reading and math differences:

Result	Reading	Math
Significantly Better	25%	29%
No Significant Difference	56%	40%
Significantly Worse	19%	31%

<sup>7</sup> CREDO, National Charter School Study, 2013

Even private school critics Christopher and Sarah Lubienski conclude that charter schools are largely isomorphic with public schools.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly America has a significant opportunity problem. In Jesus' time among us, there was one clearly disadvantaged group, lacking opportunity: women. In many ways, Jesus did to elevate the status of women in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine<sup>9</sup>. God cares about opportunity. Christian K-12 are arguably one of the greatest forces for equal opportunity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **#4: K-12 Christian Schools Produce Pillars of Character**

There are four lines of evidence clearing showing that Christian schools produce students of high (Christian) character.

### **Line of Evidence #1: What we know about Christian school character results**

The 2012 and 2014 Cardus studies are particularly instructive on Christian school character outcomes, because current behavior was compared to schooling 15-20 years earlier. In addition, the group studied were active in church as children and teenagers. Comparing the actual behaviors of over 1500 adults 15-20 years later, compared to all other types, adults who were educated at least four years in a Protestant K-12 school were...

... more philanthropic, giving on average \$1500 a more to the churches they support

... much more active in attending church, bible study, and participating in short term missions,

... much less likely to have pre-marital sex, or get divorced,

... reading their bible and praying far more, respecting the infallibility of the Bible and the authority of the church,

... uniquely optimistic about their future,

... more likely to pursue jobs that fulfill a religious calling,

... leaders and pillars in their congregation.

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<sup>8</sup> The Public School Advantage: Why Public Schools Outperform Private Schools. (2014), p. 65. However, for the Lubienski's to conclude that public schools outperformed private schools, they made a number of specious adjustments to the original data.

<sup>9</sup> A Christian classic, The Upside Down Kingdom (Donald Kraybill) makes this point eloquently.



Even as our communities unravel, K-12 protestant educated adults were “community stabilizers” according to the 2012 Cardus study. In terms of social capital, the 2014 study noted that:

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*SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT. The close-knit nature of private school communities and the strength of relationships between students and teachers suggest private schools are adept at fostering social capital. Graduates feel prepared for relationships. And in fact enjoy close ties with individuals who are different from themselves in significant ways, including close friends who differ in belief and race/ ethnicity. The social capital built within private schools does not appear to exclude bridges across social differences.<sup>10</sup>*

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William Jeynes of Cal State, Long Beach, has conducted a number of meta-analysis studies of Christian school outcomes. These “studies of studies” conclude that students attending both Evangelical and Catholic schools were:

- Less violent,
- More racially tolerant and harmonious,<sup>11</sup>
- Less disobedient to parents,
- Less involved in gangs, and
- Less likely to steal.<sup>12</sup>

In a systematic review of every primary research study conducted between 1990 and 2020, Horowitz<sup>13</sup> found that religiously active youth have:

- Better academic outcomes and grades,
- Lower rates of truancy,

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<sup>10</sup> Cardus Educational Surveys, 2012 & 2014, Cardus Foundation.

<sup>11</sup> Dick Carpenter found that friendliness between racial groups was significantly increased in private schools, and that private schools are more racially integrated. (In Jeynes, *International Handbook*, p. 61 & p. 49.)

<sup>12</sup> Jeynes, *International Handbook of Protestant Education*, 2012, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Ilana M Horowitz, Religion and Academic Achievement: A Research Review Spanning Secondary School and Higher Education. Religious Research Association, 2020. [Religion and Academic Achievement: A Research Review Spanning Secondary School and Higher Education | IBOOK.PUB](#)

- More aspirations for higher education,
- More years of higher education actually completed, and
- Higher high school GPAs / better prepared for college.

*Christian school graduates have better marriages.* The Cardus Foundation recently released (2017) a report about the marriage / divorce status of Christian school graduates. Here was their overall conclusion:

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*Protestant schoolers have perhaps the most distinctive outcomes, which are almost entirely consistent with the mission and orientations of evangelical schools. They are more likely to be married than single or cohabitating, and they are more likely to have married at some point in their lives and are less likely to divorce. Protestant schoolers have more children and are more likely to integrate religion into family life. They are more supportive of traditional gender roles as well. Overall, and net of the religiously conservative families that attend evangelical Protestant schools, Protestant school communities appear to instill and support traditional marriage outcomes. (p. 16)*

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The finding about better marriages for active Christians was affirmed in a surprising way. In a wonderful, small book, *The Good News About Marriage* (2014), Shaunti Feldhahn summarized a major research study of 13,000 people, which found that actively attending church reduced the divorce rate from 50% overall to 35%. And Feldhahn noted that: “Those who are active in their faith are the happiest in their marriage.” (P. 77).<sup>14</sup>

Almost weekly I learn of interesting benefits of church involvement. For example, women who attend church have less post-partum depression, and provide better care for their infants.<sup>15</sup>

## **Line of Evidence #2: What we know about American society when public schools became godless.**

For 350 years, character education was central in all levels of Christian education in the United States. This changed in 1962 & 1963, at the apex of the United States economic and spiritual dominance, with

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<sup>14</sup> Per Feldhahn: how to reduce your chances of divorce to less than 10%: (1) Regularly attend church, (2) Don't live together before marriage, (3) Wait until your mid-twenties, (4) Get a 4-year college degree.

<sup>15</sup> [How God Works: The Science Behind the Benefits of Religion](#), 2021.

three Supreme Court decisions that forbade bible reading, prayer, and discussion of God in the classroom. From then to the year 2000, the United States ...

- ... Doubled the divorce rate,
- ... Tripled the teen suicide rate,
- ... Quadrupled the rate of reported violent crime,
- ... Quintupled the prison population,
- ... Sextupled the percent of babies born to unmarried parents,
- ... Increased, by sevenfold, our cohabitation rates, and
- ... Is ten times more depressed than before WWII.<sup>16</sup>

As was widely reported, SAT scores declined seventeen years in a row, from 1963 to 1980, altogether 110 points on their 1600 point scale. In middle school, students are, on average, about 1.5 years from their peers in 1930 – with the average textbook also written at about two grade levels lower.<sup>17</sup>

### Line of Evidence #3: Religious Commitment and Character

A number of authors have noted the significant character advantages of devout religious commitment. Here is Smith and Denton’s take for teenagers ages 13-17:<sup>18</sup>

	U.S.	Devout (8%)	Regulars (27%)	Sporadics (17%)	Disengaged (12%)
Smokes cigarettes once a day	7	1	6	9	14
Drinks alcohol weekly	5	<1	4	7	11
Drinks alcohol never	63	88	62	50	49
Smokes marijuana regularly	4	<1	2	6	8
Cut class in last year (6+ times)	7	2	5	10	12
Grades usually Cs, Ds, Fs	10	3	8	10	12
Suspended / Expelled (4x/2yr)	5	1	3	6	9
Parents say: rebellious	13	3	13	13	17
Parents say: bad temper	43	32	36	46	49

<sup>16</sup>David G. Meyers, “Wanting More in an age of Plenty,” Christianity Today, April 24, 2009.

<sup>17</sup>Jeynes, *International Handbook*, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup>Christopher Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, 2005, pages 222-223.

TV watching (hours/day)	2.6	1.8	2.6	2.3	2.5
Most movies watched rated R	29	14	25	32	42

Clearly, the more involved in their faith, the less likely teenagers are to “get in trouble.”

If young people will continue to attend church, they are less likely to fall into sin. Bottom line? Attendees of Protestant K-12 school are attending church in their 20’s. For many Christian school parents, that is the ultimate in student safety!

## Conclusion

An overwhelming theme throughout this research is that active involvement in a Christian church, in the Christian faith, has great benefits in practically every area of life. Which brings us back, full circle, to the initial assertion of this research paper: PK-12 Christian schools are faith-saving. Where 60-70% of formerly church-attending young people leave the church when they go out on their own, Christian schooled kids largely stay active in the faith. This is completely consistent with the widely researched idea that intense religious experiences in childhood are likely to cause that person, as an adult, to stay in the faith. It is young adults who had little church background who now are the “Nones.”

Of course, kids make their own decisions, but by the numbers, children and young people who have the intense Christian experience that a Christian school offers are much more likely to stay in the faith in their 20s and 30s. The benefits come from attending and being involved with a church. Not merely assenting to the Christian faith.

Active Christian faith provides “Guardrails<sup>20</sup>” that keep our kids away from practices that will waste their time, confuse their minds, or even fall into negative behaviors that can ruin their lives. On the other hand, an active Christian faith is like the Northstar – providing purpose, passion, and aspiration for more education and more meaningful work. And an active Christian faith gives young adults the persistence and resiliency to see it through.

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*, 2007, pp. 77, 166, 172.

<sup>20</sup> Borrowing Ilana Horowitz’s term.