

The Christian School Difference

The American Christian schooling movement has deep roots and a rich history, and it continues to produce graduates who can transform our nation with their Christ-centered values. A few years ago Cardus, a Christian think tank headquartered in Ontario, Canada, sought to discover to what extent those graduates are making an impact. In other words, does K–12 Christian education produce its intended outcomes?

With grants from three charitable foundations and the University of Notre Dame, along with ACSI and other associations, Cardus spent two years surveying Protestant and Catholic school administrators and teachers as well as graduates aged 24 to 39 of public schools, homeschools, Catholic schools, Protestant schools, and nonreligious private schools. In 2011 the *Cardus Education Survey (CES)* was released (Pennings et al. 2011). The survey revealed that graduates of Protestant Christian schools excel spiritually, academically, and culturally.

My colleague Philip Scott, ACSI's assistant director for Legal/Legislative Issues, wrote a summary of the *CES* that I found both insightful and encouraging for Christian school parents (Scott 2012, 5–7, 11). I'd like to share a few excerpts from that document. (Note: All page numbers within the excerpts are from the *Cardus Education Survey*.)

- Students graduate from Protestant Christian schools feeling well prepared for a spiritual life; consequently, they are more committed to their churches. They practice spiritual disciplines and follow church teachings more often than graduates from any other type of school. (16).
- They also attend church more regularly and are more active in their congregations than other school graduates (16–17).
- These students “are distinctively different from their peers in their belief that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation” (17).
- Homeschool, public school, and Catholic school graduates all pray, read Scripture, and evangelize at about the same

rates, but Protestant Christian school graduates practice all three at significantly higher rates (21).

- When Protestant Christian school graduates marry and have children, they also spend more time incorporating their faith into their family life; they pray, discuss God, and read Scripture together as a family more often than any of their peers (22).
- Another distinctive of Protestant Christian school graduates is their tendency to choose careers on the basis of their religious calling and to place less importance on compensation (20). These students average lower household incomes, yet they give more of their time and finances to their churches and communities than their peers do (18–19)
- They also give significantly more time, volunteering more hours in their churches and about the same number of hours in other community causes (19, 26).
- These graduates also feel more gratitude for their possessions, even in light of their relatively lower household incomes and greater efforts in giving (24–25). What community would not want such citizens?
- The *CES* data suggest that Protestant Christian school graduates' religious beliefs also have an impact on how they interact with the culture. These graduates use Scripture to make moral decisions more often, and they believe more strongly that moral standards are absolute—including prohibitions against premarital sex, divorce, and cohabitation (16–17, 20).
- These students also strongly believe religion should be included in public discourse on the pressing issues of our time (20).
- Finally, they are doing more community good through their commitment to short-term mission and aid trips. Protestant Christian school graduates participate in more post-high-school relief and development, mission, and evangelism trips than any of their peers do (19).
- It is clear that these students are not islands unto themselves in their communities, but they are integrated into its various parts.



CHRISTIAN *School* COMMENT

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- The overarching academic finding of the *CES* was that Protestant Christian education is significantly less academically rigorous than Catholic education (31).
- Such a claim deserves further inquiry and close inspection.
- Protestant Christian schools are already among the top 10 percent of schools when judged by average student performance on the NAEP test. For the past 37 years, since ACSI and its predecessors started tracking Stanford Achievement Test scores in 1974, ACSI schools have scored significantly higher than the national norm in every grade level every year. Clearly Protestant Christian schools, and ACSI schools specifically, are excelling academically. The *CES* finding is based on several criteria, among them school academic programs (including number of required courses in various disciplines and number of AP courses available), the percentage of graduates who attend more-selective colleges and universities, and graduates' average years of higher education and number of advanced degrees. While Catholic schools do offer some specific academic advantages, we believe that the academic gap is significantly less than first reported and that it has less to do with academic preparation than with school, parent, and student goals.
- The [*CES*] authors make it clear that “research finds Christian schools to be serving a public good in many ways.” However, the authors set a high value on top-down influence by saying that Christian school graduates show “a surprising lack of engagement in areas traditionally thought to influence culture: through the political sphere, relationships with

people in positions of power and status or people earning higher university degrees, and intellectual engagement in the arts” (24).

- There is nothing wrong with emphasizing a top-down view; however, [Christian school educators'] goal is to prepare students to achieve the ultimate design God has for them, whether that is a top-down or bottom-up influence.
- Clearly there is more work to be done within top-down influence, but as the *CES* clearly shows, [Christian schools graduates] are excelling at bottom-up influence.

As a Christian school parent, you already know the benefits of the educational investment you're making in your children. This study is a great reminder that you'll see a return on that investment long after your children graduate. And so will our society!

References

Pennings, Ray et al. 2011. *Cardus education survey*. Hamilton, ON: Cardus.
Scott, Philip. 2012. *Upon a solid foundation: The ACSI response to and expansion on the "Cardus Education Survey"*. Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI.



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