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CAPE outlook

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Study Finds Advantages for Students in Faith-Based Schools

Students in religious schools enjoy a significant academic advantage over their counterparts in traditional public schools and charter schools, according to findings from a meta-analysis of 90 studies on the effects of schools conducted by William Jeynes, senior fellow at the Witherspoon Institute in Princeton, New Jersey, and a professor at California State University, Long Beach. The study was published in issue 3 of volume 87 of the *Peabody Journal of Education*.

"The results indicate that attending private religious schools is associated with the highest level of academic achievement among the three school types, even when sophisticated controls are used to adjust for socioeconomic status," according to the report.

"I was quite surprised that students from charter schools did no better than their counterparts in traditional public schools," wrote Jeynes in an email message to CAPE. At the start of the study, he was expecting to see higher levels of performance from charters.

"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," said Jeynes. "Not only are they considerably more economically efficient, but their students obtain better results." He said the nation should "rethink its strategy of espousing charter schools and overlooking the benefits of faith-based education."

Time for Choice

One of the paper's conclusions is that it may be time to extend school choice to include the private sector. Jeynes told CAPE that because religious schools are so much more efficient than public schools, "states would save money by implementing programs that pay for children to attend these schools instead of more expensive

public ones." He said the meta-analysis "calls into question the current trajectory of school choice that emphasizes only public school choice, without due diligence in pursuing the inclusion of private religious schools."

Results

A meta-analysis looks at studies in a specific field and, employing sophisticated statistical techniques, identifies the effect size of each study and then calculates an overall average effect size for the set of studies.

Examining results from all 90 studies, Jeynes found that the average standardized test score for religious school students is .29 of a standard deviation higher than that for traditional public school (TPS) students, while the average score for charter school students is only .01 of a standard deviation higher. Converting the effect sizes into percentiles, the average standardized test score for students in faith-based schools is 11 percentile points higher than that for TPS students, while charter school students score essentially the same as their TPS counterparts.

In his communication with CAPE, Jeynes summarized the advantage this way: "Students who attend religious schools score at an academic level about 12 months ahead of their counterparts."

Jeynes also looked at only those studies employing "sophisticated controls" in their analyses (e.g., controls relating to socioeconomic status, race, and gender) and still found a positive effect size of .14

standard deviations for religious schools. For charter schools, the effect is negative (-.03). Jeynes told CAPE that even with the controls, the private school academic advantage is about seven months.

Another key finding in the study is that the achievement gap, as measured

both by ethnicity/race and socioeconomic status, is roughly 25 percent narrower in faith-based schools than in public schools, a fact that should capture the attention of policy makers who have been wrestling with this vexing problem for years. As the report puts it, "Americans should rejoice" that the gap is being bridged, regardless of where it's being bridged.

Although academic performance

was a key focus in the report, the study also examined student behavior and found an even larger advantage, or effect size, for religious schools. As Jeynes told CAPE, "Students who attend religious schools have fewer behavioral problems than their counterparts, even when adjusting for socioeconomic status, race, and gender." That translates into fewer gangs, less drugs, and greater racial harmony in religious schools than in public schools.

Why are students more successful in religious schools? Jeynes believes that such schools "have higher expectations of students and encourage them to take hard courses," adding that religious schools subscribe to the notion that "students are often capable of achieving more than they realize."

Meta-Analysis Key Findings

Compared to traditional and charter public schools, faith based schools have...

- a significant academic advantage
- narrower achievement gaps by race/ethnicity and income
- better student behavioral outcomes