



Religious Practice and Educational Attainment:

How Worship Influences Academic Success

written by:
**Patrick F.
Fagan,
Ph.D.**

OVER THE LAST DECADE, RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE HAS EXPANDED, AND NOW ENCOMPASSES SUCH AREAS AS HEALTH, OVERCOMING ADDICTIONS, REDUCING CRIME, AND REFORMING CRIMINALS. COVER STORIES IN POPULAR MAGAZINES HAVE BROUGHT SOME OF THIS RESEARCH TO PUBLIC NOTICE. FOR PUBLIC POLICY, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE IS EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT. EDUCATION IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED AS THE WAY TO MAINTAIN THE WELLBEING OF THOSE BORN INTO THE MIDDLE CLASS. IT IS ALSO A POWERFUL TOOL TO RAISE INDIVIDUALS OUT OF POVERTY. AS A RESULT, NATIONS HAVE DEVELOPED LONG-TERM EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THEIR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT. IF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE WERE TO HAVE A SIGNIFICANTLY POSITIVE ROLE IN EDUCATION, THEN THE PRACTICE OF RELIGION WOULD HAVE PROFOUND IMPLICATIONS FOR WORLD ECONOMIES AND SOCIETIES.

This article examines the effects of religious practice on educational performance, and the pathways by which religious practice achieves these effects, or how religious practice impacts educational success.

Educational Impact

For some time, a small but growing body of research has consistently indicated that the frequency of religious practice is directly and significantly correlated with academic outcomes and educational attainment. Several studies have shown that religiously involved students spend more time on their homework, work harder in school,¹ and achieve more as a result.²

Academic Performance. Religious attendance, a key indicator of the role of religion in a person's life, is strongly associated with academic performance. Analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (NLSAH) found that increased religious attendance correlates with higher grades.³ In one study, students who attended religious activities weekly or more frequently were found to have a GPA 14.4 percent higher than students who never attended.⁴ Frequent religious attendance also cor-

relates with lower dropout rates and greater school attachment.⁵ Looking specifically at math and reading scores, students who frequently attend religious services scored 2.32 points higher on tests in these subjects than their less religiously-involved peers⁶ (see figure 1).

Parents' religious attendance is also a significant indicator: one study found that Dutch students who held a strong "Christian worldview" and whose families attended religious services scored higher academically than those who did not report religious involvement.⁷

Social life that includes or is built around church functions ("religious socialization") and children's involvement in church activities are strong predictors of academic achievement as well. Children in Pentecostal families who have greater religious socialization also have increased levels of educational attainment, despite being at a lower socioeconomic level than peers in other denominations, and having a generally lower educational attainment compared to the rest of the population.⁸ Furthermore, those who become more religiously involved during high school increase their academic ranking.⁹ A study of Iowa families found that religiously involved eighth graders will have higher academic competence in the twelfth grade.¹⁰

Another study of undergraduates at a small secular liberal arts college found a similar association among college-age students. More than 75 percent of students who become more religious during their college years achieve above-average college performance.¹¹

Years of Schooling. Students who attend church weekly while growing up also have significantly more years of total schooling by their early thirties than peers who do not attend church at all. The benefits that students receive from weekly worship are equivalent to the benefits that come from a mother and a father that have three and four years of extra education, respectively.¹²

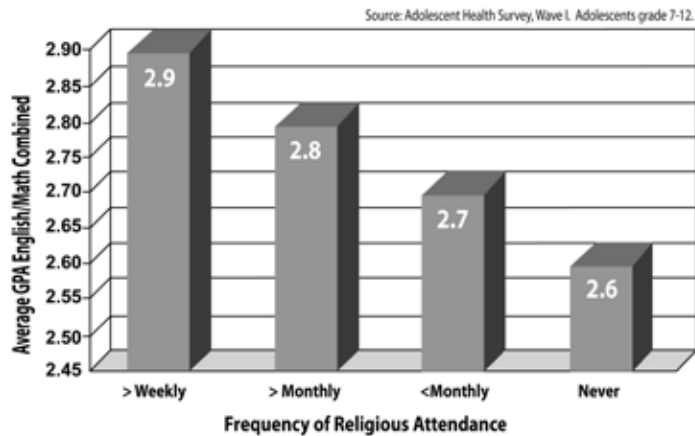
Christian Smith, director of the National Study of Youth and Religion and Professor of Sociology at Notre Dame, notes that the influence of church attendance and favorable perceptions of religion on "positive school attitudes" is evident from childhood, through late adolescence, and into college.¹³

Low frequency of religious attendance strongly correlates to a higher public school dropout rate. One study found that 19.5 percent of students who infrequently worshiped drop out of school, compared to only 9.1 percent of students who attended worship often.¹⁴

Impact on Disadvantaged Youth

Religious practice seems to benefit the education of the poor even more than it does that of advantaged children. An analysis of the NLSAH found

Figure 1 - "GPA English-Math Score" by Religious Attendance



that church attendance strengthens educational progress among children in high-poverty neighborhoods.¹⁵ Mark Regnerus, Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, reports that church attendance also has a more positive impact on the academic performance of youths in lower-income neighborhoods than on the performance of their peers in more affluent neighborhoods (see Figure 2).¹⁶

Regnerus draws attention to the fact that religion for the advantaged is only one resource among many. By contrast, for the poor, the effect of religious practice is significant because it is one of the few robust positive influences in their lives.¹⁷

The same study also found that "[a]s the level of poverty rises within the neighborhood, the relationship between church attendance and being on-track in school becomes more positive, indicating a uniquely protective influence of church attendance among youth in more impoverished neighborhoods when compared with their devout counterparts in more prosperous neighborhoods (See Figure 3)."¹⁸

Other studies confirm religion's beneficial effects on the academic performance of children in urban

Figure 2 - "Interaction Between Church Attendance and Level of Neighborhood Poverty on Academic On-Track Performance"

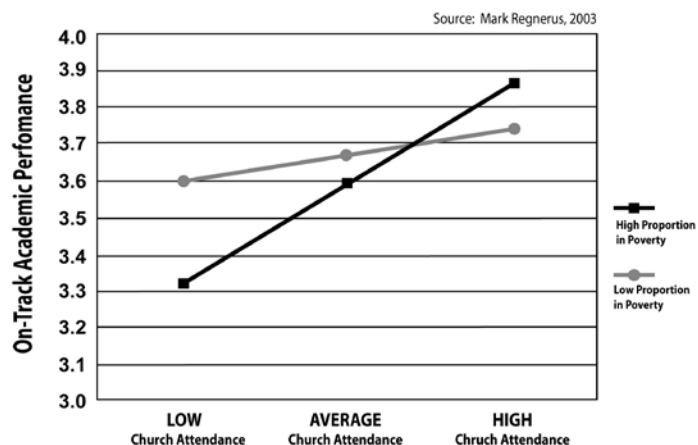
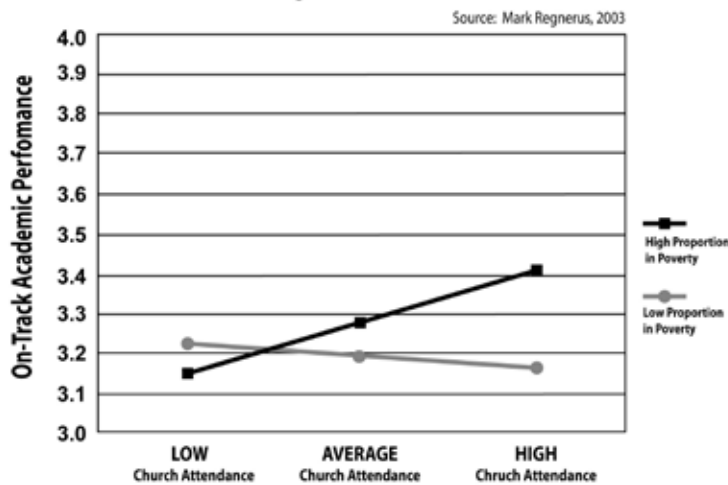


Figure 3 – “Neighborhood Poverty and Academic On-Track Performance”
after controlling for Wave I On-track status



communities. William Jeynes, Professor of Education at California State University Long Beach, found that “very religious” high school adolescents from urban communities fared better academically than non-religious adolescents. Furthermore, religiosity has a greater impact on educational outcomes for urban youth than for non-urban youth.¹⁹ One possible reason for this effect is that religious organizations are more accessible in urban areas. Religion also acts as a check against the distractions of urban neighborhoods that obstruct educational achievement.²⁰

Spiritual and religious involvement affects educational outcomes more than income does. One analysis of tenth grade students found that, for both black and white students, the impact of pro-social values was stronger than the effect of socioeconomic status on reading and math proficiency (44 percent greater for white students and 51 percent greater for black students).²¹ The study also showed that holding religious values was associated with higher math scores for black students.²² According to another study, socialization within a religious context has a greater positive effect on the educational attainment of black youths than either family structure or denominational affiliation.²³

How Religious Practice Impacts Education

The beneficial effects of religious practice on education are transmitted to the individual student through various pathways within the family of origin, and through peers, the church community, and the extended community.

Values and Norms. Internalized values and norms have a significant impact on math and reading scores, both directly²⁴ and indirectly, through the effect that values have on other school-related

activities such as homework, watching television, and reading.²⁵ Just as secular “personal morality” has a positive impact on school attendance,²⁶ so do “religious values,” which are among the variables that influence behaviors outside of school (such as watching television less, doing homework more, reading, and working for pay). All of these, in turn, affect high-school students’ achievement.²⁷

Values also help form an internal “locus of control,” which is the presence of established habits of discipline and balance in matters of work and initiative. Sandra Hanson, Professor of Sociology at Catholic University of America, and Alan Ginsburg, Director of the Policy and Program Studies Service within the U.S. Department of Education, explain that “[a] high internal locus of control refers to the belief that one’s action and efforts, rather than fate or luck” shape the result of one’s efforts. This belief, in turn, is linked to “the effort that students put forth and the importance they assign to working hard.”²⁸

In a panel study of Iowa families, Glen Elder, Professor of Sociology and Psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Rand Conger, Professor of Psychology, Human Growth, and Family Studies at the University of California-Davis, conclude that “[r]egular participation in church services and programs strengthened self-concepts of academic achievement, work habits, and discipline.”²⁹

Skills and Habits. Certain habits correlate with good school performance, such as attending school regularly and spending more time on homework. Religious practice helps form these habits, as an analysis of inner-city children who escape poverty illustrates: “Church-going invariably raises the amount of time a youth spends on productive activity [working, searching for work, traveling to work, school-going, housework, and reading].”³⁰

Religious attendance also appears to boost social skills: Elder and Conger report from the Iowa longitudinal study that religiously-involved eighth graders have greater social skills in the twelfth grade.³¹ These studies all agree that religious practice (and all that comes with it) delivers highly valued habits and skills that enhance social life, study, and earnings.

Behavior. One study analyzed the characteristics of those who escape poverty and found that church attendance powerfully reduces socially deviant activity.³² Another showed that while religious practice has a positive protective influence across all income levels, it proves particularly effective in engendering educational resilience among at-risk youths.³³

Even among low-risk, middle-class adolescents, religious attendance has a significant effect on minimizing behavioral risks. One study found that adolescents who attended weekly religious services were less likely to use drugs or alcohol, to engage in delinquent behavior, to get in trouble at school or to

have poor grades when compared with their peers who attended church less than monthly or not at all.³⁴ For many of these youth, church attendance “reinforces messages about working hard and staying out of trouble, orients [youth] toward a positive future, and builds a transferable skill-set of commitments and routines.”³⁵

For youth from more advantaged homes and communities, it is the *importance* they place on religion which has the greater impact on positive behavioral outcomes, rather than church attendance alone. For advantaged students, a high “importance of religion” score reduces the likelihood of alcohol use, drug use, delinquency, and problem behaviors at school.³⁶

Family Influence. The family helps to generate much of the individual human capital reviewed above by transferring values, developing a sense of autonomy and internal locus of control, and by passing on expectations that children will develop their talents and habits.³⁷ Chandra Muller and Christopher Ellison, both Professors of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, found that the social capital obtained from family and community largely, though not entirely, explains the effect of religious practice on educational attainment.³⁸ Two studies³⁹ found that religious socialization clearly corresponds to the educational attainment of younger blacks. These beneficial effects of religious practice on vulnerable youth increase still more when the at-risk children have grown up in two-parent families.⁴⁰ Within the religious family, parental cohesion adds to these benefits, while conflict diminishes them (*see Figure 4*).⁴¹

Parental Expectations. In a study of secular academic performance, Hanson and Ginsburg found that parental educational expectation was among the factors that have the strongest impact on adolescents’ high-school outcomes.⁴² Smith, moreover, found that parents’ church attendance increased the probability that their adolescent children knew more clearly what their parents expected and that their parents would be upset if they were sexually involved, used drugs, drank alcohol, got into fights, or skipped school.⁴³

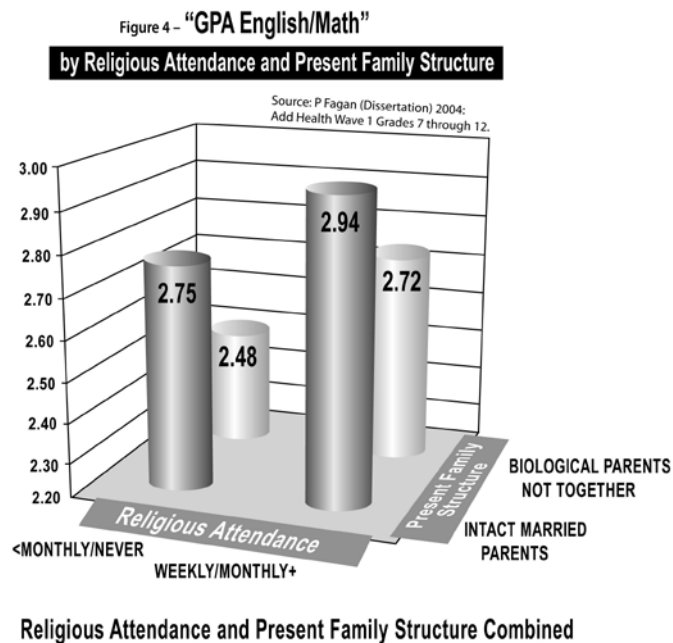
Marriage of Parents. Marital stability is another form of human capital that advances educational attainment, while its opposite—divorce—hinders it.^{44 45} Religious practice plays its part here also. Religious heterogamy (when the spouses belong to different denominations) increases the likelihood of divorce,⁴⁶ while homogamy (when both spouses are members of the same denomination) increases the likelihood of marital stability and happiness.^{47 48}

Interestingly, Carmel Chiswick, Professor of Economics at the University of Illinois at Chicago, found that “[p]eople with high levels of religious human capital tend to select spouses who also have high levels, forming family units for which the home production of religious education is more

“While religious practice has a positive protective influence across all income levels, it proves particularly effective in engendering educational resilience among at-risk youths.”

efficient.”⁴⁹ This phenomenon of high homogamy and practice seems to be operating in the American home-schooling movement.⁵⁰ It also leads to less conflict and greater happiness for couples,⁵¹ as well as better relationships between children and parents.⁵² In turn, this adds to family satisfaction, which has a larger effect than any of the religious variables in protecting against risky behaviors that undermine educational attainment.⁵³ Such indirect effects of religion, mediated through the parents, may be stronger than the direct effect of religion when practiced by the child.

The Church Community. The strong social bonds of religious groups can supplement the resources available to children, especially those in large families, helping them to achieve higher levels of education.⁵⁴ Participation in church activities benefits children in all neighborhoods of different income-levels, though it particularly benefits children in





In addition, religious schooling has a positive long-term impact on adolescents' religiosity, especially in high school, and if students receive a considerable amount of classroom instruction in religion.⁶¹ Low-income students in schools that “stress academics and religion, possess high student morale, and encourage the centrality of religion and the development of community of faith” tend to be more committed to their faith and church than their counterparts in schools that do not have such emphases.⁶²

Conclusion

Overall, religious practice boosts educational performance and attainment, especially for low-income individuals. Regular religious attendance can increase the internalization of moral norms and values, strengthen an “internal locus of control” and habits of discipline. Religious practice, by stabilizing parental marriage and by making family life happier, increases levels of educational attainment. Close ties within congregations expose children to positive models that forge paths to success, especially for disadvantaged youth. For inner-city youth, religious attendance may provide powerful protection against delinquent behavior and thus aid in educational attainment. For the poor, church congregations are one of the few forms of human capital available to them and thus are especially advantageous for them.

When scholars more fully study these different impacts of religion, they may find that the combined, subtle, multifaceted, deeply embedded nature of the religious influence on human development is quite substantial. Religious practice has a wide-ranging capacity to boost the academic potential of young people, especially for those who need it most. Though religious practice must be engaged in voluntarily for it to produce effective educational results, those entrusted with the public welfare have an interest in protecting and promoting it, if only because of its utility to society at large, as illustrated here in its impact on education. ❖

This is a condensed version of a longer report released jointly by the Family Research Council and the North Carolina Family Policy Council. Read the full report online at ncfamily.org.

low-income neighborhoods.⁵⁵ Interviews with black college students found that their religious communities fostered academic success by providing role models and mentors.⁵⁶

In their longitudinal study of Iowa students, Elder and Conger explain the effect of the church community on adolescent attitudes, expectations and academic achievement:

Surrounded by adults and peers who care about worthy accomplishments, religiously-involved youth tend to score higher than other adolescents on school achievement, social success, confidence in self, and [parents' report of their] personal maturity...⁵⁷

Religious Schools. Worthy of its own in-depth review, a significant literature exists detailing the strength of Catholic education in advancing the academic achievement of its pupils.⁵⁸ One study described the supportive network of such parochial and private schools as equivalent to a “social neighborhood” that reduces youths' risks and promotes academic achievement.⁵⁹ Throughout a large body of literature investigating the comparative educational effectiveness of religious and secular schools, findings such as the following are typical: “Roman Catholic students in Catholic-controlled schools are more likely to plan for college than Catholic pupils in public schools—even if Catholics are in the majority at the public school.”⁶⁰

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Patrick F. Fagan, Ph.D., is senior fellow and director of the Marriage and Religion Research Institute at the Family Research Council. For a footnoted version of this article, please visit ncfamily.org.

- analyzed 9,200 youth from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. They also found that each unit increase in church attendance decreased the likelihood of getting poor grades by 13 percent.
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