

NAVIGATING

THE *CARDUS* EDUCATION SURVEY

BY BRIAN MODARELLI

For several years, I enjoyed serving on the senior pastoral staff of a large and thriving evangelical church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The church's cast of young pastors met together frequently for unfiltered dialogue. During one particular gathering, the youth pastor said, "Hey, Brian, a friend of mine conducted his own survey of a recent graduating class from [a substantial South Florida Christian school]. He told me that only 3 percent of this group of graduates were still going to church."

My first reaction was, "Now, c'mon! Most federal prison release programs will aggregate a stronger church attendance rate than 3 percent." So, I fired back with numbers I knew. I had graduated from a different Christian school in South Florida, and I was aware of eleven members of my graduating class who were engaged in full-time Christian service. I was also rather sure that a quite sizeable percentage of the friends with

whom I had graduated were still active and growing in their faith.

The bottom line was that we both had our separate standpoints on Christian education and our unique perspectives of its outcomes. Moreover, we both had our makeshift, nonscientific data to loosely support our perceptions. In the end, the conversation reached no conclusion, and we were each forced to concede that the plural of *anecdote* is not *facts*.

The world of Christian education has primarily relied on our own collections of vignettes to substantiate whether we are or are not fulfilling our missions. This is not due to any lack of interest on our part. It is simply too expensive and too time consuming to conduct the full-bodied and statistically robust research required to collect the right amount of randomly selected data and painstakingly conduct the analysis of the data to produce a product that can stand up to scholarly review. It is true that we have found insights into the spiritual lives of our nation's youth through the research of organizations like The Barna Group and the scholarly work of Christian Smith. However, our nation's Christian schooling movement has been left without hard research on how closely our graduates reflect our schools' stated missions. Until now.

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THE CARDUS EDUCATION SURVEY

The *Cardus Education Survey (CES)* was designed with the intention of both defending Christian education and improving it. In 2007 Cardus, a Canadian think tank and research group, hosted a symposium of 37 leaders, including representation from virtually all Christian school groups in North America. They examined these questions: “Is Christian education having the lasting impact our schools say it has? And if so, how do we know?” Upon reflection, the symposium participants unanimously agreed that very little objective data was available to substantiate the claims contained in school mission statements.

Following the symposium, Cardus launched a million-dollar research project. The project was headed by Ray Pennings, senior fellow and director of research at Cardus. Mr. Pennings and a highly capable team of researchers began the investigation with the mindset that the overarching motivations of Christian schooling were so noble and so worthwhile that the alignment between those motivations and the outcomes of Christian schooling deserved rigorous examination. Stated another way, the team asked whether or not Christian schools are getting the outcomes at which they aim.

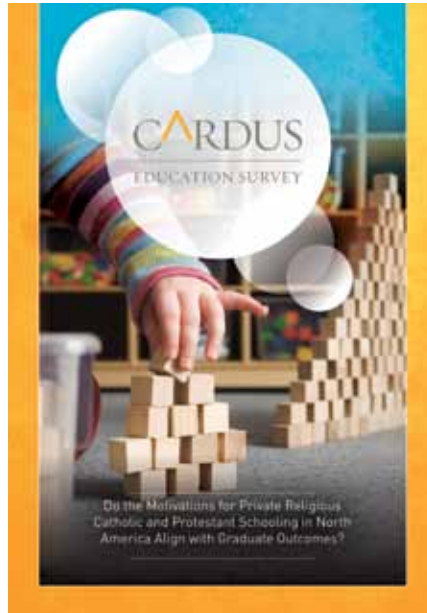
The *Cardus Education Survey* was designed with a vision for multiple end users, including the following:

- policy makers and the public, to better understand the nature and outcomes of Christian education (including the debunking of commonly held stereotypes about Christian schools)
- Christian school leaders, to identify areas of school improvement
- donors, to validate their resolve to support Christian schooling
- parents, to make better-informed decisions when choosing a school

The Cardus report was released in August of 2011, and it has already proven to be a catalyst for dynamic dialogue inside and outside the Christian school community. ACSI has embraced the Cardus efforts, and it is currently using an oversampling of data from ACSI graduates to conduct further association-specific research.

OVERARCHING RESULTS

Like a best-of-the-70s CD, the *Cardus Education Survey* is sure to contain many elements that you will love, and other portions that you will find rather disappointing. The *CES* states the following in its executive summary:



In contrast to the popular stereotypes portraying Christian schools as promoting a socially fragmented, anti-intellectual, politically radical, and militantly right-winged lifestyle, this comprehensive study reveals a very different picture of the Christian school graduate. Compared to their public school, Catholic school, and non-religious private school peers, Protestant Christian school graduates are uniquely compliant, generous, outwardly-focused individuals who stabilize their communities by their uncommon commitment to their families, their churches, and larger society. (Pennings et al. 2011, 5)

The report continues by painting a picture of the Christian school graduate as an irreplaceable, reliable, salt-of-the-earth community member. Furthermore, the report notes that Christian school alumni bear witness to higher levels of thankfulness and hope for tomorrow than graduates from other types of schools.

While Protestant schools are providing an atmosphere rich with opportunities for student spiritual development, Christian school graduates reported less-flattering postsecondary outcomes within the academic realm. The *CES* noted that Christian school alumni are not advancing into higher education or persisting through universities with any more regularity than their public school peers. Likewise, Christian school graduates were more likely to attend less selective universities than their prep school and Catholic school counterparts.

As with any research, we hold a natural tendency to embrace the findings that are flattering toward our preconceptions, and we challenge the studies that offer antagonistic views toward our personal bents. With that said, it is important to note the following:



1. The *CES* was not designed to describe any particular Christian school. The findings from the study are meant to describe a general set of outcomes from the entire population of American Christian schools. We are fully aware that each Christian school is somewhat unique, and each presses toward its own mix of student expectations.

2. The study was not designed to specifically describe the public school down the street, nor the Catholic or prep school around the corner.

3. Minimizing or dismissing the findings of the study will not render the results less valid.

METHODOLOGY

The *Cardus Education Survey* is a compilation of five coordinated studies, conducted by five different universities. The primary study was quantitative and was conducted by the University of Notre Dame. Four qualitative studies were also commissioned to add context and supplementary perspectives to the numerical data. The four qualitative studies were conducted through Trinity Western University, Southeastern University, Boston University, and Covenant College.

The primary quantitative study utilized online surveys to administer a 60-minute, Internet-based questionnaire to approximately 2,000 graduates, ages 24–39, of American high schools. The survey included questions about accomplishments in educational and occupational arenas, participation in civic and political matters, and development of spiritual disciplines. The survey also requested information about marriage, family, and psychosocial outcomes pertaining to the respondents' early adult years. Demographic information from the respondents' high school experiences was also collected, including characteristics of family backgrounds. At the end of the survey, the questionnaire asked if the former high school student had attended a public, Catholic, Christian, nonsectarian private, or homeschool. From the onset, the study was designed to control for 30 variables known to have an impact on student development, in order to hone in on the particular "school effect" for each independent variable.

It should be noted that ACSI commissioned *Cardus* to oversample graduates of American ACSI schools so that a separate analysis of alumni from within the association could be conducted.

In addition to the survey of graduates, *Cardus* conducted a random survey of approximately 200 Catholic and Protestant school administrators. These principals and heads of school were given a 45-minute online survey to ultimately assist the researchers with a deeper understanding of the aspirations, strategies, and challenges of today's Christian schools.

THE BIG QUESTION

The foundational question upon which the *Cardus Education Study* was built was, "To what extent are the motivations and outcomes of Christian schools aligned in academic, spiritual, and cultural domains?"

Since our motivations are typically housed and translated within our schools' mission statements, a review of various Christian school mission statements would seem to offer a solid benchmark for our intentions. The following are samples of mission statements from well-respected Christian schools in the United States.

To assist Christian parents by helping equip students to embrace biblical truth, strive for academic excellence, and model Christ-like leadership to influence their homes, churches, and communities for Christ.
—Prestonwood Christian Academy (Plano, Texas)

Westminster seeks to glorify God by providing an excellent education that equips students to live extraordinary lives for Jesus Christ.
—Westminster Schools of Augusta (Augusta, Georgia)

The mission of Lakeland Christian School is to educate students in the light of God's Word and equip them for a lifetime of learning, leadership, service, and worship.
—Lakeland Christian School (Lakeland, Florida)

The mission of Boston Trinity Academy is to educate students on the basis of a Christian worldview and to promote high academic achievement and character development founded on the love of Jesus Christ. Boston Trinity Academy actively recruits a student body that reflects Boston's richly diverse communities and is committed to the proposition that a strong faith culture and a demanding academic program can unite a student body with social, economic, and racial differences. In partnership with parents and the community,

the Academy seeks to produce graduates distinguished by their intellect, integrity, service, and moral vision.

—Boston Trinity Academy (Boston, Massachusetts)

To glorify God by providing quality, Christ-centered education dedicated to developing discerning leaders who are spiritually, personally, and academically prepared to impact their world.

—Cascade Christian School, (Puyallup, Washington)

Whether long or short, and with varying manners of eloquence, all of these mission statements clearly express spiritual, cultural, and academic claims. Hence, the three-stranded CES research aim appears to be highly consistent with its purpose.

THE VOICE OF SCHOOL LEADERS

Approximately 200 school administrators from Catholic and Protestant schools were surveyed to further distinguish the aims of the two school types. They were asked to rank their emphases on 13 different areas of student preparation (figure 1). With few exceptions, Catholic and Protestant school leaders cited almost identical levels of importance for the 13 categories (Pennings et al. 2011, 26).

A follow-up question asked the administrators to name their single top priority among the list of 13 intended student outcomes (figure 2). At this point separation of intent emerged; Catholic schools value university preparation and volunteering, and Protestant schools place the highest emphasis on family (Pennings et al. 2011, 26).

School emphases (averages)

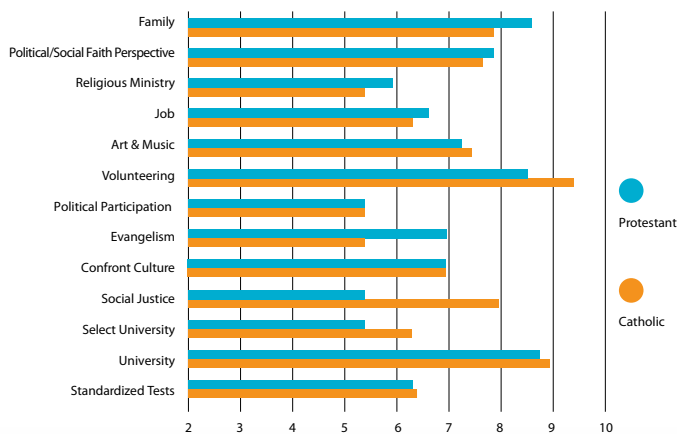


FIGURE 1: Administrators' reported school emphases placed on preparing students in the above areas.

Top ranked emphasis of school

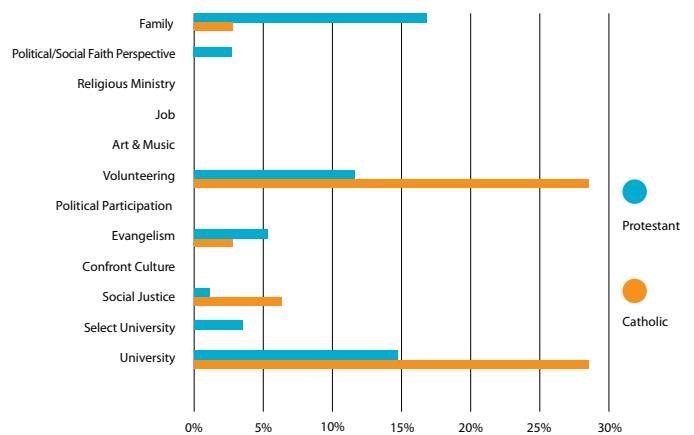


FIGURE 2: Administrators' reported top ranked school emphasis placed on preparing students in the above areas.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS VALUE UNIVERSITY PREPARATION AND VOLUNTEERING, AND PROTESTANT SCHOOLS PLACE THE HIGHEST EMPHASIS ON FAMILY.

THE VOICES OF ALUMNI

Other articles within this edition of *CSE* will specifically address each of the three categories in more detail:

- "Spiritual Formation" by Todd R. Marrah on page 18.
- "Cultural Engagement" by Heather Dawn Smith on page 20.
- "Academic Development" by Gary B. Arnold on page 22.

The following sections offer a short summary of the *CES* findings for each of the spiritual, cultural, and academic strands of the study. (It should be noted that the *Cardus Education Survey* used the terms Christian school and Protestant school interchangeably.)



SPIRITUAL FORMATION

For Protestant schools, the findings related to the spiritual formation of our graduates should be highly encouraging. When compared with graduates of public, Catholic, and nonsectarian private schools, Christian school graduates reported a significantly higher level of church attendance, Bible reading, and prayer. Christian school alumni also reported the strongest held convictions when asked about the authority of church leadership, the infallibility of the Bible, and the acceptance of morality based upon an absolute standard. They are more convinced that premarital sex, cohabitation before marriage, and divorce are morally wrong.

Graduates of Christian schools donate significantly more to their churches and to other religious causes than their counterparts, even though Protestant school graduates make less money as adults. They participate in more missions and relief trips than other young adults. Finally, Christian school alumni stated that they are highly apt to seek jobs that fulfill their calling, even if that career path earns less money.

In virtually all of the positive outcomes related to spiritual development, the isolated effect of the Protestant school proved to be positive and substantial. Clearly, Christian schools are getting what they emphasize—a biblical worldview and a valuing of the family.

An analysis of the numerous charts in this particular section of the *Cardus* study reveals that the spiritual formation results for both Christian schools and home-schools seemed to be quite similar. Interestingly, the results for Catholic schools and nonreligious schools also seemed to have a very high correlation.

[Read more about this topic on page 18.](#)



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Christian school graduates marry earlier, have more children, and divorce less than most of their peers from other schools. They report stronger feelings of preparedness for personal relationships, including marriage. Additionally, they hold a clearer sense of direction in life, and they more passionately express feelings of hope and thankfulness.

While the graduates of Protestant schools are highly involved in their churches, they are equally uninvolved in the ambit of politics. They report low participation in political causes and donate considerably less to political campaigns than do others their age. Overall, they have developed a general lack of interest in politics and public affairs. An analysis of the school effect on these phenomena reveals that the Christian schools themselves are a major contributing factor to the disengaged nature of their alumni.

The stark contrast between the Christian school alumni's towering engagement in their churches with their tepid involvement in political life suggests that our schools view the creation of "world changers" singularly through the church, and particularly with minimized activity in the political sphere. The *CES* findings reveal that Christian schools tend to focus on a sound *critique of* political action, rooted in a biblical worldview, rather than on *involvement in* political action. That is, our schools might skillfully analyze the decisions of the United States Supreme Court, without encouraging our brightest students to seek an eventual appointment to it. With that said, it is interesting to note that the United States Supreme Court currently seats three Jewish, six Catholic, and zero Protestant justices.

[Read more about this topic on page 20.](#)



ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

While the spiritual outcomes of Protestant schools clearly outshine those of their Catholic counterparts, the opposite is true in the academic arena, where Catholic schools generally have higher outcomes across the board. Graduation requirements for both school types are quite similar. However, Catholic schools offer double the number of Advanced Placement courses, draw more visits from college recruiters, and matriculate more students into selective universities than do Christian schools. Catholic school students also persist through more years of postsecondary education and attain advanced degrees with greater regularity.

PROTESTANT SCHOOL GRADUATES ARE NOT DOING POORLY IN THEIR ACADEMIC ATTAINMENT. RATHER, THEY ARE SIMPLY NOT SETTING THEMSELVES APART FROM THEIR PUBLIC SCHOOL PEERS.

Protestant school graduates are not doing poorly in their academic attainment. Rather, they are simply not setting themselves apart from their public school peers, and are lagging behind their Catholic school and nonreligious school counterparts.

Read more about this topic on page 22.

CONCLUSION

Surely a multitude of tangential research will be launched from the baseline data that were collected from the *CES*, as numerous questions were raised by the findings. The flattering conclusions from the spiritual development facet of the report, the mixed results from the cultural engagement arena, and the somewhat unflattering inferences from the academic realm are indications that American Protestant schools can clearly declare a measure of success, as well as seek targeted improvement.

The fact that school outcomes correlated so well with the stated emphases of the school leadership naturally raises a pressing question. Are our evangelical schools able to significantly increase our emphasis on academics and cultural engagement without losing our distinctively stronger thrust toward spiritual development?

The full report of the *Cardus Education Survey* is available at www.cardus.ca/store/publications. Schools that wish to utilize the *CES* online survey to collect their own site-specific data may do so by contacting Dan Postma at dpostma@cardus.ca.

Reference

Pennings, Ray et al. 2011. *Cardus education survey*. Hamilton, ON: Cardus.

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