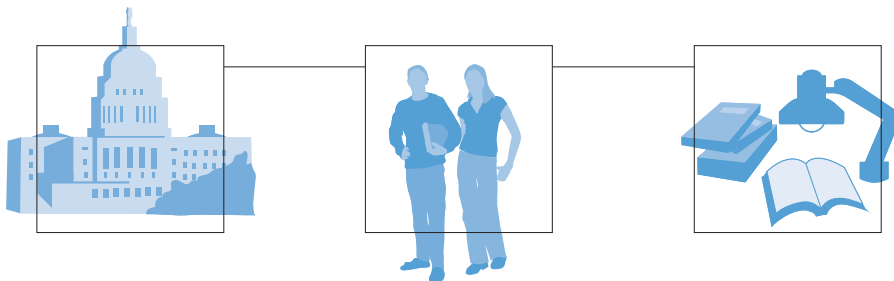


# Does Religious Participation Help Keep Adolescents in School?

**By Nancy Augustine Gardner**  
**June 2004**

BRIDGING YOUTH POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH



AMERICAN YOUTH POLICY FORUM



## American Youth Policy Forum

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## Executive Summary

Many recent studies, both popular and academic, have focused attention on the life chances of children. There is particular concern about the lingering effects of disadvantages experienced during childhood, such as family instability, neighborhood instability, and the inadequacy of local institutions. These factors are thought to work together to ensure that poor families stay poor, and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds carry those disadvantages with them to adulthood. Numerous studies have shown the importance of various aspects of parental achievements and family life, household stability, and neighborhood/school characteristics. Generally overlooked, however, is whether a child's association with a religious institution (church, synagogue, mosque or other house of worship) can contribute to his or her success. Religious participation should make a difference because it (1) provides opportunities for congregants to acquire skills and attributes that better enable them to succeed at school; (2) provides a context for the development of social contacts that can enhance informal information-gathering; and (3) improves personal well-being. Teens also benefit from (4) exposure to positive role models; (5) relationships with adults outside of the family; and (6) diversion from potentially risky activities. Participation in secular activities is also expected to promote the success of teens, for similar reasons.

Statistical modeling using the National Educational Longitudinal Survey – 1988 (NELS 88) reveals that most forms of religious participation contribute to on-time graduation from high school and total years of educational attainment. These findings persist when the sample is limited to poor youth or minority youth, although the nature of the association differs somewhat. Secular participation, including athletic participation, is also associated with successful outcomes, as are other family, individual and contextual characteristics.

Legal requirements governing the separation of church and state precludes policy that directly promotes religious participation. Nonetheless, policy makers can help religious institutions by removing regulatory obstacles and seek opportunities to collaborate with religious institutions in pursuit of youth development goals.

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## I. Introduction

**M**any recent studies, both popular and academic, have focused attention on the life chances of children. There is particular concern about the lingering effects of disadvantages experienced during childhood, such as family instability, neighborhood instability, and the inadequacy of local institutions. These factors are thought to work together to ensure that poor families stay poor, and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds carry those disadvantages with them to adulthood.

A growing subset of these studies focuses on the children that are able to overcome the disadvantages of their youth to later become at least minimally “successful,” in terms of completing high school, enrolling in college, joining the labor force, and earning wages sufficient to support a family. Although the specific findings vary from study to study, the key factors that are typically found to play a role in achieving success are various aspects of parental achievements and family life, household stability, and neighborhood/school characteristics.

Numerous studies have also examined the role of extracurricular activities and other forms of group association in promoting the success of children. Generally overlooked, however, is whether a child’s association with a religious institution (church, synagogue, mosque or other house of worship) can contribute to his or her success.

The purpose of this study is to compare the role of “religious” and “secular” participation during the adolescent years in promoting educational “success,” defined here as on-time graduation from high school and total years of educational attainment, especially for poor and minority children. “Religious participation” includes participation in *non-worship* activities through a religious institution, such as youth group, volunteering, or classes. “Secular participation” includes engagement in extracurricular activities and association with non-school organizations that are not religious in nature. A subset of secular participation is involvement in organized sports.

With respect to religious participation specifically, the purpose of this study is not to examine the role of belief in a higher power per se or adherence to

particular religious tenets. While certain religious beliefs or the strength of religious beliefs may influence an individual’s attitudes and behaviors, which in turn may influence his or her prospects for success, these factors are beyond the feasible and appropriate influence of public policy and therefore beyond the scope of this paper. Religiosity, denomination and attendance at worship services are treated as “control” variables. Including these variables as controls allows the analyst to sort out these influences from the associational influences of religious participation.

The primary research questions are:

1. Does religious participation during high school, controlling for other characteristics of the adolescent’s life, contribute to completing high school on time and total years of educational attainment?
2. Does secular participation during high school, controlling for other characteristics of the adolescent’s life, contribute to completing high school on time and total years of educational attainment?
3. Do the above effects differ for poor and minority adolescents?

## II. Why Should Religious Participation Make a Difference?

Like schools, families and communities, religious institutions implicitly make investments in children and other congregants. Peterson (1992), Verba, Schlozman et al. (1995), Brown and Gary (1991), and Schneider (2003) contend that worshippers gain certain skills directly as a byproduct of more active modes of religious attachment.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Peterson (1992) and Verba, Schlozman et al. (1995) sought to explain the higher rates of at least some forms of political participation observed among individuals who attend worship services, rather than socioeconomic outcomes. Djupe and Grant (2001) disagreed, providing evidence that people bring their skills into the church from their secular lives, rather than developing those skills at church.

For instance, parishioners may be called upon to write letters, run meetings, resolve sources of disagreement within the organization, plan events, communicate with others outside of their religious institution, budget resources, and speak in public (Smith 2003)<sup>2</sup>. These activities may allow the individual to build communication, organizational, interpersonal and leadership skills that can be useful in the pursuit of education. Volunteer work, which is often facilitated by religious organizations, can bolster students' attachment to school by reinforcing the lessons learned in the classroom.

Religious participation can also facilitate the accumulation of "softer" human capital skills that promote school readiness. These include building the individual's capacity for self-regulation and helping the individual to learn to abide by standards and rules (Cook 2000). Religious participation may reinforce "the acquisition of traits such as honesty, diligence, and reliability [through] monitoring and sanctions by [religious] group members" (Tomes 1985, p 246).

As local institutions and as gathering places, churches, synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship provide a setting for "social capital" (Putnam 2000). Social capital has been defined as "the stocks of social trust, norms, and networks that people can draw upon in order to solve common problems" (Lang and Hornburg 1998.). Association with others through a religious organization can facilitate contacts and networking with individuals of similar or very different socioeconomic status, depending on the characteristics of the congregation. Opportunities for leadership within the congregation can also give the individual access to leaders in other milieus (Wuthnow 2002). Adolescents in particular benefit from building relationships with adults, and participating in an organization on a similar basis as adults (Smith 2003).

In addition, there is evidence that individuals who

attend worship services enjoy a heightened sense of psychological well-being (Hadaway 1978; Ellison, Boardman et al. 2001; Brown and Gary 1991; Sojourner and Kushner 1997; Ellison 1993), improved health, possibly due to "cleaner living," (Najman, Williams et al. 1988; Eng, Hatch et al. 1985; Iannaccone 1998) and greater longevity (Hummer 1999). Parents may take their children to worship services and other religious activities in order to instill the "right" attitudes and behaviors, convey their culture and beliefs, expose children to positive role models, and encourage their children to engage in a wholesome activity (Dijkstra and Peschar 1996; Bridges and Moore 2002; Werner and Smith 1992; Youniss, McLellan et al. 1999; King 2001).

### III. Why Should Secular Participation Make a Difference?

Adolescents who participate in extracurricular or other group activities are thought to have an edge over other students as a result of their participation because it diverts them from detrimental activities, fosters attachment to school, helps them to hone time management skills and other competencies, builds confidence, applies classroom lessons in a realistic setting, teaches them to work with others, and bolsters their own educational expectations (Parkerson 2001; O'Brien and Rollefson 1995; Barber, Eccles et al. 2001; Fredricks, Alfeld-Liro et al. 2002; Holland and Andre 1987). By providing a setting for regular interaction, groups and organizations can promote relationships between youth and caring, knowledgeable adults, which in turn can foster educational success by promoting trust and commitment (American Youth Policy Forum 1999), thereby deterring disengagement. On the other hand, participation may actually detract from some educational outcomes, particularly if participation diverts (individual and institutional) resources away from more productive activities (Eide and Ronan 2001; Fejgin 1994).

<sup>2</sup>Specifically, "religious youth may find themselves organizing a car wash, facilitating a Bible study, arranging a trip to Israel, sitting in as a youth delegate on a church committee, serving as altar boy or girl, helping to coordinate a social justice march, assisting in a tutoring program, planning a retreat, sitting in on a congregational meeting, reading scripture in a service, and much more," (Smith 2003, p. 23.)

Participation in groups and organizations can also foster personal development through formal and informal opportunities to build competency and confidence and to learn from both purposeful and incidental interactions among participants (Parkerson 2001; Landers and Landers 1978). Participation in non-athletic activities has been associated with lower incidence of substance abuse (Barber, Eccles et al. 2001), and lower delinquency rates (even when controlling for athletic participation; Landers and Landers 1978; Holland and Andre 1987). However, at least one study suggests that participation in extracurricular or other activities does not deter teen parenthood (Doebler 1998).

An important subset of secular participation activities is athletics. Broh (2002) suggests three mechanisms through which athletic participation may foster academic achievement. First, participating in sports may instill values that promote success (such as a work ethic, respect for authority, and perseverance). Second, success in high school sports may also provide access to a group of high achieving friends, which in turn promotes achievement. Finally, participation in sports may build human capital by promoting social ties among students, parents and schools. Other researchers have emphasized the influence of teaching athletes how to follow rules and set goals, building character, teaching participants how to operate as part of a team, increasing students' interest in and identification with school, providing an incentive to keep grades up to maintain eligibility, and providing an incentive to stay in school in the hope of being able to play in college (Loveless 2002; Eide and Ronan 2001; Snyder and Spreitzer 1990; Fredricks, Alfeld-Liro et al. 2002; Fejgin 1994; Marsh 1993; O'Brien and Rollefson 1995). Educational success associated with sports participation may also accrue from reputation; college admissions officers and potential employers may take sports participation as a signal that an adolescent has some desirable qualities that will help them succeed, without necessarily seeing actual evidence that the adolescent possesses such qualities (Loveless 2002; Ewing 1995).

#### IV. Data and Methodology

In the strictest sense, a causal relationship between one or more factors and an observed outcome can never be proven. Researchers can use established theory to speculate on the nature and effectiveness of the mechanisms that allow one variable to have an impact on another; such speculation is a critical basis for study. Sections II and III make the theoretical case that various forms of participation can be transformative to adolescents.

Yet even if the theoretical argument is found to be persuasive, a second question remains, and that is whether there truly is an association between certain factors and observed outcomes. Statistical modeling can shed light on a hypothesized association by revealing whether a relationship exists and then persists after controlling for background characteristics. Simple bivariate relationships between participation and educational outcomes (not shown) establish that a relationship exists. More complex models that include many control variables allow the analyst to assert that the relationship persists even after accounting for underlying differences in family and individual characteristics of adolescents (that may vary across individuals with religious participation).

To explore the association between participation and success, and to compare the roles of religious and secular participation, a series of statistical models are developed. These models utilize the results of a longitudinal survey that provides a wide range of background data on a nationally representative sample of adolescents.

The data set chosen for this study is the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS). NELS was begun in 1988 by the National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. All respondents were in 8th grade at the beginning of the survey period, approximately age 14. Follow-up surveys took place in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000, when survey respondents were 16, 18, 20, and 26. The original sample included 24,599 students, but subsequent rounds included only a portion of this group. A total of



12,144 individuals participated in all five rounds of the survey. NELS provides a wide array of data related to the adolescent's background, life circumstances, and decisions.

With respect to religious participation, NELS participants responded to questions regarding denomination, attendance, enrollment in a religious school, youth's participation in other religious activities and groups, whether a religious environment is a consideration in a future school choice, whether religious participation is important to friends, and perception of self as being "religious." Among these attributes, the key variable of interest is participation in other religious activities. Questions administered to 8th graders were more detailed than those given to 10th and 12th graders. In 8th grade, adolescents and parents could indicate whether the adolescent was involved in a religious group at school or outside of school, and whether the adolescent attended religion classes away from school. In 10th and 12th grades, adolescents were asked about their participation only in non-school religious activities (not religious activities at school), dropouts were asked about doing work for their religious group, and 12th grade students were asked about volunteer work performed in association with their religious groups.

Surveys also provide a great deal of information about the child's and family's secular joining behavior, including participation in volunteer work and public service activities. However, many of these questions pertain to activities that take place in the school, and students who dropped out would not have the opportunity to participate in such activities. For this reason, dropouts evince systematically lower rates of participation than do graduates.

A full listing of survey questions indicating religious and secular participation, including sports participation, is included in Appendix 1, beginning on p. 31.

Separate surveys were administered to the parents, school administrators, and teachers of youths participating in the survey, providing a wide array of family background characteristics, school attributes, curriculum, and other personal data. Family characteristics include family composition, language spoken at home, immigrant status, financial resources available to support education, income and poverty status, participation in public assistance programs, parents' educational attainment, and parental involvement in the child's development. School and academic data include aggregate and individual attendance, discipline, transcripts, standardized test scores, curriculum, and other school characteristics. Personal characteristics include attitudes and perceptions about school, friends, family, and self, expectations and aspirations, time use, including work, and physical impairment. Respondents are also asked to reveal whether they engage in risky behaviors, such as smoking, drug use, unprotected sex, and delinquent activities.

Standard multivariate regression techniques were employed to determine whether the key variables of interest, religious participation and secular participation, have a significant<sup>3</sup> impact on the likelihood of graduating from high school on time and total years of educational attainment, after controlling for other background characteristics and life circumstances. Further analysis reveals whether results differ for minority adolescents or for poor adolescents. "Minority" adolescents include all survey respondents who reported their race or ethnicity as other than non-Hispanic white. "Poor" adolescents include survey respondents whose reported family income in the 8th grade survey was in the lowest quartile.

A more detailed description of the methodology employed for this study and a full list of control variables appear in Appendix 2 on page 36.

<sup>3</sup> In the terminology of statistics, "significance" denotes that we can be reasonably certain that a particular explanatory variable (religious or secular participation) has the estimated impact on the dependent variable (educational attainment and on-time graduation), based on the relationships observed among these variables in the sample. Absolute certainty is unattainable as long as inferences about the population are being made based on relationships observed within a sample. It is also generally accepted that causal influence of one variable on another can never be proven because it is always possible that some other factor has not been accounted for. At best, when association is observed, the analyst can and should make a strong case for causation based on theory.

## V. Sample Characteristics

Descriptive characteristics of the sample provide a sense of the “typical” experience of adolescents who participated in the survey, as well as a sense of the prevalence of the conditions and circumstances under study in the lives of these adolescents. As part of the analytical process, sample characteristics provide valuable background and context for the more complex models that follow by describing the distribution of variables under consideration. The policy response to a finding that a particular variable is influential will be shaped, in part, by its relative frequency in the population.

### A. Outcomes

Most adolescents in the sample (78.8 percent) graduated from high school on time or early. By the age of 26, 93.6 percent of these adolescents received a high school diploma or equivalent, with the typical person completing 13.7 years of schooling.

### B. Religious and Secular Participation

More than half of 8th graders (60.6 percent) participated in some kind of religious activity other than worship, such as youth group, religious classes outside of school, or a religious group at school. The rates are lower among 10th graders (45.0 percent) and 12th graders (45.4 percent). While more than three-fourths (78.5 percent) of adolescents reported engaging in some other religious activity at some point from 8th to 12th grade, only 28.0 percent reported engaging in at least one activity in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades.

Adolescents were also more likely to participate in non-sport secular activities, such as academic clubs, service clubs, band, scouts, 4-H and others in 8th grade than in high school. More than five out of six (84.2 percent) eighth graders participated in non-sport secular activities, while somewhat fewer participated in 10th grade (69.1 percent) and 12th grade (72.9 percent). Nearly all survey participants joined some activity at some point from 8th to 12th grade (95.7 percent), although

only half reported participating in all of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades.

Participation in athletic activities is somewhat lower, including 59.9 percent of 8th graders, 51.6 percent of 10th graders, and 38.7 percent of 12th graders. About three-fourths of adolescents (75.6 percent) participated in some sport at some point from 8th to 12th grade, but only one-fourth (25.9 percent) participated in all three survey years.

### C. Family Characteristics

Simple frequencies of family characteristics reveal the extent to which individual adolescents in the sample experienced various forms of disadvantage and advantage in their home life. In most respects, a majority of children in the sample enjoyed conditions that might be expected to be conducive to success.

Regarding family structure, the parents of more than two-thirds (69.0 percent) of adolescents in the survey started off together and stayed together throughout the period from 8th through 12th grade. Very few adolescents in the sample (1.7 percent) were born to one or more adolescent parents. The average adolescent had 1.6 siblings; most had one (39.5 percent) or two (26.2 percent) brothers and/or sisters. Surveys of parents asked respondents to identify the range of their annual income. Almost 1 in 6 adolescents (15.6 percent) were in a household where the annual income was less than \$15,000. This figure is just above the poverty threshold for most families.

By the adolescent’s senior year of high school, more than half (57.3 percent) of families had some assets available to fund future education. Half of fathers (50.0 percent) and more than half of mothers (53.8 percent) had completed no more than a high school diploma or equivalent, while almost one-third of fathers (30.0 percent) and almost one-quarter of mothers (23.6 percent) had at least a college degree.

Parents’ work status was observed when the child was in 8th grade and again when the child was in 12th grade. There was remarkable stability in the

percentage of parents who reported working in both of these survey years, and in their status as part-time or full-time. In just over one-third of families, two parents<sup>5</sup> were present and worked full-time (35.2 percent in 8th grade, 36.9 percent in 12th grade). In another one-sixth of families, one parent worked full-time and the other worked part-time (16.0 percent in 8th grade, 15.6 percent in 12th grade). Not working at all was slightly more common in single-parent households (4.9 percent in 8th grade and 5.3 percent in 12th grade) than in two-parent households (3.7 percent in 8th grade and 4.0 percent in 12th grade), although more than one-quarter of households consisted of two-parent families in which one did not work at all (30.2 percent in 8th grade and 26.1 percent in 12th grade).

Changing schools “off-schedule,” i.e., moving to a new school *not* as a result of normal grade progression, was part of the reality for more than half (58.7 percent) of students in the sample over the course of their elementary and secondary school careers combined. One-quarter (25.6 percent) of students changed school off-schedule during high school.

About one in eight students (12.0 percent) had at least one parent who was not born in the United States, and one in ten students lived in a household in which English was not the dominant language.

#### **D. Child’s Characteristics**

Adolescents in the sample were roughly evenly split by gender (49.7 percent male, 50.3 percent female). Most adolescents identified themselves as non-Hispanic white (72.3 percent). The rest of the sample consisted of non-Hispanic black (12.3 percent), Hispanic (10.6 percent), Asian / Pacific Islander (3.4 percent), and Native American (1.4 percent). One in six (16.5 percent) suffered from some mental or physical disability, as identified by their parents.

Victimization was fairly common among students in the sample, although many students escaped it. More than half of adolescents did not have anything stolen from them in school during the previous year (56.2 percent in 10th grade, 70.5 percent in 12th grade). Most had not been offered drugs at school during the previous year (83.2 percent in 10th grade, 83.8 percent in 12th grade), or been threatened with violence during the previous year (76.9 percent in 10th grade, 85.6 percent in 12th grade). Traveling back and forth to school proved hazardous for 8.8 percent of 12th graders who were offered drugs and 6.2 percent of 12th graders who were threatened with violence; 10th graders were not asked about their experiences on the way to and from school. Victimization of the forms described above was reported more often among 10th graders (57.5 percent) than 12th graders (44.2 percent).

## **VI. Results**

As discussed in Section IV, causality between one or more factors and an observed outcome can never be proven. For expositional purposes, though, the results below are presented in terms of participation affecting education. A more accurate interpretation may be that the figures in this section represent an upper bound of the transformational power of participation on education, allowing that some of the observed association is probably attributable to underlying differences that cannot be accounted for in these models.<sup>6</sup>

### **A. On-Time Graduation**

The majority of adolescents in the NELS 88 sample (82.8 percent) graduate at the end of four or fewer years of secondary education. All of the figures below were calculated in models controlling for a wide range of family and individual characteristics.

#### **1. Religious Participation**

The models described in this section include reli-

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 2, including note, for more discussion of the poverty threshold.

<sup>5</sup> “Parent” denotes any adult who plays a role in the raising of the child, rather than denoting either a particular biological or legal relationship between that adult and that child, or a particular relationship between the two adults. For instance, the two “parents” could be the child’s mother and grandmother.

<sup>6</sup> Although a wide range of background characteristics is included in the model, it seems nearly certain that some important underlying characteristics are omitted. Unquestionably, some self-sorting of “good” kids is taking place, which naturally draws certain kids into participation.

gious participation as the key variable of interest and a wide range of background variables, but not secular participation. Because secular participation is excluded from these models, estimates of the impact of religious participation do not account for possible underlying differences in secular participation among adolescents in the sample. Results are summarized in the table 1.

For the full sample of adolescents, most forms of religious participation make a modest contribution to the likelihood of on-time graduation, although there are some exceptions. Adolescents who participated in some religious activity at some point were 6.6% more likely to graduate on time than were adolescents who never participated in any religious activities. Consistency (participating in at least one religious activity each year) provides a boost of 47.1% over youth who never participated. The biggest gains are associated with attending religious classes outside of school in 8th grade (30.9% increase), participating in a religious organization at school in 8th grade (23.9%

increase), and engaging in some religious activity in 10th grade (19.7% increase). Engaging in some activity in 12th grade does not contribute significantly to the likelihood of on-time graduation, while participating in a religious youth group outside of school in 8th grade actually lowers the probability of on-time graduation slightly (3.3%).

For adolescents who were in the lowest income quartile in 8th grade, some religious participation enhances the likelihood of on-time graduation by 24.8%, while religious participation in each year increases the probability by 45.2%. The biggest impact comes in 10th grade, when religious participation is associated with a 60.0% greater likelihood of on-time graduation, compared to adolescents who did not participate in 10th grade. Participating in some religious activity in 12th grade actually detracts from the likelihood of on-time graduation slightly, by 5.2%. Various forms of religious participation in 8th grade contribute little or only modestly to on-time graduation.

Table 1: Impact of participation in religious activities on the probability of graduating on-time, controlling for a wide range of background variables but not accounting for participation in secular activities.

<b>Increase or decrease in probability of completing high school on time</b>	<b>Full sample</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Minority</b>
	% change	% change	% change
Engaged in some religious activity at some point 8th – 12th grade	6.6	24.8	53.6
Engaged in at least one religious activity in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	47.1	45.2	43.3
Participated in a religious organization at school in 8th grade	23.9	12.8	44.0
Participated in a religious youth group outside of school in 8th grade or before	-3.3	NS	20.0
Attended religion classes outside of school in 8th grade	30.9	7.7	84.0
Attended religious activities outside of school in 10th grade or (dropout in 1990) did work for religious group	19.7	60.0	NS
Attended religious activities outside of school in 12th grade, did volunteer or community work associated with a church or church-related group in 12th grade, or (dropout in 1992) did work for religious group	NS	-5.2	-17.4

•“NS” denotes that the variable does not make a significant difference

For minority adolescents, the benefit of at least some religious activity at some point from 8th grade is even greater than for poor adolescents or the full sample of adolescents (53.6% greater likelihood of graduating on time). The benefit of consistency (participating in every survey year) is comparable (43.3% greater likelihood). Surprisingly, minority adolescents benefit the most from all forms of participation in 8th grade, including a religious group at school (44.0% gain), religious group outside of school (20.0% gain), and religious classes outside of school (84.0% gain), compared to minority adolescents who did not participate in each of these activities. Religious participation in 10th grade does not contribute significantly to on-time graduation, while religious participation in 12th grade is actually associated with a lower probability of a minority adolescent graduating on time.

## **2. Secular participation**

This section reports the results of a set of models

that includes secular participation as the key variable of interest and a wide range of background variables, but not religious participation. Each model includes separate measures of sport and non-sport secular activity, so that the estimate of the effect of sports participation is independent of any underlying differences in non-sport secular participation, and vice versa.

Secular activities were associated with much more dramatic boosts to the probability of adolescents graduating on time, that is, by 1992. In the full sample, adolescents who participated in at least one non-sport secular activity at some point from 8th to 12th grade were more than twice as likely (123.0 percent more likely) to graduate on-time than were adolescents who never engaged in any non-sport secular activity. Participating in each survey year had a more substantial an effect (162.2% more likely), with 12th grade participation having a much stronger impact than participation in 8th or 10th grade (136.6% increase, compared to 27.4% increase and 24.1% increase).

Table 2: Impact of participation in secular activities (sport and non-sport) on the probability of graduating on-time, controlling for a wide range of background variables but not accounting for participation in religious activities.

<b>Increase or decrease in probability of completing high school on time</b>	<b>Full sample</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Minority</b>
	% change	% change	% change
Engaged in at least one non-sport secular activity at some point 8th – 12th grade	123.0	163.0	207.0
Engaged in at least one sport at some point 8th – 12th grade	92.2	112.7	95.0
Engaged in at least one non-sport secular activity in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	162.2	249.8	169.8
Engaged in at least one sport in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	310.7	600.2	982.7
Participated in a non-sport secular activity in 8th grade	27.4	NS	71.2
Participated in a sport in 8th grade	6.4	235.8	-10.9
Participated in a non-sport secular activity in 10th grade	24.1	38.4	6.3
Participated in a sport in 10th grade	97.4	226.2	102.9
Participated in a non-sport secular activity in 12th grade	136.7	8.7	219.0
Participated in a sport in 12th grade	86.5	48.9	171.3

• “NS” denotes that the variable does not make a significant difference



At least one athletic activity at some point was shown to make a difference (92.2% greater probability), but not nearly as much as consistent participation (more than four times the likelihood or 310.7% greater likelihood). Individual years of participation contributed somewhat less to the likelihood of graduating on time (6.4% increase in 8th grade, 97.4% increase in 10th grade, and 86.5% increase in 12th grade, each compared to adolescents who did not report participating in any sport in the respective grades).

Among adolescents who were in the lowest income quartile in 8th grade and minorities, any participation and consistent participation both have a stronger impact on the likelihood of graduating on-time than for the full sample, but the relative importance of timing is inconsistent. No discernable pattern with respect to the timing of non-sport participation emerged. Participating in sports in 8th grade and 10th grade each more than tripled the probability of on-time graduation (235.8% in 8th grade and 226.2% in 10th grade), but adolescents who participated in sports in 12th grade were only half again as likely (48.9%) to graduate as adolescents who did not participate in 12th grade. For minorities, 8th grade sports participation was actually associated with a lower probability of graduating on-time, while later participation doubled the probability (102.9% greater probability associated with 10th grade sport participation) and almost tripled the probability (171.3% greater probability associated with 12th grade sport participation).

### **3. Is It Religious Participation, Secular Participation, or Both?**

The above findings have established that participation in general clearly makes a difference. But what kind of participation makes a difference? That is, does religious participation have some intrinsic benefit that is distinct from secular participation, and vice versa? Or is it simply participating in some organization, regardless of its religious or secular nature, that makes a difference in the lives of adolescents? And which matters more? To answer these questions, a set of models

that includes both secular and religious participation is run and the results examined to determine if both are significant. The same procedures are used here as in previous analysis, and that is to run separate models for the full sample, the poor, and minorities, and to run separate specifications of each model using alternative measures of the various types of participation.

**Religious participation:** In most specifications, the relatively weak impact of religious participation on the probability of graduating on-time was further weakened when controlling for secular forms of participation, meaning that the impact of religious participation previously detected is actually explained in part by the child's tendency to join activities, both religious and secular. A notable exception for the full sample is attending religious classes outside of school in 8th grade, which boosts the probability of on-time graduation by about one-third, regardless of whether participation in secular activities is considered. For minorities, participating in some religious activity at some point continues to be associated with half again (50.3%) the likelihood of graduating on time, and the impact of attending religion classes outside of school increases slightly (to 99.5%).

**Non-sport and sport secular activity:** In the full sample, when controlling for religious participation, both sport and non-sport secular participation are slightly or negligibly less associated with the likelihood of graduating on-time than when religious participation was not included in the model. These results can be interpreted to signify that very little of the impact of sport and non-sport activity is explained by a child's tendency to be a joiner. The results for poor and minority adolescents are similar, again with largely inconsistent results regarding the timing of participation.

### **4. Other Influential Characteristics**

Many other background characteristics are associated with a significantly lower or higher probability of crossing the important threshold of graduating from high school on schedule. The biggest gains are associated with identifying oneself as a

very religious person (57.2% greater likelihood of graduating on time) and having parents that were together throughout the period 8th through 12th grade (85.1% greater likelihood). Teens who got into trouble in school in 8th grade were almost twice as likely (99.6%) to not graduate on time, as were teens who got into trouble in 10th grade (96.5%). Being born to a teen parent decreases the likelihood of graduating on time by 144.5%.

Teen parents are about 27 times less likely than non-teen parents to graduate on time. Drinking in 10th grade is unrelated to the likelihood of graduating on time, while attending worship services in 10th grade, and drinking in 12th grade have no negligible impact (+3.0% and -2.1%, respectively). See Appendix 3 on p. 39 for details.

Table 3: Full model, estimating impact of secular and religious participation on the probability of graduating on-time, controlling for a wide range of background variables.

<b>Boost to education</b>	<b>Full sample</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Minority</b>
	% change	% change	% change
Engaged in some religious activity at some point 8th – 12th grade	7.3	-28.2	50.3
Engaged in at least one non-sport secular activity at some point 8th – 12th grade	90.3	108.7	111.9
Engaged in at least one sport at some point 8th – 12th grade	75.4	91.8	99.3
Engaged in at least one religious activity in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	17.0	7.2	12.8
Engaged in at least one non-sport secular activity in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	142.5	205.6	142.9
Engaged in at least one sport in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	273.5	484.0	981.4
Participated in a religious organization at school in 8th grade	11.5	10.0	34.9
Participated in a religious youth group outside of school in 8th grade or before	-6.2	-12.2	NS
Attended religion classes outside of school in 8th grade	32.0	NS	99.5
Attended religious activities outside of school in 10th grade or (dropout in 1990) did work for religious group	9.5	32.8	-20.0
Attended religious activities outside of school in 12th grade, did volunteer or community work associated with a church or church-related group in 12th grade, or (dropout in 1992) did work for religious group	-30.5	-30.0	-37.4
Participated in a non-sport secular activity in 8th grade	13.1	-6.4	-81.5
Participated in a sport in 8th grade	NS	-13.3	-21.5
Participated in a non-sport secular activity in 10th grade	27.2	50.7	44.6
Participated in a sport in 10th grade	82.2	240.1	172.8
Participated in a non-sport secular activity in 12th grade	162.5	224.4	218.1
Participated in a sport in 12th grade	88.8	28.5	211.0
• “NS” denotes that the variable does not make a significant difference			

<b>Additional time spent in school, expressed both in terms of portion of the school year and number of months</b>	<b>Full sample</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Minority</b>
	# years # mos	# years # mos	# years # mos
Engaged in some religious activity at some point 8th – 12th grade	NS -	NS -	NS -
Engaged in at least one religious activity in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	0.39 yrs 3.5 mos	0.36 yrs 3.2 mos	0.28 yrs 2.5 mos
Participated in a religious organization at school in 8th grade	NS -	NS -	0.45 yrs 4.1 mos
Participated in a religious youth group outside of school in 8th grade or before	NS -	NS -	NS -
Attended religion classes outside of school in 8th grade	NS -	NS -	NS -
Attended religious activities outside of school in 10th grade or (dropout in 1990) did work for religious group	NS -	0.22 yrs 2.0 mos	NS -
Attended religious activities outside of school in 12th grade, did volunteer or community work associated with a church or church-related group in 12th grade, or (dropout in 1992) did work for religious group	0.24 yrs 2.2 mos	NS -	NS -

• “NS” denotes that the variable does not make a significant difference  
 • The calculated number of months assumes 9 months per school year



Secular participation is also found to make a significant contribution to educational attainment. Adolescents in the full sample who participated in at least one non-sports secular activity from 8th to 12th grade completed almost 6-1/2 months more of school than did adolescents who participated in no secular activities during this time period. Participating in at least one non-sports secular activity each year provided a smaller benefit of an additional 4 months of schooling. The timing of activity is also important. About two months of additional education is associated with participation in 8th grade (2.1 months) and 10th grade (1.6 months), but a half-year (4.5-month) increase is associated with participation in 12th grade.

Athletic participation is associated with additional schooling, although by most measures, the impact is smaller than for non-sport activities. Participating in sports at any point keeps adolescents in school longer by almost 4 months, and participating in at least one sport each year provides a slightly larger boost of 4-1/2 months. However, participating in any individual year is associated with only a modest increase of 1 month in 8th grade, 2 months in 10th grade, and a more notable 3-1/2 months in 12th grade.

Evidence on the differential impact of secular participation on poor and minority adolescents is mixed. Engaging in at least one non-sport activity from 8th to 12th grade is associated with even more schooling for poor students (8.6 months) and minority students (1 year and 2.2 months) than for

Additional time spent in school, expressed both in terms of portion of the school year and number of months	Full sample	Poor	Minority
	# years # mos	# years # mos	# years # mos
Engaged in at least one non-sport secular activity at some point 8th – 12th grade	0.71 yrs 6.4 mos	0.96 yrs 8.6 mos	1.24 yrs 11.2 mos
Engaged in at least one sport at some point 8th – 12th grade	0.43 yrs 3.9 mos	0.39 yrs 3.5 mos	0.26 yrs 2.3 mos
Engaged in at least one non-sport secular activity in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	0.44 yrs 4.0 mos	0.59 yrs 5.3 mos	0.57 yrs 5.1 mos
Engaged in at least one sport in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	0.51 yrs 4.5 mos	0.67 yrs 6.0 mos	0.50 yrs 4.5 mos
Participated in a non-sport secular activity in 8th grade	0.23 yrs 2.1 mos	0.39 yrs 3.5 mos	0.65 yrs 5.9 mos
Participated in a sport in 8th grade	0.12 yrs 1.1 mos	NS -	NS -
Participated in a non-sport secular activity in 10th grade	0.18 yrs 1.6 mos	0.32 yrs 2.9 mos	NS -
Participated in a sport in 10th grade	0.21 yrs 1.9 mos	0.28 yrs 2.5 mos	NS -
Participated in a non-sport secular activity in 12th grade	0.50 yrs 4.5 mos	0.44 yrs 4.0 mos	0.56 yrs 5.0 mos
Participated in a sport in 12th grade	0.40 yrs 3.6 mos	0.42 yrs 3.8 mos	0.41 yrs 3.7 mos

• “NS” denotes that the variable does not make a significant difference

• The calculated number of months assumes 9 months per school year

- “NS” denotes that the variable does not make a significant difference

• The calculated number of months assumes 9 months per school year

Table 6: Full model, estimating impact of secular and religious participation on total educational attainment, controlling for a wide range of background variables.

<b>Additional time spent in school, expressed both in terms of portion of the school year and number of months</b>	<b>Full sample</b>		<b>Poor</b>		<b>Minority</b>	
	# years	# mos	# years	# mos	# years	# mos
Engaged in some religious activity at some point 8th – 12th grade	0.15 yrs	1.4 mos	NS	-	NS	-
Engaged in at least one non-sport secular activity at some point 8th – 12th grade	0.57 yrs	5.1 mos	0.84 yrs	7.6 mos	1.16 yrs	10.4 mos
Engaged in at least one sport at some point 8th – 12th grade	0.39 yrs	3.5 mos	0.34 yrs	3.1 mos	0.25 yrs	2.3 mos
Engaged in at least one religious activity in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	0.19 yrs	1.7 mos	0.24 yrs	2.2 mos	NS	-
Engaged in at least one non-sport secular activity in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	0.38 yrs	3.4 mos	0.50 yrs	4.5 mos	0.54 yrs	4.9 mos
Engaged in at least one sport in each of 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	0.48 yrs	4.3 mos	0.57 yrs	5.1 mos	0.46 yrs	4.1 mos
Participated in a religious organization at school in 8th grade	0.18 yrs	1.6 mos	NS	-	0.39 yrs	3.5 mos
Participated in a religious youth group outside of school in 8th grade or before	NS	-	NS	-	NS	-
Attended religion classes outside of school in 8th grade	NS	-	NS	-	-0.25 yrs	-2.3 mos
Attended religious activities outside of school in 10th grade or (dropout in 1990) did work for religious group	0.12 yrs	1.1 mos	NS	-	NS	-
Attended religious activities outside of school in 12th grade, did volunteer or community work associated with a church or church-related group in 12th grade, or (dropout in 1992) did work for religious group	NS	-	NS	-	NS	-
Participated in a non-sport secular activity in 8th grade	0.23 yrs	2.1 mos	0.36 yrs	3.2 mos	0.40 yrs	3.6 mos
Participated in a sport in 8th grade	0.12 yrs	1.1 mos	NS	-	NS	-
Participated in a non-sport secular activity in 10th grade	0.12 yrs	1.1 mos	0.22 yrs	2.0 mos	NS	-
Participated in a sport in 10th grade	0.20 yrs	1.8 mos	0.26 yrs	2.3 mos	NS	-
Participated in a non-sport secular activity in 12th grade	0.54 yrs	4.9 mos	0.55 yrs	5.0 mos	0.75 yrs	6.8 mos
Participated in a sport in 12th grade	0.39 yrs	3.5 mos	0.39 yrs	3.5 mos	0.49 yrs	4.4 mos

• “NS” denotes that the variable does not make a significant difference

• The calculated number of months assumes 9 months per school year

the full sample of adolescents (6.4 months). Yet engaging in at least one sport during this period provides less of a boost for poor students (3.5 months) and minority students (2.3 months) than for the sample as a whole (3.9 months). Participating in at least one sport or non-sport activity in each year also increases schooling for poor and minority students in the 4-1/2 to 6 month range, while the full sample only enjoys a benefit of 4 to 4-1/2 months. Examining sport and non-sport participation separately by year reveals that when there is a significant effect, the effect is generally stronger for poor and minority students, but several forms of participation do not make a significant difference. Generally, the effect of non-sport activities is stronger than sports, and the effects are stronger as the child progresses through school.

An important point regarding secular participation must be made, and that is that these findings could be an artifact of the modeling process. As noted earlier, dropouts are systematically less likely to participate in secular activities because they no longer have access to activities at school. This paper makes the argument that participating in activities is instrumental in preventing dropout, but it is also the case that students who remain in school participate in more activities than dropouts because they are in school and have access. This dynamic is in contrast to religious participation, which we would not expect to be substantially less available to dropouts than to enrolled students, with the possible exception of students enrolled in religious schools.

### **3. Is It Religious Participation, Secular Participation, or Both?**

**Religious participation:** Controlling for secular participation, modeling reveals that some forms of religious participation continue to contribute, albeit modestly, to the educational attainment of adolescents. Just participating in some activity at some point from 8th to 12th grade makes some difference (1.4 months additional for the full sample, but no difference for poor or minority adolescents). Participating in at least one activity each

year is associated with more schooling for the full sample (1.7 months) and poor adolescents (2.2 months), but not for minority adolescents. Generally, the timing of participation makes little or no difference (see table for results), with some exceptions. Participating in a religious organization at school in 8th grade increases educational attainment for the full sample by 1.6 months, and for minority adolescents by 3.5 months. Religious activities outside of school in 10th grade boost attainment by only 1.1 months. These results suggest that some forms of religious participation have a positive association with schooling, independent of the association of secular participation with schooling.

**Non-sport secular activity:** In nearly all specifications of all models, controlling for religious participation reduces the estimated effect of non-sport secular participation by no more than 1 month, and in most cases, the effects for poor and minority adolescents are stronger than for all adolescents. Participating in at least one non-sport secular activity at some point from 8th to 12th grade is associated with more than 5 additional months of schooling for the full sample (7.6 months for poor adolescents and 10.4 months for minority adolescents). Participating in at least one activity each year has a slightly smaller impact of 3.4 months for the full sample (4.5 months for poor adolescents and 4.9 months for minority adolescents). Participating in 8th or 10th grade is associated with 1 to 2 more months of attendance (3 to almost 4 for poor and minority adolescents). Participating in 12th grade increases attendance by 5 months for the full sample and poor adolescents, and by 6.8 months for minority adolescents.

**Sports participation:** The effect of participation in sports on educational attainment is little changed as a result of controlling for religious participation, and most measures of athletic participation continue to be less influential than non-athletic participation.

### **4. Other Influential Characteristics**

As expected, many of the favorable background

characteristics and life circumstances examined in this study are associated with significantly<sup>7</sup> more schooling. Although significant, most of the effects are not substantial, being on the scale of a few months. For instance, after accounting for all of the other characteristics included in this study, adolescents who lived in a household in which two parents were together while the adolescent was in 8th grade through 12th grade completes an average 2.1 months more of school than adolescents who lived in a household in which there were never two parents or in which at least one parent left or joined the household during the study period. Adolescents who reported using drugs in 10th grade completed 1.2 months less of school than adolescents who did not, while adolescents who reported using drugs in 12th grade completed 1.9 months less of school than adolescents who did not.

Starker findings are associated with having one parent who dropped out of school before finishing high school (1 year, 4.2 months less education than teens whose parent or parents were not dropouts), and becoming a teen parent (1 year, 3.2 months less education than youths who did not become teen parents). Drinking in high school, not having at least one parent who worked full time, and living in a non-English dominant household did not make any difference for total educational attainment. For more details, see Appendix 4 on p. 40.

### **C. Summary of Results**

In summary, the findings above support the position that participating in some organization is associated with improved educational outcomes, even after controlling for a wide array of background characteristics and life circumstances.<sup>8</sup> While various forms of *secular* participation, such as vocational clubs, arts organizations, and student government, as well as team and individual sports are associated with more schooling, adolescents who participate in some kind of religious activity in addition have even better educational outcomes.

Neither this study nor any other can prove that participation is instrumental in promoting success; that is, it cannot be proven that either religious or secular participation is transformational. Nonetheless, the current study provides fairly solid evidence, backed up by theory, that this is the case. Theory suggests many ways that participation should make a difference. It provides opportunities to learn organizational, interpersonal, leadership and communications skills. It can increase psychological attachment to the school and therefore prevent dropout and bolster student engagement. In more normative settings, it tends to inculcate prosocial and work ethic values. Participants gain access to valuable contacts and role models, and may receive social support and direct assistance. Some adolescents benefit from having something to do and a place to be other than the street. While further study would be necessary to determine which of these mechanisms is more transformative (and it seems likely that some mechanisms are more effective for some adolescents than are others), many adolescents likely enjoy many of these benefits, particularly disadvantaged adolescents who may have no other exposure to these benefits.

If participation is not transformative, then the associations found in this study are the result of self-sorting, so that adolescents who are “good” in some way that cannot be accounted for in regression models are more likely to participate, and it is that inherent “goodness” that allows them to succeed, rather than the participation itself. This is a matter of debate in the literature, particularly with respect to religious participation. Numerous studies have attempted to discern whether it is the religious atmosphere that is effective, the emphasis placed on values, or some other factor that makes a difference. Anecdotal evidence suggests that “value-based” or faith-based programs enjoy high success rates with their clients. For examples, see Kramnick (1997); Monsma (2001); Solomon (2001); Boston (1999), but critics have countered that individual secular programs have also had high success rates, (Kramnick 1997). Sorting out

<sup>7</sup>Again, “significance” denotes reasonable certainty that a particular variable has an impact of an estimated magnitude.

<sup>8</sup>Variables included in modeling represent “alternative hypotheses” about the true cause of success. The fact that many forms of religious and secular participation remain significant after controlling for these variables is an indication that they are in fact instrumental in promoting success.

the effects is no small task.<sup>9</sup> In a 1997 article, predating his appointment as head of the Bush Administration's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (a position which he has since left), John DiIulio acknowledged that "we remain a long way from a definitive body of research evidence on the actual extent and the efficacy of church-anchored and faith-based social programs." Although initial, anecdotal evidence was promising, he continues, "it will be some time before we can identify the conditions, if any, under which given types of church-centered programs work, or specify how, if at all, faith-based efforts can be taken to scale in ways that cut crime, reduce poverty, banish illiteracy, or yield other positive, predictable, and desirable social consequences." Many other researchers have noted that little is known about the role of faith and religious organizations, or even nonprofits in general, in the effectiveness of social services, (Netting 1984; Ostrander 1985; Sider and Unruh 2001; Nightingale and Pindus 1997; White House 2001; others).

It seems most likely that some self-sorting of "good" adolescents is taking place, which naturally draws them into participation. It also seems likely that some transformation is taking place, at least for some adolescents. A study of this scale cannot reasonably address which effect is predominant for whom. However, it does indicate the magnitude of the total effect, which is substantial enough to warrant further study and consideration for policy response.

## VII. Potential Policy Implications

The main contribution of this study is to provide a much deeper and broader understanding of the extent to which religious and secular participation from 8th grade to 12th grade helps late adolescents complete their educations. This understanding has direct implications for policy.

This study focused on the decision made by the adolescent (or the adolescent's parents) to engage in religious participation. One clear implication of the finding that religious participation promotes educational outcomes is that adolescents should take advantage of opportunities available to them to participate in religious activities. However, policy cannot mandate that people become involved with a religious organization, nor can the government provide religious activities directly to people. Nonetheless, there are legitimate ways that the government can offer incentives to encourage religious participation, either by removing obstacles (reducing costs) or providing rewards for engaging in the desired behavior. For instance, the government can take steps to remove obstacles and even facilitate the siting and continued operation of churches in particular areas. Zoning regulations, site development requirements, the Building Code and tax policies can either encourage or discourage the siting of churches, and can either promote or hamper the ancillary activities of religious organizations that can be so vital to their operations. The approval process, for instance, for a new house of worship in an existing downtown building might require a public hearing to approve the use, waivers for parking requirements and sign regulations, special permission for mid-week activities and special events, and special permission for outreach and community service activities (particularly activities that bring large numbers of service recipients to the site). The jurisdiction could require religious leaders to bring the building into full compliance with the Building Code prior to occupancy. Streamlining of the approval process, waivers for religious organizations, and eased requirements for reuse of existing buildings could promote the proliferation of houses of worship in certain areas.<sup>11</sup>

Policy initiatives can also increase opportunities

<sup>9</sup> Several methodological issues complicate attempts to address this question. First, participants cannot be randomly assigned to a faith-based program because they must agree to it. Therefore, there is a systematic difference between participants that opt for a religious provider and those that do not. Predisposition towards religion may be the critical factor in achieving a successful outcome. This difference probably resists objective measurement, as does "success." Religious-based programs tend to be very small and idiosyncratic, which impedes empirical study.

<sup>10</sup> From a land use standpoint, community concerns with construction of new churches, especially large ones, arise from the size and design of the worship buildings (Estrada 1997), the magnitude of the parking lot required to accommodate worshipers, surges in traffic loadings just before and just after services and other events, signage, and compatibility of ancillary uses (particularly social services) with surrounding uses (Reed 2003). These concerns should not be discarded lightly, but instead balanced carefully against the potential benefits of the use.

<sup>11</sup> Policy that exempts religious organizations from property taxes and provides for the deductibility of contributions (offerings) also support such organizations in general.



for religious participation, even for public school children. This “supply-side” response switches the emphasis to organizations and addresses programming provided by the organizations, rather than participation chosen by the individual.

Schools can promote organizational involvement in myriad ways, such as by providing the meeting space and adult leadership, scheduling to accommodate activities during the school day, resources, recognition, and a supportive environment.

Elected and other officials can bolster religious organizations by acknowledging religious leaders and religious organizations. Changes in social service contracting policies, as has been urged under the “faith-based initiative,” can further strengthen religious organizations and raise their stature and role in the community. This strategy may be particularly effective when there is a local or regional coalition of houses of worship whose mission includes some public-serving objectives, such as assistance to the disadvantaged.

Individually or as a group, religious organizations can be encouraged to provide services and programming for adolescents, such as after-school programs, mentoring programs, tutoring, Big Brother/Big Sister and many others. “Encouragement” may be in the form of dialog among school officials and religious leaders, the formation of an alliance or cooperative arrangements, sharing of information, and logistical assistance.

A more controversial recommendation is to advocate in favor of allowing religious schools to participate in school choice, including voucher programs and charter schools. From the standpoint of increasing the religious exposure of adolescents, this recommendation makes great sense. However, there may be other, more important reasons that this strategy is impractical or unwise.

Recommendations above pertaining to public policy and religious participation are presented with some caveats. First, increasing religious exposure is one pathway to success for adolescents, but it is not the only pathway. Further study is needed to

establish whether increasing religious exposure is a cost effective or resource effective means of promoting educational outcomes. A closely related issue is whether in a world of limited education funding and time constraints (of the school day and of adolescents who may have full schedules), some form of religious participation is the best way to promote total years of schooling, on-time graduation, or other educational outcomes. Parents and schools may come to different conclusions, based on their own sets of objectives and the availability of alternatives means to reach particular ends.

Second, not all forms of religious participation are alike. This statement becomes rather obvious when we consider that many people could attend a single activity or series of activities and respond in highly individualized ways. On the other hand, a single person’s response to participating in a generic activity type, such as youth group, could vary from day to day, from church to church (or synagogue to synagogue, mosque to mosque, etc.), and from denomination to denomination. Undoubtedly, religious leaders would like to discover the “technology” or process that renders participation more effective in the sense of being more transformative to the individual, but such a technology has apparently not yet been developed. Some studies have suggested that stricter denominations have higher participation rates among their members because they place high demands on them and promise great “rewards,” in the form of salvation, in return (Iannaccone 1994; Kelley 1986). Building on this framework, we might speculate that participation that requires a low level of engagement and is inconsistent in its message is likely to be less transformational than participation that requires more active involvement and whose message is reinforced in worship services or through some other means.

A third issue that must be considered is that not all religious organizations are alike. Organizational characteristics can also be important, for instance, with respect to how closely programming is tied to the religious life of the church, and operationally

how distinct the programming is from other religious activities. A religious organization that sees its mission as helping persons in need would probably be more effective at promoting educational outcomes than would a religious organization that is mainly concerned with proselytizing, recruiting new members, or simply worshipping. All of these factors and many others play a critical role in program effectiveness and should be considered before implementing any of the program recommendations below.

Fourth, as noted earlier, not all adolescents respond to programming in the same way. Average effects mask important variations, and it seems likely that some of that variation is systematic and identifiable. The present study makes the adolescent the unit of analysis, and two possible sources of that systematic variation, low income and minority status, were explored. Many other such characteristics and groups of characteristics should similarly be explored.

Fifth, despite the theoretical arguments and results of statistical models that point to a genuine association between religious participation and improved educational outcomes, there is no way of knowing that the religious nature of the setting or the institution running the program is a critical factor. Religious programs and institutions might differ from secular programs and institutions in ways that are at best only incidentally related to their religious nature. For instance, religious organizations may be able to recruit more effective

volunteers than are secular organizations, potentially for several reasons. Individuals with the needed competencies and characteristics (such as organizational skills, education, and availability of time) for some forms of volunteer work may be overrepresented in some congregations. Credibility and respect afforded to a religious institution may attract more highly skilled volunteers, regardless of their affiliation with the institution. Volunteers at a religious institution may have a greater sense of purpose related to their association with the institution, as well as their own sense of fulfilling the institution's or their own religious mission.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, any effort at increasing the religious participation of adolescents must conform to legal requirements governing the separation of church and state. The "faith-based initiative" and several court cases have elucidated some of those requirements, while some dimensions remain unclear. See Appendix 5 on page 41 for more discussion of the Bush administration's faith-based initiative and associated requirements to maintain separation between church and state.

This study has also demonstrated that a wide array of circumstances and conditions in an adolescent's life can have an impact on educational outcomes. While addressing any individual factor can make a difference, substantial improvement proceeds from a multi-faceted, holistic approach, particularly for adolescents who experience multiple disadvantages.

<sup>12</sup> A related issue is that there is no way of knowing how much "religion" is incorporated into programs at a religious institution. NELS 88 does not include program characteristics. Some indication of the extent to which religious values and practices (as well as many other characteristics) are incorporated into programs would deepen our understanding of the type of participation that make a difference for teens.

## Appendix 1: Participation Survey Questions

Responses to all questions below were recoded to indicate whether the adolescent did or did not participate in the particular activity. Question numbers refer to NELS variable numbers.

### 1. Religious Participation

#### a. 8th grade (students):

Have you or will you have participated in any of the following school activities during the current school year, either as a member, or as an officer (for example, vice-president, coordinator, team captain)?

- Religious organization

Have you or will you have participated in any of the following outside-school activities this year, either as a member, or as an officer (for example, vice-president, coordinator, team captain)?

- Religious youth groups

Has your eighth grader attended classes outside of his or her regular school to study any of the following? (MARK ONE EACH)

- Religion

Since your eighth grader began the first grade, has he or she been involved in any of the following non-school activities? (MARK ONE EACH)

- Religious group

#### b. 10th grade (students and dropouts)

How often do you spend time on the following activities (outside of school)?

- Attending religious activities

In the past 2 years, did any of the following things happen to you?

- I did work for my religious group.

#### c. 12th grade (students and dropouts)

How often do you spend time on the following activities (not sponsored by your school)?

- Participating in religious activities

In the past 2 years, did any of the following things happen to you?

- I did work for my religious group.

During the past two years (from January 1, 1990 to the present), have you performed any unpaid volunteer or community service work (through such organizations as Little League, scouts, service clubs, church groups, school groups, or social action groups)?

Which of the following types of organizations are/were you involved with during your unpaid volunteer or community service work?

- Church or church-related groups (not including worship services)

### 2. Non-sport participation in 8th grade

#### a. 8th grade (students):

Have you or will you have participated in any of the following school activities during the current school year, either as a member, or as an officer (for example, vice president, coordinator, team captain)? (MARK ONE EACH)

- Science fairs

- Band or Orchestra

- Chorus or choir

- Dance

- History club

- Science club

- Math club

- Foreign Language club

- Other subject matter club



- Debate or speech team
- Drama club
- Academic Honors Society
- Student newspaper
- Student yearbook
- Student Council
- Computer club
- Vocational education club

Have you or will you have participated in any of the following outside-school activities this year, either as a member, or as an officer (for example, vice-president, coordinator, team captain)?

- Scouting
- Hobby clubs
- Neighborhood clubs or programs
- Boys' clubs or girls' clubs
- Non-school team sports
- Four H Club
- Y or other youth groups
- Summer programs, such as workshops or institutes in science, language, drama, and so on
- Other

#### **b. 10th grade (students and dropouts)**

Please mark one for each activity that you have participated in THIS SCHOOL YEAR.

- Band, orchestra, chorus, choir, or other music group
- School play or musical
- Student government
- NHS or other academic honor society
- School yearbook, newspaper, or literary maga-

zine

- Service clubs (AFS, Key Club)
- Academic club (Art, Computer, Engineering, Debate/Forensics Foreign languages, Science, Math, Psychology, Philosophy, etc.)
- Hobby clubs (photography, chess, frisbee, etc.)
- FTA, FHA, FFA or other vocation education or professional club

How often do you spend time on the following activities (not sponsored by your school)?

- Participating in youth groups or recreational sports programs
- Doing volunteer or community service

#### **c. 12th grade (students and dropouts)**

How often do you spend time on the following activities (not sponsored by your school)?

- Participating in youth groups or recreational sports programs
- Doing volunteer or community service
- Which of the following types of organizations are/were you involved with during your unpaid volunteer or community service work?
- A youth organization, such as coaching Little League or helping out with scouts
- Service organizations, such as Big Brother or Sister
- Political clubs or organizations
- Community centers, neighborhood improvement or social-action associations or groups
- Organized volunteer group in a hospital or nursing home
- Education organizations
- A conservation, recycling, or environmental group such as the Sierra Club or the Nature Conservancy

**3. Athletic Participation****a. 8th grade (students):**

Have you or will you have participated in any of the following school activities during the current school year, either as a member, or as an officer (for example, vice-president, coordinator, team captain)? (MARK ONE EACH)

- School varsity sports (playing against teams from other schools)
- Intramural sports (playing against teams from your own school)
- Cheerleading

**b. 10th grade (students and dropouts)**

Please mark all that apply for EACH interscholastic activity and/or intramural activity that you have participated in THIS SCHOOL YEAR. INTERSCHOLASTIC means your school team competes with other school teams. SCHOOL INTRAMURAL means the teams are within your own school. (CIRCLE ALL THAT APPLY)

- Baseball/softball
- Basketball
- Football
- Soccer
- Swim team

- Other team sport (hockey, volleyball, etc.)
- Other individual sport (cross-country, gymnastics, golf, tennis, track, wrestling)
- Cheerleading
- Pom-pom, drill team

**c. 12th grade (students and dropouts)**

Please mark one response for EACH type of interscholastic sport activity in which you have participated THIS SCHOOL YEAR. (INTER-SCHOLASTIC means your school's team competes with other schools' teams.) Mark the highest number that applies on each line.

- A team sport (baseball, basketball, football, soccer, hockey, etc.)
- An individual sport (cross-county, gymnastics, golf, tennis, track, wrestling, etc.)
- Cheerleading, pompom, drill team

Please mark one for each activity in which you have participated THIS SCHOOL YEAR. Mark the highest number that applies on each line.

- An intramural team sport (baseball, basketball, football, soccer, hockey, etc.)
- An intramural individual sport (cross-country, gymnastics, golf, tennis, track, wrestling, swimming, etc.)

## Appendix 2: Methodology

**S**tandard multivariate regression techniques were employed to determine whether the key variables of interest, religious participation and secular participation, have a significant impact on the likelihood of graduating from high school on time and total years of educational attainment, after controlling for other background characteristics and life circumstances.

Modeling and analysis are then repeated for two subsamples, to determine whether the relationship between participation and success is the same for certain groups as for adolescents as a whole. The first subgroup includes only those adolescents who grew up in the lowest income quartile. Poor adolescents might gain more from secular or religious participation because of the relatively fewer resources available to them in the home, and because organizations may be able to offset some of the myriad disadvantages these adolescents face, either directly or indirectly. In the 1988 survey, when family income is observed, the lowest quartile included families earning up to \$19,999, which is above the poverty threshold but nonetheless reflects a very low level of income.

The second subgroup includes only minority adolescents. Minority adolescents might have a different experience with religious participation because religious institutions are highly racially segregated (Roof and McKinney 1987; Smith, Denton et al. 2002), and the religious institutions that minorities belong to are quite different in nature and scope of activities than non-minority institutions (Chaves and Higgins 1992; Rubin, Billingsley et al. 1994; Eng, Hatch et al. 1985; Greenberg 1998; Mews 1989).

Regression models include a wide range of family and individual characteristics as control variables. Including these variables as controls allows the analyst to determine the extent to which these factors account for the observed variation in outcomes among children. That is, including these variables as controls allows analysis to sort out the influences of these variables from the influence of the key variables of interest (religious participation and secular participation). For instance, by including “intact family status” in the model, the estimated effect of religious (or

secular) participation can be distinguished from underlying differences in intact family status. Variables to be included in this study are listed below:

1. Outcomes
  1. On-time graduation
  2. Total educational attainment
2. Key explanatory variables: religious participation
  - a. Participation in extra religious activities
  - b. Participation in groups and institutions
3. Religious control variables
  - c. Attendance at Worship Services
  - d. Denomination
  - e. Importance of Religion
  - f. Religiosity
4. Family Characteristics
  - g. Intact Family Status
  - h. Parent a Teen at Child’s Birth
  - i. Number of Siblings
  - j. Family Income
  - k. Family Assets
  - l. Parents’ Educational Attainment
  - m. Working Parents
  - n. Residential Stability
  - o. Parental Involvement
  - p. Parents’ Immigrant Status and Language Spoken at Home
5. Individual Characteristics
  - q. Gender

- r. Race/Ethnicity
- s. Disability Status
- t. Victimization at or en Route to School

A relatively complex modeling scheme is employed to address the research questions described in section I. For each outcome, the results of three separate modeling efforts are reported. The first set of models includes religious participation variables, the second set of models includes secular participation variables, and the third set of models includes both; all three include a full set of background variables as controls. The strategy behind this approach is to explore first whether participation in general has a role in outcomes, whether it is religious participation (in the first set of models) or secular participation (in the second set of models), and then whether different types of participation (religious or secular) have different effects on the outcomes (in the third set of models).

Within each set of models, three separate specifications are implemented with the intention of further refining an understanding of the nature of par-

ticipation that makes a difference. For each set of models, the first specification denotes whether the adolescent has participated in any (religious or secular) activity at any point from 8th to 12th grade, in order to reveal whether having even minimal exposure is sufficient to make a difference. The second specification measures whether the adolescent has participated in at least one activity in each of the survey years, 8th, 10th, and 12th grades, to explore the importance of consistency of participation. Finally, the third specification includes separate variables for participation in each of the grade levels in order to reveal whether the timing of participation makes a difference.

Then all three specifications of all three models, run separately for both of the outcomes, are run for different data sets. First, modeling for the full sample of adolescents reveals the impact of religious participation on adolescents as a group. The second model includes only adolescents who were in the lowest income quartile in 8th grade, while the third model includes only non-white adolescents. These models are performed to detect whether participation has a different impact on these subgroups on the population.

### Appendix 3: Other Factors That Influence the Likelihood of Graduating On-Time

**B**elow are listed the estimated effects of each of the control variables included in the models used in this study. These figures correspond to the model with both religious and secular forms of participation. “NS” denotes that the factor has no significant impact on educational attainment.

• attended worship services in 10th grade + 3.0%	• born to at least one immigrant parent + 13.6%
• attended worship services in 12th grade+ 14.9%	• English not dominant language at home- 74.8%
• identified self as religious or that religion is important + 57.2%	• gender = male - 16.3%
• parents were together throughout + 85.1%	• disabled - 52.7%
• born to a teen parent - 144.5%	• became a teen parent - 2678%
• per additional sibling -18.9%	• got in trouble at school in 8th grade -99.6%
• one parent did not graduate from high school - 66.3%	• got in trouble at school in 10th grade -96.5%
• at least one parent worked full-time while child was in 8th grade + 13.2%	• got in trouble at school in 12th grade - 81.8%
• at least one parent worked full-time while child was in 12th grade - 53.6%	• reported drinking in 10th grade NS
• per each additional move in high school- 63.6%	• reported drinking in 12th grade -2.1%
	• reported using drugs in 10th grade -12.2%
	• reported using drugs in 12th grade -17.4%

#### Appendix 4: Other Factors That Influence Educational Attainment (Total Number of Years of Education)

**B**elow are listed the estimated effects of each of the control variables included in the models used in this study. These figures correspond to the model with both religious and secular forms of participation. “NS” denotes that the factor has no significant impact on educational attainment.

• attended worship services in 10th grade	NS	• English not dominant language at home	NS
• attended worship services in 12th grade	+ 1.9 months	• gender = male	- 1.9 months
• identified self as religious or that religion is important	-1.2 months	• disabled	- 3.2 months
• parents were together throughout	+ 2.1 months	• became a teen parent	- 1 yr, 3.2 months
• born to a teen parent	- 5.0 months	• got in trouble at school in 8th grade	-2.3 months
• per additional sibling	-0.5 months	• got in trouble at school in 10th grade	-2.0 months
• one parent did not graduate from high school	- 1 yr, 4.2 months	• got in trouble at school in 12th grade	-2.0 months
• at least one parent worked full-time while child was in 8th grade	NS	• reported drinking in 10th grade	NS
• at least one parent worked full-time while child was in 12th grade	NS	• reported drinking in 12th grade	NS
• per each additional move in high school	-1.7 months	• reported using drugs in 10th grade	- 1.2 months
• born to at least one immigrant parent	+ 2.3 months	• reported using drugs in 12th grade	- 1.9 months

## Appendix 5: Charitable Choice, the Faith-Based Initiative, and the Separation of Church and State

**C**haritable choice was first adopted as a matter of federal law as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (“welfare reform” P.L. 104-193; 1996). Through the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) Program of this Act, states are given block grants to set up their own programs of services and cash assistance. States have broad latitude in making arrangements for social services, within federal guidelines. States can provide services directly through state or local government agencies, provide vouchers to TANF participants, or arrange for private, nonprofit organizations to provide the services, either through grants, contracts, or some other arrangement. The charitable choice provisions stipulate that if a state or local government opts to arrange for services through private, nonprofit organizations, and if it uses federal money to fund these services, then it may not exclude or disadvantage church-based or church-affiliated organizations solely because of their religious nature (Center for Public Justice 1997).

Charitable choice provisions have also been adopted and made applicable to the Community Services Block Grant funds provided in the Community Opportunities, Accountability, and Training and Educational Services Act (Community Services Block Grant Act, Public Law 105-285; 1998); the Children’s Health Act of 2000 (Public Law 106-310; 2000); and the New Markets Venture Capital Program Act (Public Law 106 -554; 2000), (Independent Sector undated). The U.S. House of Representatives approved the “Community Solutions Act” (HR 7) in 2001 (National Conference of State Legislatures 2001), which would significantly broaden the applicability of charitable choice to include housing, juvenile justice, community development, job training, child welfare and child care, crime prevention, elderly services, domestic violence and hunger relief (Twohey 2001).

The purpose of charitable choice is to allow religious organizations to apply for funds directly from the government and to provide services directly to clients, rather than having to establish an affiliated nonprofit organization to engage in these activities. It accomplishes this purpose through the following principles (Santorum 2001; White House 2001) :

- Religious groups may compete with secular groups on the same basis for federal funding, without penalty due their religious nature, as long as they are implemented consistent with the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution.
- Religious groups may retain their “religious character,” including the hiring of persons only that share their religious views, and maintaining a “religious atmosphere.”
- Services must be provided to clients without discrimination, i.e., without requiring that they share the group’s religious views or participate in religious activities. A secular alternative must be available, although not necessarily from the same provider.
- Government funds cannot be used for inherently religious activities, such as worship or proselytizing. Recipients of federal funds must be willing to keep detailed records of spending and submit to financial audits of the use of government funds to demonstrate compliance with this condition.



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## About the Author

Nancy Augustine Gardner served as the Harold Howe II Youth Policy Fellow at the American Youth Policy Forum from July 2003 – June 2004. The Fellowship is supported under a grant from the Ford Foundation and is designed to help attract talented and high-achieving scholars to the field of youth work and youth policy development, and expand the knowledge base for improving policy and practice. The Fellow carries out a self-designed project on a significant issue in youth policy, practice, research or program evaluation, focusing particularly on disadvantaged youth.

Ms. Gardner brings almost ten years of experience in local government policymaking to her current research interests, which focus on the long-term effects of family background, neighborhood characteristics, and institutional involvement in the eventual educational attainment and early labor market experiences of disadvantaged children. As the inaugural Harold Howe II Youth Policy Fellow, Ms. Gardner expects to focus on identifying the factors that contribute to successful escapes from poverty for children.

Ms. Gardner is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in public policy (urban policy concentration) at The George Washington University. She previously earned a Master of Arts in economics from Georgetown University and a Master of Urban and Environmental Planning from the University of Virginia. Following completion of her doctorate (expected in 2004), she hopes to continue research related to urban issues and the life chances of children, particularly disadvantaged children.

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