

What Religious School Parents Want: Evidence from the 2013 Fordham Study

“What Parents Want” is a report commissioned by the Fordham Institute, a major think tank in the United States focusing on school reform. It is based on a survey that asked 2,007 American parents of school-age children about the educational goals and the school characteristics that are most important to them.

Unfortunately, the survey data does not allow a detailed breakdown of parents by the kind of religious school their children attend. But it does allow us to compare parents with children in religious schools—primarily Catholic and evangelical Protestant school parents—and parents in other school types of schools.

In this study, parents were presented with a list of educational and school priorities and asked to choose the ones that were most important to them. In the end, researchers were able to scale 17 educational goals and 30 school characteristics according to parent choices. Parents of 134 children in religious schools completed the survey, which reflects fairly closely the percentage of families in U.S. religious schools but may not provide a large enough sample size to detect important differences across school sectors. In addition, the school sector differences reported here should be considered suggestive but not conclusive since the nature of the sampling, which was based on an internet panel, makes it difficult to be

confident of statistical tests of significance differences. A final concern is that the data only allows us to break down the averages for each of four broad school sectors: public, charter, religious, and nonreligious private. That said, we report below our analysis of data generously provided to us by the Fordham Institute.

Religious School Parents Have Mainstream Concerns

The study finds that parents are not starkly divided on what they want from schools. Instead of finding strong differences in terms of what parents want from schools, the results show broad agreement on the core functions of school. The average rankings of all parent groups across school types showed four core concerns when it comes to their children’s schooling. Parents want, in descending order, 1) for their children to learn “good study habits and self-discipline,” 2) for their children to develop “strong critical thinking,” 3) for their children to learn “strong verbal and written communication skills,” and 4) for schools to offer “a strong core curriculum in reading and mathematics.”

Religious school parents share these top four concerns. The only apparent difference is that a core curriculum is their top concern and verbal and written communication is the least important of the four.

Religious school parents have priorities for schools that are consistent with many of the core goals of public education. The similarity across sectors provides evidence that religious school parents are not placing their children in religious schools for reasons that some might consider private or parochial. In fact, along with parents in other school sectors, religious school parents are likely to demand that their schools teach the educational basics well.

Religious School Parents Care About Moral Formation and Student Behavior

That is not to say that religious school parents are not different in meaningful ways. They emphasized “developing a strong moral code of conduct” significantly more than did most other groups of parents. With an average ranking of 6.1 (where a “1” indicates *highest* priority), religious parents ranked this characteristic as the fifth most important of all school goals. For all parents, moral education still ranks quite high, with an average priority ranking of 7.4. Yet, religious school parents would push moral education even higher as an educational goal.

Similarly, across all parent groups, religious school parents cared the most that schools emphasize high moral standards for student behavior. While the average group of parents gave this educational goal a ranking of 9.9, religious school parents gave student moral behavior an 8.6 on average, which indicates that this goal was a somewhat more critical educational goal for religious school parents.

Religious school parents were the second highest group in caring about “character development, ethics, and/or morality.” Religious school parents cared more about this potential school function,

ranking it as a higher priority (8.8) than the average parent (10.0).

Religious School Parents Value Small Schools That Echo Their Personal Beliefs

Parents in all school sectors tended to downplay the importance of a small student body. The non-religious private school parents, however, ranked this goal higher than parents in other sectors. Religious school parents were similar to non-religious private school parents in seeing this goal as a relatively higher priority (17.8 versus 20.8). Still, in comparison to all the goals considered, parents across sectors did not see this goal as a high priority.

Additionally, while again being a relatively low priority for most parents, having schools that teach curriculum compatible with parents’ personal beliefs was relatively more important (14.1 versus an average of 18.2) for religious school parents. We can interpret this as consistent with the view that parents in religious schools value the connection to their family life that a religious school represents. The religious connection between home and school resonates with religious school parents, but is not a particularly high educational goal.

Less Emphasis on Life Skills, Vocational Training, and Programs for Struggling Students

Religious school parents were relatively less likely than the average parent to emphasize the importance of schools offering strong education in life skills, such as money management and nutrition (10.8 versus 8.6). They are significantly

different from traditional public school parents, who ranked this programming as relatively more important (8.0).

Religious school parents were not distinctive regarding the priority they placed on children developing job skills at school that do not require further schooling (12.5 versus 12.9). But religious school parents emphasized this less than charter school parents, who ranked it as relatively important (10.9).

Religious school parents were also significantly less likely than average to prioritize schools offering programming for struggling students or students with special needs. Religious school parents ultimately ranked this low on their list (17.0), while the average parent ranked it 13.7 and traditional public school parents, with an average of 13.3, found it even more important. It is difficult to explain this finding. It may reflect a concern that these programs crowd out a core liberal arts or college prep curriculum (though see contrary evidence below). Or it may reflect the distribution of special needs children, who are more likely to be found in the public sector where additional funding and established programs are more readily available.

Less Emphasis on Advanced Students, Project-Based Learning, and Individual Interest Pursuit

Not only were religious school parents less likely to emphasize job skills and programming for struggling students, they were also less likely to prioritize programming for advanced students. While a still relatively high priority at 11.4, religious school parents were slightly less enamored with this goal than the average parent (10.5). Nonreligious private schools and public magnet

school parents ranked this goal as even more vital (7.3 and 5.7, respectively).

On average parents ranked college goals as a relatively high priority. Religious school parents, however, set a lower priority for teaching students “how important it is to go to college” than did the average parent (10.1 versus 9.3) and significantly lower than charter school parents (8.3).

While STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) programs were ranked as important for all parents types, religious school parents ranked this as a lower priority than the average (8.5 versus 6.8) and less important than it was for traditional public school parents (6.9).

Religious school parents also disvalued an emphasis on hands-on or project-based learning compared to the average parent (11.1 versus 10.3) and compared to traditional public school parents (9.6).

All parents prioritized schools inculcating in students the ability to identify interests and pursue their talents on their own, but religious school parents cared about this relatively less than other parents (8.5 versus 7.1). This was an emphasis that nonreligious private school (6.5) and traditional public school parents (6.9) cared about significantly more. This finding may reflect a concern with progressive pedagogy and support for the place of cultural and school authority in education.

Religious School Parents and Fordham’s Parent Typology

Since the study identified more commonality among parents than difference, the Fordham researchers dug deeper to identify patterns of priority differences among parents. What they found was that commonly used parent subgroups, based

on race/ethnicity, income, or school type, did not show distinctive subgroup differences. It was only when investigating certain goals and priorities that tended to be lower ranked that identifiable subgroups emerged.

Based on six educational goals that seemed to divide parents, the study identified six types of parents. The most common were the *Pragmatists* (36% of all parents). *Pragmatists* were more likely to prioritize vocational and job-related programs than average. As was shown above, religious school parents were least likely among all parent types to emphasize this goal. What is distinctive about religious school parents, then, is that other priorities come before a vocational emphasis in school. They are not *Pragmatists*.

The second most common are the *Jeffersonians* (24%), who were more likely than average to prioritize school instruction in citizenship, democracy, and leadership. The study found that this group of parents was slightly more likely to be Christian, but there was no significant difference between religious school parents and average parents in ranking this educational goal. Religious school parents are no more or less likely to be *Jeffersonians* than parents of any other school type. This finding runs counter to common concerns about the lack of emphasis on civic education in religious schools. There is no pressure from religious school parents that would hinder the teaching of the commons in religious schools.

The third parent group, the *Test Score Hawks* (23%), care more than average about children attaining “high test scores.” Religious school parents do rank this as a higher priority than average (14.9 versus 16.3), but it is not a statistically significant difference. We can conclude that religious school parents are as concerned about test scores as other parents, but not more so.

With the fourth and fifth groups, *Multiculturalists* (22%) and *Expressionists* (15%), who care about their children learning “to work with people from diverse backgrounds” and receiving emphasis on “arts and music education,” respectively, the Fordham study finds that religious parents care less than average about these priorities. However, the difference between religious school parents and the average parent is not statistically significant.

Finally, the sixth group, *Strivers* (12%), consists of those parents who care more than average about their child being accepted into a top-tier college. Religious school parents care about this priority only an average amount. This is perhaps surprising given common notions that attending private schools is about achieving social advancement. At least for the average religious school parent, this does not appear to be the case.

All things considered, religious school parents do not fit neatly into any of the categories identified by the Fordham Institute. While they do seem less likely than the average to fall into the *Pragmatist* group, it is not possible to predict clearly religious parent leanings toward or away from these parent groups.

Conclusions

What we can learn from this study is that many of the public purposes of education are held in common by American parents, including religious school parents. When prioritizing a wide-ranging list of educational goals, all parents want schools to teach 1) “good study habits and self-discipline,” 2) “strong critical thinking,” 3) “strong verbal and written communication skills,” and 4) “a strong core curriculum in reading and mathematics.” Religious school parents value these educational goals as much as parents of children in other school

sectors. And they value civic formation goals of public education no less than other parents.

The study also finds that while religious school parents are a lot like the average parent of school age children, there are some differences at the margins. They tend to prioritize moral formation and high standards for student behavior more than the average parent. They also care more about sending their children to small schools and to schools that have a tight relationship with families. In general, then, we have some limited evidence that after achieving the main goals of a public curriculum, religious school parents favor the kind of school that can more tightly connect the character and moral formation goals of the family with the education. This may be consistent with an emphasis on an effective school community in which family and school work together for socialization of children in many dimensions.

Religious school parents appear to oppose a progressive pedagogy that emphasizes student choice and a utilitarian approach to education. There is some evidence that religious school parents are more supportive of a strong core academic curriculum that is not distracted by a focus on life skills, job skills, and programming for struggling students. They put less emphasis than the average parent on developing students who pursue their individual interests and talents, which often is linked to project-based learning. We might think of religious school parents as most comfortable with a “great books” or traditional liberal arts focus on the classic texts and ideas within Western civilization, though we lack sufficient evidence from this study to make that claim definitively. But we also note that the concern of religious school parents for a core curriculum for all students reduces their interest not only for a vocational or technical curriculum but also for special programming for advanced students. The religious school parents

seem to favor a school that provides a curriculum with a “common core” that all students must take. This may result from religious school parents’ vision of the ideal school as a united and authoritative community.

Still, we need to be cautious in making interpretations based on the findings presented here. One of the most significant concerns is that it is not possible to break the “religious school” sector into more meaningful categories, such as Catholic, Jewish, evangelical Protestant, and other religious school sectors. Given the size of these religious school sectors, we can be sure that most of the weight is carried by the Catholic and evangelical Protestant sector. But we would expect fairly significant differences in school priorities across parents in these two groups. That said, it is still possible that there are some common school priorities across parents in diverse religious school sectors that are reflected in our findings here.

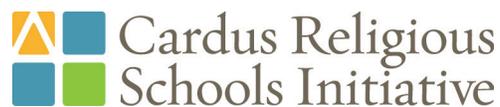
Appendix A: Methodology

In 2012 the Fordham Institute worked with Harris Interactive to conduct a survey of parents and guardians of students in K-12 public and private schools in the United States. There were 2,007 participants (all over age 18) surveyed online in August 2012. Of the 2,007 parents, 46% were male, and 56% were female. The mean age of the respondents was 42.5 years. The racial composition of the respondents was 65% White, 17% Hispanic, 9% Black or African-American, 6% Asian or Pacific Islander, 1% other, and 1% declined to answer. The purpose of the survey was to understand and prioritize parents’ educational values for their children (Zeehandelaar & Winkler 2013). Since the list of educational values that parents possess for their children can be very long, the surveyors used a technique called

maximum-difference scaling so values could be identified using sets of only a handful of options at a time.

One possible limitation of the study is that the sample may not be generalizable to the national population because of convenience sampling. The researchers have weighted the data to reflect the composition of parents and guardians of K-12

students in the population. But, because of convenience sampling (the sample included those who had previously agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys), estimates of sampling error cannot be calculated (Zeehandelaar & Winkler 2013). In addition, we would like to see a higher sample size to ensure that important differences between school sectors can be detected using the usual standards of statistical significance.



University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame IN 46556
<http://crsi.nd.edu>