

Cardus Report: ACSI Schools

Accredited

VS.

Nonaccredited

By Derek Keenan

ACSI has reported rather extensively on the *Cardus Education Survey (CES)* since the release of the data in 2011. The *CES* surveyed graduates of religious schools in North America. It investigated three areas of the religious school mission: spiritual formation, academic development, and cultural engagement. The results were disaggregated into these school categories: conservative Protestant, Roman Catholic, nonreligious private, and homeschooling families. A comparative baseline for the data was established by surveying public school graduates.

The introduction to the Executive Summary of the *CES* notes the following:

Though Christian schools have served a vital role in the educational landscape of North America for over 400 years, a comprehensive study of the contemporary outcomes of these schools is absent from the current research base. Faith-based education in the United States dates back to 1606, when the first Catholic school was established in what is now known as St. Augustine, Florida (White House Domestic Policy Council 2008). From that time until late in the 18th century, the purpose of education in the U.S. was centered on religion; early religious schools in New England were created to ensure that the Puritan faith was passed on from generation to generation as required by the *Old Deluder Satan Act* of 1647. For three centuries, it was assumed public schooling was rooted in the Christian faith. (Pennings et al. 2011a, 9)

The goal of the *CES* was to engage the complexity of the religious school landscape and seek a deeper understanding of both the motivations and outcomes of Christian schooling. The information was gathered from religious school graduates, ages 24–39. The study controlled for over 30 variables in categories such as family relationships, how often they attend church, and educational attainment (Pennings et al. 2011a, 12).

In general, the results of the *CES* portrayed conservative Christian school graduates as ideal members of their community, their church, and their families. Christian school graduates give the most to their church and to other missional activities. They also volunteer more in service to others than any other category (Pennings et al. 2011a, 19). The area where Christian school graduates were rated below their Catholic school peers was in academic rigor. Catholic schools require more courses than Protestant Christian schools in most subject areas. Catholic school graduates also attend more selective colleges and universities than the norm for Christian school graduates (31).

ACSI was interested, as it engaged in supporting the *CES*, in seeing if there were significant differences between the two categories of ACSI member schools—accredited and nonaccredited members. Cardus sampled within the *CES* Christian school administrators in accredited and nonaccredited schools to provide a data set regarding the variances between the two types of ACSI member schools. Cardus submitted 400

pages of data about this aspect of the study. The data indicated the measure of difference between ACSI-accredited schools (AS) and nonaccredited schools (NAS) as well as among other conservative Protestant schools (CPS) and Catholic schools (CS).

The data showed that accredited schools are usually larger than nonaccredited schools. Total enrollment in AS was 524 students, compared with 288 students in NAS (Pennings et al. 2011b, 298). High school enrollment, grades 9–12, in AS was almost twice that of NAS, 175 students compared with 92 students (297). AS give almost three times as much financial aid to students than NAS (299), and AS have more programs for students with learning disabilities (301). The student dropout rate is negligible in all ACSI schools (308).

One section of comparison was about what the school emphasizes in its mission, the training of its students, and the student outcomes it expects to assist parents in embedding in students' lives. Many areas indicated no significant difference between the AS and the NAS, but there were several areas of notable difference. Assessment on standardized tests seems to be more of a priority for AS than for NAS schools (Pennings et al. 2011b, 2) as well as getting into highly selective colleges or universities (4). Accredited schools rank just below the CS in this regard though. AS rank the highest of all school categories in preparing students to confront harmful cultural trends in the United States (6). Schools were asked to rank their top priorities as schools; AS emphasize college or university admission for graduates, 51.7 percent (27), while NAS emphasize volunteering and having a healthy marriage and family life, 61.3 percent each (33 and 38). Both accredited and nonaccredited ACSI schools show a stronger emphasis on a close personal relationship with God than other conservative Protestant Christian schools and Catholic schools do (65).

In student development goals, all schools were rated about the same in mathematics, science, history, literature, critical thinking, health, and other areas such as concern for the environment (Pennings et al. 2011b, 39, 40, 43, 44, and 52). In regard to Christian worldview, both accredited and nonaccredited ACSI

schools rate higher than ACSI nonmember schools and Catholic schools (53).

In the academic courses for middle and high schools, there are a number of significant differences between accredited ACSI schools (AS), nonaccredited ACSI schools (NAS), other conservative Protestant schools (CPS), and Catholic schools (CS). Notable areas are listed in the chart below (Pennings et al. 2011b 150, 152–153, 155, 157, and 160–61):

	AS	NAS	CPS	CS
Advanced Placement Courses*	6	3	3	9
Required Mathematics Courses**	7	5	5	6
Required Science Courses**	7	5	4	5
Bible/Theology Courses**	8	5	5	6
Foreign Language Courses**	4	3	2	3
Social Studies Courses (Not including civics/government)**	5	4	4	4
Physical Education**	3	3	3	3

*Number of courses offered

**Number of semesters

The curriculum of a school is supported by the textbooks, but for some schools the textbook is the curriculum rather than a resource for a school-planned learning program. AS indicate that they use books from conservative Christian publishers and other publishers (Pennings et al. 2011b, 171). A little less than one-third of AS use a conservative Christian publisher, while 58 percent of NAS do (172). Eighty-nine percent of students in accredited schools are in a college-preparatory program, while only 75 percent of students in nonaccredited schools are (194). Over 62 percent of AS indicate improved student academic performance over the last five years, while less than 50 percent of NAS do so (229). More than half of AS

require students to take the college entrance exams, while only about one-third of NAS do (357).

Almost 80 percent of teachers in AS are certified, and 18 percent of them do some teaching outside of their field. Sixty-three percent of teachers in NAS are certified, and almost 22 percent of them teach out of their field (Pennings et al. 2011b, 263). Almost 27 percent of the school board in NAS is made up of pastors, while only 14 percent of the board in AS is (271).

In regard to Christian worldview, both accredited and nonaccredited ACSI schools rate higher than ACSI nonmember schools and Catholic schools.



In this age of blended, shared, cooperative, and online learning, there is an increasing diversity in the variety of educational means being utilized by schools. Nonaccredited member schools and other conservative Protestant schools tend not to engage their students with local colleges and universities. Over half of these schools do not have this type of collaborative learning opportunities for their students, while about two-thirds of ACSI-accredited and Catholic schools have students enrolled in local higher educational institutions (Pennings et al. 2011b, 184). More accredited member schools are utilizing distance learning courses than any other group, with only about 20 percent of these not having online course work for their students (186). Two percent of accredited schools have part-time homeschool students, while other Protestant school groups tend to have about 5 percent of their students in homeschooling (191).

The Cardus study questioned the barriers to student learning, and most schools indicated that very few of those barriers were from lack of parent support, poor teachers, or lack of computers and software (Pennings et al. 2011b, 202–03, 206–07, and 216–17). Almost 21 percent of accredited schools desire more multimedia resources, while almost 40 percent of Catholic schools have the same need. About 10 percent of nonaccredited schools need more multimedia resources.

For student participation in clubs, groups, mission trips, and the like, there was a significant difference between ACSI schools, both accredited schools (AS) and nonaccredited (NAS), and the other conservative Protestant (CPS) and Catholic schools (CS). See the chart below for the comparisons in percentages (Pennings et al. 2011b, 118–19, 120, 122, and 129–30):

	AS	NAS	CPS	CS
Academic Clubs	32	22	17	41
Student Political Groups	13	8	8	14
Volunteer Groups	62	72	65	82
Student Prayer Groups	45	49	47	27
Mission Trips (International)	56	47	55	31
Mission Trips (United States and Canada)	89	83	60	74

Other differences, some more notable than others, between AS and NAS were in areas of schools' security and administration. Almost 52 percent of AS require faculty and staff to wear name badges, while only 31 percent of NAS do (Pennings et al. 2011b, 325). AS also make more use of cameras for security than NAS (326). AS tend to have administrators with more years of experience as an administrator (373). And pastors have less influence on school policy decisions in AS (285).

The Cardus study of accredited and nonaccredited ACSI schools tends to do what good studies often do, that is, provide a thought-provoking set of data that encourages a deeper dive into the general results. It stirs questions that should encourage individual schools, and certainly this association, to support activities that strengthen the Christian school movement by strengthening schools. Two of those questions are, "Do quality schools become accredited? Or do schools become accredited on their journey to quality?" It appears that both of these are simultaneously true. Schools seek to have their quality recognized, and schools of recognized quality are inherently on a mission to continue to improve.

References

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