

New Report: Religious Participation Linked to Stronger Academic Outcomes for Students

Harvard and BYU researchers advocate for a "Third Way" — nonsectarian partnerships between public schools and faith organizations to improve learning opportunities

March 2026, Cambridge, MA / Provo, UT — A new report from researchers at Harvard Graduate School of Education and Brigham Young University's Wheatley Institute presents compelling evidence that religious faith can serve as an untapped resource to improve learning opportunities for all students — particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Authored by Bryant Jensen, Professor of Teacher Education at Brigham Young University and Wheatley Institute Affiliate Scholar, and Irvin L. Scott, Senior Lecturer at Harvard Graduate School of Education and founding director of the Leadership Initiative for Faith and Education (LIFE) at Harvard University, the report, "Faith in Educational Renewal: Religion as a Resource to Transform Learning Opportunities," explains the benefits of partnerships between public schools and the nation's more than 350,000 houses of worship to address persistent learning gaps.

"After nearly two centuries, the promise of U.S. public schools to foster effective and meaningful learning opportunities for all children across race and social class remains unfulfilled," said Jensen. "Large gaps in learning opportunities continue to persist by student race and ethnicity while opportunity gaps by gender and family income are widening. We believe religious faith can help bridge these gaps."

Seven in ten Americans identify with a faith tradition and religious faith plays a significant role in various dimensions of human flourishing. The authors define religious faith as including both (a) personal spiritual beliefs and practices and (b) participation in religious organizations that structure shared beliefs, values, and rituals that guide personal and community conduct.

Whereas the educational benefits of religious faith depend on one's level of observance, evidence suggests that nonbelievers can also benefit from religious faith as a resource in the PK–12 education ecosystem. Characterized as "abiders," students with high levels of religiosity experience the greatest benefits.

Organized into the three areas of the authors' review of extant literature, key findings include:

Religious Faith of Students and Families:

- Religiosity — measured through private practices like prayer and participation in public rituals and services — is associated with higher levels of student achievement, educational attainment, and aspirations for higher education.
- Students characterized as "abiders," those with high levels of religiosity, experience the greatest benefits.
- Students from working-class families benefit more from religious participation than their higher-income peers.
- Male students benefit more than female students, despite females reporting higher overall religious participation.

Educational Programs of Faith Organizations:

- Faith organizations offer various educational services, including donations of school supplies, tutoring, mentoring, college preparation assistance, youth development services, and parent education classes. Well-coordinated partnerships between schools and faith organizations can positively impact parental involvement and student reading outcomes.

Religious Faith of Educators:

- Teachers who feel "called" to the profession, often connected to spiritual devotion, are more intrinsically motivated. They draw on their religiosity/spirituality to manage stress, sustain enthusiasm, and engage meaningfully with students.

"While we do not advocate for public schools to teach religious doctrine or use public funds for religious purposes, partnerships with faith communities can offer untapped resources to enrich student learning opportunities, especially for those in disadvantaged communities," said Scott.

The authors urge a "third way" — in the nonsectarian tradition of Benjamin Franklin — that avoids two extremes: endorsing religion in schools on one end or entirely excluding it from the work of schools on the other.

Top recommendations for faith leaders, educators, policymakers, and researchers include the following:

1. Share information about existing school-faith partnerships.
2. Establish regular communication between faith communities and public schools.
3. Develop targeted educational programming within houses of worship based on local student needs.
4. Build coordinated partnerships between faith organizations and schools to address student learning needs.
5. Give educators opportunities to explore how their work and faith intersect.
6. Expand research on religious faith as an educational resource for improving learning opportunities for all students.

Religious faith has inspired many movements that expanded democracy and justice such as abolition, women's suffrage, and the Civil Rights Movement in American History.

"With more than 350,000 houses of worship across the U.S., the question is how we harness religious faith in similar ways today — to meet pressing and complex learning needs of our students," said Scott. "Improving learning opportunities for disadvantaged students requires moral resources that religious faith can help to provide."

These findings are encouraging and demonstrate the need for more research to understand further how religious faith impacts K-12 education and educators.

The full report is available at wheatley.byu.edu/Faith-in-Education

About the Authors

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About the Leadership Initiative for Faith and Education (LIFE)

The Leadership Initiative for Faith and Education (LIFE) at Harvard is working to organize discussions in support of stronger partnerships between schools and faith organizations. This report is part of that effort. The authors seek to provide faith and school leaders with

shared language and conceptual frameworks to more clearly define roles and activities within faith-school partnerships, with the goal of improving learning opportunities for all students.

About Wheatley Institute

Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University engages students, scholars, thought leaders, and the public in research supported work that fortifies the core institutions of the family, religion, and constitutional government. For more information, visit <https://wheatley.byu.edu/>.

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