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Study links private schools, religion and better marks for lagging students



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Monday, April 23, 2007

By **Mónica Ortiz Uribe**

Tribune-Herald staff writer

Minority and low-income students who attend private school and come from stable, religious families reach about the same level of academic success as their white and wealthier counterparts, according to a new study presented at Baylor University.

The study, commissioned by the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, was written by nonresident scholar William Jaynes, an education professor at California State University in Long Beach.

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William Jeynes

Jeynes' findings show the achievement gap between minority and white students is reduced by 20 percent to 25 percent among those who attend private school. The gap shrinks by a similar percentage between private school students of low and high socioeconomic status.

Educators and policymakers are well aware of the achievement gap and have long studied how to lessen it, said DeEtta Culbertson, spokeswoman for the Texas Education Agency.

"Over the last four or five decades, scholars and educators have really labored . . . on how to reduce this (achievement) gap," Jeynes said during a recent presentation about the study at Baylor. "Therefore, any study that can give us some insight on how to significantly reduce or even eliminate this gap deserves our attention."

The results were compiled from a three-year analysis by Jeynes of about 15 studies on the achievement gap. He also reviewed statistics from a sample of 20,706 12th grade students out of the National Educational Longitudinal Study, a nationwide data set gathered by the federal government.

Jeynes said the level of academic success at private schools has to do with school culture, parental involvement and encouragement of religious commitment. The vast majority of private schools in the data-sets Jeynes used were Christian.

"Few recent studies examine religion as a possible factor to consider when considering student achievement," said Perry Glazner, an associate professor at Baylor's School of Education, who studies religion in education. "(Jeynes) findings certainly are persuasive. If educators are really serious about closing the achievement gap, they should welcome (his) study and seek to explore the possible ramifications further."

#### Other benefits

In his research, Jeynes also found that private schools have a higher rate of racial harmony and that students were less likely to become involved in gangs or with illegal drugs.

Albert Beck, head of Texas Christian Academy in Waco, said most of his teachers consider what they do to be more than just a job.

"It's a ministry where (teachers) can pour their lives into students and children," Beck said. "There's a certain level of passion and commitment that propels what we try and accomplish here."

Jeynes argues that most private school families he studied draw strength from their religious commitment, which in turn leads to a more stable family and academic life.

Jeynes defines a "stable family" environment as one where both biological parents were present.

When considering data where students came from families that had a high religious commitment, Jeynes says the achievement gap virtually disappears.

Jeynes, a born-again Christian at the age of 18, argues that public schools should be more religiously tolerant.

"For (many) African American and Latino students their faith is a source of strength," he said. "Therefore this shouldn't be something that is discouraged in our public schools."

Jeynes suggested schools adopt something as simple as a moment of silence for optional prayer or the ability to write an essay on a religious subject.

Nolan Correa, principal at University High School, said the state already mandates a moment of silence at the end of the pledge of allegiance.

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Correa said a keen interest in a particular subject, whether it be religion or football, will help a student's performance. And, the public high school already has a Christian-based athletic team that has a little over 20 members, he said.

During the Baylor presentation Jaynes also encouraged policymakers to advocate for private school vouchers or a degree of tax relief for families who want to send their children to private schools.

"(These results) are exciting," Jaynes said. "Educators have been trying to . . . significantly reduce the gap for years and the answers have been staring us right in the face for decades."

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