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# The Hidden Role of Religiosity in Contemporary Public Education in the United States of America

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The Hidden Role of Religiosity in Contemporary Public Education in the  
United States of America

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Education Policy

by

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## ABSTRACT

The ‘separation of church and state’ is a fundamental precept of the United States, yet the phrase itself is not written in the Constitution and even Supreme Court justices disagree on how it should be defined. The ambiguity surrounding religious liberty is perhaps most felt in K-12 public education, where the fear of inflicting faith formation on impressionable students has inspired the vision of a secular, God-neutral, government-run school system. As such, federal and state laws dictate that public school educators who coerce students by promoting or inhibiting religious devotion risk losing their jobs. Yet, the reality is that the fabric of a school is woven by the people who work, learn, and play in it—and oftentimes those people and their religious faith are indivisible. In this circumstance, the religious faith of individuals becomes a stealth moderator of school-based decision-making and outcomes, and as such, the ‘separation of church and state’ in public education becomes a misnomer. This three-papers-on-a-theme dissertation interrogates the under-studied topic of the role that religiosity plays in K-12 public education. Employing both qualitative and quantitative methodology, I utilize a nationally representative survey on public school perceptions, criminal and civil court records from Milwaukee, and Twitter discourse about the firing of a praying football coach to explicate this often-controversial topic. As a result, this dissertation provides evidence of the statistically significant predictive power of religious faith on students, parents, and teachers. At the same time, this dissertation reveals the complexity and apprehension that everyday Americans have about religion in K-12 public schooling.

In my first study, I challenge the stereotype of Evangelical Christians being adversarial toward public education due to their faith by using parent and teacher survey data to compete the factors of religion, race, and political ideology to determine which identity drives discontent with

public schools. I find that the variable of religion carries no statistically significant effect.

Instead, race and political ideology are the major drivers of perception on public schooling, with political ideology having the greatest influence. In my second study, I found that low-income students of color in Milwaukee who either attended religious services at least once a week in 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade or attended a private, mostly religious high school had fewer criminal convictions and paternity suits by their mid-20s compared to their matched counterparts in Milwaukee Public Schools who came from homes with low religiosity. My third and final study is a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Twitter comments following the U.S. Supreme Court ruling of *Kennedy v. Bremerton*, which deemed it constitutional for a Christian public school football coach to pray mid-field with his players after a game. I discerned from the CDA that religious freedom was viewed in terms of winners and losers; that the public has opposite interpretations of what the phrase “separation of church and state” means; that people often interweave racism, abortion rights, and other social issues with their views on religious freedom; and that unfettered religious expression in public schools could have unintended consequences for Christians.

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Before I was born, God knew me and had a specific plan for me to touch the nations (Jeremiah 1:5). What is more, God knew the names of each person that I am about to recognize and the tremendous role they would play in my life. These individuals encouraged me to press forth against great odds and to focus on achieving my purpose, which is to shine the light of hope in the world. So I begin by thanking God in the name of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Apart from Him, I can do nothing (John 15:5), but through Him I can do all things (Philippians 4:13).

Next, I must thank my eldest child, Naomi Rhames. She had just graduated from high school, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, when I moved the family from Chicago to Northwest Arkansas to pursue my Ph.D. degree. She promised that she would hang in there with me until I graduated, and she did. Babysitting her younger siblings, cooking dinner, and running errands for the family when I couldn't do it. She rarely complained even though she too was juggling her own education to become a software developer. I would not have been able to earn this degree without Naomi's support. I also thank my two younger children Elise and KJ for being patient when I was sequestered in my bedroom, reading and writing for hours. My kiddos worked together to keep peace in the home, knowing that their mom was working hard to create a brighter future for them and for students everywhere like them. I am so proud of my children for being team players. I trust that my perseverance has taught them valuable lessons about life.

I would not be where I am today without the faithfulness and grace of my mother, Erma Anderson, and the hearty ambition of my late father, Robert J. Anderson. They raised me in church, thereby extending my family by the hundreds. My mother taught me the virtues of benevolence, reconciliation, and quiet leadership, which is activated in everything I do. My father taught me to be bold and courageous and to stand in the power of who I am and whose I am. I am most grateful to have been born an Anderson and for my ten siblings who have each

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who offered me higher pay to blog for another four years about how to make schooling work better for children; and a big thank you to Rick Hess who so generously invited me to his AEI K-12 Working Groups and empowered me to share my ideas about religious communities safely and legally supporting K-12 public schools with dozens of his friends in education policy and research; then there's the one-and-only Stacey Childress of NewSchools Venture Fund, my dream-maker, who wrote a check to support my vision for improving education and charged me with these words: "Now go be great!" These people tilled the soil that nurtured this dissertation. How can I not acknowledge Allison Slade of Namaste Charter School, the most inspirational principal that I've ever worked for? Then there's Ms. Jernagan, the parent who appreciated my role in her child's life so much that she took me on an all-expense paid trip to Cancun, Mexico. I am thankful for the spiritual family that took my kids and me in upon our lonely arrival to Fayetteville, Arkansas: Christ Community Church and the *historic* St. James Missionary Baptist Church. Thank you to Dr. Kathaleena Edward Monds, director of the Center for Educational Opportunity at Albany State University, for awarding me the research grant that funded the second paper in my dissertation. So many souls invested in me, encouraged me, and lovingly corrected me. If I listed them all, my Acknowledgements would be longer than my dissertation.

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Finally, and most earnestly, I want to thank my second paper co-author, professor, faculty advisor, department chair, and dissertation committee chair extraordinaire, Dr. Patrick Wolf! Without Dr. Wolf's steadfast care and support, I might not have endured the pressures of the EDRE program and life as a broken-hearted-single-mother-Ph.D.-student from Chicago in a Southern state amidst the insane 2020 election and a so-called "racial reckoning" at the height of a global pandemic. I cried on Dr. Wolf's proverbial shoulder many times, and after which he calmly spoke of a "pot of gold" awaiting me upon graduation. I always left his office feeling a little better. Moreover, he made sure I exited with a plan for how I will achieve the next most important thing. I have no doubt that God Almighty handpicked Dr. Wolf to take my case.

This Acknowledgement is adequate but not sufficient. Therefore, if you have done anything to help me on this journey to achieving my doctoral degree, big or small, please know that I see you and I truly appreciate you. Most of all, God knows all the good works you have done for me, and I pray that He rewards you generously for it (Colossians 3:23-24).

## DEDICATION

To Naomi, Elise, and KJ

To know me is to know that I love my children.

## EPIGRAPH

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the  
Holy One is understanding.”

-Proverbs 9:10

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## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation entitled, *The Hidden Role of Religiosity in Contemporary Public Education in the United States of America*, offers three papers that demonstrate how religious faith manifests itself in the human experience of educating and being educated, even within public schools. The bulk of modern academic research regarding religion's role in education exists in the context of private religious schooling, not in public education. This is because many educators and researchers alike often assume that the First Amendment's Establishment Clause—commonly referred to as the “separation of church and state”—forbids any form of religious expression in the public education system. My hypothesis is that an inherent interchange of the spirituality and intellectualism not only exists, but it may also be moderated by the racial and cultural identities of students, parents, teachers, and adults. If this is true—which I believe it is based on the findings of the studies contained in this volume—then education researchers would do well to investigate, not shun, the relationship among religion, race, and public education.

Look no further than to the Black Christian Church for proof of concept of religion's ability to transform educational outcomes. Laws were enacted in the early 1800s to make it illegal for enslaved African Americans to learn how to read and write (Consecrated Ground, n.d.), yet, even before slavery ended in 1865, Black congregations were using Sunday School as a covert way to provide literacy instruction to children and adults (Hale, 2001). From 1816-1893, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, for example, began enacting policies designed to leverage education to achieve Black liberation (Childs, 2009). One such strategy the AME Church employed was helping to establish several Historically Black Colleges and Universities

(HBCUs) including Morris Brown College, Paul Quinn College, Wilberforce University, and Edward Waters College (Sanders, 2020). Moreover, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s might not have occurred without the leadership and massive support of the Black Church. This fight for equal rights made an indelible impact on American education, namely in the desegregation of schools from the 1954 landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the passing of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which emphasized equal access to education for minority students and provided additional federal funding to high-poverty school districts to address achievement gaps (Archambault, 1980).

Existing empirical research has shown that religious engagement yields academic benefits for students of all racial and socioeconomic groups (Glanville et al., 2016; Muller & Ellison, 2001; Regnerus & Elder, 2003). However, low-income and/or Black American youth were found to be especially susceptible to social, emotional, and academic improvement when involved in a faith community (Brown & Gary, 1991; Regnerus, 2000; Regnerus, 2001; Jeynes, 2002; Johnson, 2008). One study found that African American youth's level of "religious socialization" or "the process by which an individual learns and internalizes attitudes, values, and behaviors within the context of a religious system of beliefs and practices" had a greater influence on educational achievement than did being raised in a two-parent household (Brown & Gary, 1991, p. 411, 421- 422). African Americans with no religious affiliation showed the lowest levels of religious socialization and reported the fewest years of education (Brown & Gary, 1991). A meta-analysis of studies seeking to determine the effects of religious schooling and personal religious commitment on African American and Hispanic students' academic achievement found significant and positive effects (Jeynes, 2002). Johnson (2008) found that

Black churches play a statistically significant role in reducing criminality among the African American youth that engage with them.

These studies affirm the long-held theories of early Black sociologists who insisted that the Black Church must work in tandem with, not in isolation from, the schools that serve Black children. Du Bois (1903) called African American churches “the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character. ... a real conservator of morals, a strengthener of family life, and the final authority on what is Good and Right.”

Thirty years later, Woodson (1933) agreed:

The Negro church ... is the great asset of the race. It is a part of the capital that the race must invest to make its future. The Negro church has taken the lead in education in the schools of the race, it has supplied a forum for the thought of the ‘highly educated’ Negro, it has originated a large portion of the business controlled by Negroes, and in many cases it has made it possible for Negro professional men to exist. (p. 21)

West (1982) asserted that it was impossible to adequately comprehend African American intellectual history and culture without acknowledging the immeasurable value of the Black Church. Billingsley (1992) wrote that the Black Church is both the epitome of the African American heritage and the primary hope for reform, adding, “Indeed no successful movement for improving the conditions of life for the African-American people has been mounted without the support of the church” (p. 350).

Despite the positive effects of religion on Black academic achievement and long-term life outcomes, the United States government began to enforce a code of strict separation between public schools and religious faith in the 1960s. The U.S. Supreme Court banned public school districts from mandating religious activity, such as the recitation of the Lord’s prayer and daily

devotional reading of the Ten Commandments (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962; *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 1963). The Court also prohibited restrictions on teaching that evolution was a viable scientific explanation of the genesis of life (*Epperson v. Arkansas*, 1968). Citing the Establishment Clause, which bars governmental entities from promoting or inhibiting religion, the Supreme Court mandated that public schools and the educators who are employed by them take a neutral position on all things related to religion. This served to silence religious speech in public schools for many years. Due in part to the tumult surrounding the redefined role of religion in public education and desegregation, Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 to set the policies that would govern religious liberties and racial equality in the nation's public schools. States and school districts that did not abide by the laws risked losing federal funding. Though the federal statute required the U.S. Department of Education to update the guidelines on religious liberties every two years, the last guidelines were published in 1995 under the Clinton Administration before being revised in 2020 under the Trump Administration. Most of the 13 years of silence regarding what was and was not constitutionally allowable in the name of religious freedom led to confusion, uncertainty, and fear among teachers and education leaders across the United States.

For example, in 2015, a Washington State high school football coach named Joseph Kennedy lost his job when he refused to abide by the Bremerton School District's edict to stop praying on the 50-yard line after games. The high-profile religious liberty case of *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* is the subject of the third study in this dissertation. In June 2022, conservative Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch authored the majority decision that favored Kennedy's right to pray, and he used similar language found in the Trump-era 2020 guidelines on religious expression in public school to make his point. On May 15, 2023, the Biden



Administration issued the latest guidance on constitutional prayer in public schools; it explicitly admonishes teachers and coaches not to allow their personal religious devotion to coerce students to pray—mirroring a vehement rebuke that liberal Supreme Court Justice Sonya Sotomayor gave Kennedy in her dissenting opinion.

The three papers of this dissertation take a pluralistic approach to research methodology. The two quantitative studies and one qualitative study reveal how the struggles relating to religion and race in public schools over the past 60 years have aged in their appearance but not in their essence. My first paper uses Phi Delta Kappan (PDK) poll data from 2019 to describe how perceptions of public schooling differ among Evangelical Christian parents and teachers compared to non-Evangelical Christian parents and teachers. In the first paper of this dissertation, *Religion, Race, or Politics? Which Identity Most Drives Concerns About Public Schooling in the United States*, I compete the factors of race, religion, and political ideology to empirically determine which identities influence K-12 public school parents' and teachers' uneasiness about pressure to fit in; religious bias; racism; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) bias; and Bible; civics; and comparative religion instruction in public schools. While Evangelical Christians have earned a reputation for being frustrated with public schooling, my study found an otherwise null effect of religion on levels of discontent. Instead, political and racial identities wielded the greatest amount of influence on perceptions of schooling, with political ideology narrowly placing first.

My second paper utilized regression analysis of longitudinal, closely curated student matching data from 2006 to 2018 to determine the impact that religious practice may have on long-term life outcomes. In the paper, *One or the Other: Parent Religiosity or Private School Choice May Reduce Crime and Paternity Disputes in Milwaukee*, my faculty advisor and co-

author Dr. Patrick Wolf and I examined the influence of parent religiosity on the effect that a school voucher program in Milwaukee may have had on long-term student outcomes such as criminality, out-of-wedlock births, municipal fines, and traffic tickets. With a sample of 2,182 students, we compared the life outcomes of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders who had attended mostly private religious schools and were from high- and low-religiosity families with their closely matched counterparts in Milwaukee Public Schools who were from high- and low- religiosity families. The findings suggest that access to a religious community at home or at school during early adolescence may have developed character traits that resulted in better decision making as adults.

My third and final paper is entitled, “*Are You Sure His Prayers Were ‘Silent’?*” *A Critical Discourse Analysis of Church-State Separation in Public Schools on Twitter Following Kennedy v. Bremerton*. With my qualitative professor and co-author Dr. Lorien Jordan, I analyzed a random sample of 442 comments from the 2,290 responses of a Twitter thread started by former Vice President Mike Pence to celebrate the favorable *Kennedy* decision. This study exposed the winners vs. losers mentality regarding the issue of religious freedom, rampant misunderstandings about what the phrase “separation of church and state” means, social distrust around issues of racism and other complexities that spilled over into the spirited debate about what is religious freedom, and questions about how to contain religious liberty in a truly pluralistic public school system.

Over the past several years, the U.S. Department of Education has seemed to have restored its commitment to informing the American public about the ways in which religious expression in public schools is constitutionally protected. The agency has disseminated the legal guardrails that must be in place to protect everyone’s religious freedom—especially that of impressionable K-12 public school students. This alone, however, is not enough. With the ever-

persistent racial and socioeconomic “achievement gap” (Goldhaber et al., 2022; Hanushek et al., 2022), youth depression and suicide rates at an all-time high (Bridge et al., 2023; Durante & Lau, 2022), and gun violence being the leading cause of death in children and teens (Andrews, 2022; Goldstick, 2022), there is a need for more practical and scientific inquiry about the ways in which faith-based interventions can legally and effectively work to address these problems in the context of public education (Rhames, 2020).

This dissertation launches groundbreaking research that opens a new domain of theory and knowledge about the ability of religious faith to motivate people to engage in public education in unique ways. It is critical to know whether our “secular” education system that boasts of an ethos of a church-state separation is motivated, challenged, or otherwise impacted by the often-stealth religious convictions of its parents, teachers, and students. My corpus of research suggests that religion/religiosity makes an independent contribution to the educational outcomes of children and adults in the same way as control variables such as race, sex, age, marital status, political ideology, and socioeconomic status do. Readers who are even slightly intrigued by the theory and analysis of the papers within this volume are strongly encouraged to join in the conversations about *The Hidden Role of Religiosity in Contemporary Public Education in the United States of America*.

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**Religion, Race, or Politics?**

**Which Identity Most Drives Concerns About Public Schooling in the United States?**

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### **Abstract**

Evangelical Christians have had a tumultuous relationship with public education in America in the 60 years since the U.S. Supreme Court banned teacher-led prayer and Bible readings and removed restrictions on teaching about evolution in the classroom. While religious convictions appear to have motivated Evangelical Christians' ongoing legal battles with public education policies and curriculum, little is empirically known about the magnitude of the role that political ideology and racial identity may have played in these fights. Today, some suggest that Evangelical Christians are more frustrated with public schooling than the general public and therefore are more willing to support private school choice options. Using data from a nationally representative survey from 2019, this study explores responses from Evangelical parents and teachers and non-Evangelical parents and teachers of various races and political perspectives to set up a competition between religion, race, and politics to determine which factor is generally the strongest predictor of concern with contemporary public schooling. The research questions in this study explore the correlations between Evangelicalism, political ideology, and race with 1) pressure to "fit in" or conform; 2) religious bias; 3) racism; 4) Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) bias; 5) improper Bible instruction; 6) civics content; and 7) comparative religion instruction. Results indicate Evangelicalism played no statistically significant role in parents' and teachers' levels of concern. Race and political ideology were highly competitive factors, but political ideology was the most influential factor of perceptions about public schooling.

**Keywords:** PDK poll, evangelical Christian parents and teachers, frustration in public schools, civics and comparative religion, conservatives, race, religion, and ideology in public education.



## Introduction

Evangelical Christian parents have had a tumultuous relationship with public education since the 1960s when the U.S. Supreme Court banned prayer, devotional Bible readings, and the prohibition on evolution instruction classroom (*Abington School District v. Schempp*, 1963; *Engel v. Vitale*, 1962; *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 1968). In the 1970s, sex education began to include condoms as an alternative to abstinence, setting off a firestorm of controversy among evangelical Christians (Harris, 2015). Because of the legal wrangling and conflicts in moral ideals, conventional wisdom suggests that Evangelical Christians are significantly more frustrated with public education than most other groups. With mounting academic research studying the effects of private school choice (EdChoice, 2020), a 2018 survey found that there is a need in America to allow independent and religious schools, not just public schools, to serve all children and the common good (Casagrande et al., 2019). For the past 60 years, Evangelical Christian advocacy groups have fought to preserve their moral values in public education through the courts, but perhaps they have changed their strategy by abandoning public schools and lobbying for private school choice. This study sought to uncover if the conventional wisdom of Evangelical frustration and discontent exists today.

In 2019, Phi Delta Kappan (PDK) conducted a national poll in English and Spanish through the Ipsos Knowledge Panel, which used probability-based sampling to randomly recruit participants to take the survey online. The goal of the survey was to measure the level of frustration of American adults, many of them teachers and parents, on a wide range of topics about public education. The survey included the question, “Would you describe yourself as a born-again or evangelical Christian?” To that question, 401, or 25.5%, of the parents and teachers in the sample answered in the affirmative, while 667 or 39.9 answered “no.” The 505 or

34.6% that refused to answer were coded as zeros or non-Evangelicals. In essence, 25.5% of the sample appeared to feel comfortable declaring themselves as Evangelical Christians, though there may have been Evangelicals in the sample that preferred not to self-identify as such. A 2005 Gallup poll found that 48% of Americans identified as Evangelicals (Newport & Carroll, 2005); however, from 1976 to 2005, Gallop polling has averaged Evangelicals as just under 39% of the U.S. population (Wheaton College, 2012). A 2019 religious landscape survey showed that just 25% of American adults self-identified as born again/Evangelicals, which is a subgroup of Protestant Christianity that encompasses 43% of the U.S. population (Pew Research Center, 2019).

The question of how frustrated Evangelical Christians are with public education is an important one, particularly considering a growing school choice movement that asks states to adopt laws to allow public tax dollars to fund school vouchers and education savings accounts so that students can access private religious schools and other schooling options besides just their residentially zoned neighborhood school. This paper seeks to discern whether the rate of concern among Evangelical Christian parents and teachers are in fact higher than those of other groups, and, if so, to identify the issues that trigger these concerns.

Moreover, this study pits religious identity against racial identity and political ideology to determine which of the three factors apply the most persuasive pressure toward influencing on the survey respondents' perceptions of public schooling. Surprisingly, the results of this study indicate that race and political ideology—not religion—accounted for much of the variation in teacher and parent concern with school conditions and practices. Between the two tightly competing factors, political ideology emerged as the most predictive influence of frustration with controversial issues within public education.

## **Literature Review**

### **Who are Born Again/Evangelicals?**

#### ***Spiritual***

Being “Evangelical” has six broad characteristics that make them a discrete group of believers, including being born again (Berber, 2009): 1) a firm belief in the supernaturally redemptive power of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, 2) the Bible's role as the definitive guide for proper Christian living, 3) the belief in the power of prayer, 4) an obligation to evangelistically share one's faith with others, and 5) adherence to a fairly strict moral code. Berger then described the sixth distinctive: the process of becoming born again, an act of individual choice to take up the Christian faith and to follow the teachings of Christ as presented through Scripture (Foubert et al., 2012).

In the Bible, Jesus told a Jewish religious leader that he cannot see the kingdom of God unless he is ‘born again,’ thus the origin of the term (John 3:3). Today, born again Christians are found in numerous denominations and interpret what being born again means in multiple ways (Foubert et al., 2012). A 1999 poll by Barna Research, the largest religious polling agency in the U.S., found that 76% of the 4,200 people interviewed considered themselves Christians, but only 40% said they were ‘saved’ or ‘born again.’ These terms are largely reserved for fundamentalists, certain Evangelicals, and conservative mainline denominations, rather than Roman Catholic and mainline/liberal Protestant denominations (Barna, 1999).

#### ***Racial***

In 2014, 70.6% of Americans were Christian, of whom 25.4% were Evangelicals and 6.5% were Historically Black Protestants; these two subgroups comprised nearly half of American Christianity (Pew Research Center, 2015a). Among Evangelicals, 76% are White,

11% Hispanic, 6% Black and 2% Asian (Pew Research Center, 2015b). While research on various racial groups' perceptions within Evangelical Christianity is limited, comparing views among Historically Black Protestants who attend predominately Black churches (i.e., “the Black Church”) and predominately White Protestant churches can provide insights on those possible distinctions. For example, 67% of Black Protestants reported attending predominately Black churches where 47% of those attendees reported hearing sermons on racial inequality, 19% on abortion, and 35% on criminal justice reform. Meanwhile, among the 10% of Black Protestants who attended predominately White churches, only 35% of those attendees reported ever hearing sermons on race relations, 28% on abortion, and 20% on criminal justice reform (Pew Research Center, 2021). Also, 99% of Black Protestants who attend predominately Black churches said their congregations call out “amen” in approval and 54% said they speak or pray in tongues, while of the Black worshippers who attend White churches only 81% call out and 35% speak in tongues.

The Black-White divide within Evangelicalism goes back to the days of American slavery. Some scholars note that Evangelicalism has a politically progressive tradition that fought to abolish slavery and push for women's rights (Balmer, 2016). Over time, however, Evangelicalism strayed from its roots after being infiltrated by political conservatives and the Republican Party, which used Evangelicals to lobby against civil rights legislation and for the segregation of Christian schools (Balmer, 2016). Other scholars argue Evangelicals have never been politically or theologically monolithic, even during slavery (Fitzgerald 2017). The liberal/conservative split within Evangelicalism is said to date to the antebellum period in which Northern Evangelicals preached against slavery and many Southern Evangelicals defended it.

Over time, more progressive sects of Protestantism distanced themselves from the label “Evangelical” and ultimately deserted it altogether (Fitzgerald 2017).

### ***Political***

Political polls tend to ask Protestants if they are “born again or Evangelical Christians” to determine whether they identify with denominations in the Evangelical and Historically Black Protestant tradition, or if they are Mainline Christians who generally do not consider themselves born again or Evangelical (Pew Research Center, 2019). The complexity and controversy of the term “Evangelical” only increased in the aftermath of the 2016 election of President Donald Trump. According to an analysis of the American National Election Studies (ANES) Pilot Studies, less educated, low-income White Evangelicals who reported seldom or never attending church services supported Trump in the presidential primary at rates higher than more devout, more affluent, more educated White Evangelicals (Washington Post, 2016). About 81% of Evangelicals voted for Trump in 2016, which helped him win the presidency. A survey using Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel found that Evangelical Christian support of Trump increased in the 2020 election from the 2016 election largely because “White Americans with warm views toward Trump were far more likely than those with less favorable views of the former president to begin identifying as born-again/Evangelical Protestants” (Smith, 2021, p. 1). Trump’s base was not a result of the convergence of two socio-political identities—Evangelical Christianity and conservative partisan identity—but “the expression of a *single* religious identity” (Miller, 2019, p. 44). That point is debatable, as the PDK data in this study found that parents and teachers with a conservative ideology held views that were separate and distinct from born again/Evangelical parents and teachers.

As for Black voters, 84% are Democrats or lean left and 10% are Republicans or lean right. Unlike White voters, however, African American voters are consistently religious across the partisan divide. Black Christians who take a strong stance against racism and sexism are more likely to be Democrats, although more than half of Black Republicans also agree with that position. However, Black Christians who oppose abortion and homosexuality are more likely to be Republican (Pew Research Center, 2021).

### ***Educational***

Sixteen simple words secure American's religious freedom: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" (U.S. Const. amend. I.). Yet, the brevity of the First Amendment only masks its complexity as it relates to public schooling. The first Establishment Clause legal challenge came in 1947, in *Everson v. Board of Education*, over a dispute about taxpayer dollars being used to reimburse transportation costs for New Jersey families that sent their children to private school, most of which were Catholic. The lawsuit failed since the funds went to the parents and not the schools. In the 1960s, however, the U.S. Supreme Court issued three landmark decisions that would greatly diminish the prevalence of Christianity in public schools: the Court prohibited teacher-led prayer (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962), outlawed mandatory Bible readings (*Abington School District v. Schempp*, 1963), and struck down a state law that prohibited instruction about evolution in science class in public schools (*Epperson v. Arkansas*, 1968). Several subsequent cases would attempt to eliminate the role of religion in public education. As Berner (2017, p. 62) wrote, the high court "stripped the vaguely Protestant uniformity of the public schools and replaced it with a secular uniformity." This reality prompted an international organization of Christian university students to publish an

editorial entitled “Banning prayer in public school has led to America’s demise” (Editorial Staff, 1988).

The forementioned Supreme Court cases caused Evangelicals to feel that the Court was not just forcing traditional Christian values out of public education but also out of mainstream culture (Laats, 2012). The 1960s and 1970s also introduced comprehensive sex education that included condoms as an alternative to abstinence, causing a firestorm of protests among parents (Harris, 2015). Coleman (2018) described the perceived fear that Evangelicals had about the rapidly changing public school system:

Nineteenth century Evangelicals had supported the project of public education in part because the public schools served as a method for assimilating the children of immigrants into American society. Now, these Evangelicals worried that their children were the ones being assimilated—into an America they no longer recognized. (p. iv)

In 1984, Ronald Reagan, who was running for president, “played to the sensibilities of Evangelical voters when he condemned ‘God's expulsion’ from public schools” (Laats, 2012, p. 320). In the early 2000s, influential Evangelical family psychologist James Dobson called on Christian parents to pull their children out of public schools in districts that embraced homosexual themes in the curriculum:

“This godless and immoral curriculum and influence in the public schools is gaining momentum across the nation in ways that were unheard of just one year ago. ... It is aimed at the very core of the Judeo-Christian system of values, the very core of scriptural values. I'm telling you that is not an overstatement.” (Olsen, 2002, para. 3).

Today, some of the biggest proponents of private school choice, where public funding is used to pay for private and religious schooling, are Evangelical Christians who have “lost

confidence in the project of public education.” (Coleman, 2018, p. 17). Private school choice has been strongly supported by former U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, a devout Evangelical Christian, who was in office when the 2019 PDK Poll was conducted.

### **Empirical Approach**

PDK recruited participants randomly via address-based sampling to take a survey online during April 12-27, 2019. Sample weights were provided to keep the sample nationally representative. The survey was conducted in English and Spanish and included demographic variables of race, age, sex, gender, household income, number of household members, religion, political party affiliation, ideology, geographic region, employment status, home ownership status, and more. In all, the full sample consisted of 2,389 adults, yet the questions explored in the analytic sample were asked to 1,017 parents of K-12 students, 382 public school teachers, and 174 parent-teachers. Of the 1,573 respondents in this analysis, 469 or 22.4% self-identified as “conservative” or “extremely conservative,” and 401 or 25.5% reported being “born again” or “Evangelical Christian.” For simplicity, I have combined ‘born again’ and ‘Evangelical Christian’ into a singular bloc called *Evangelicals* in this paper.

Most of the survey questions recorded participants’ level of contentment about a series of topics on a four-point Likert scale ranging from “Very Concerned” or “Major Problem” to “Not Concerned at All” or “Not a Problem.” The four responses were rotated randomly via the survey software. The order of the topics was also randomized. The survey questions analyzed here measured parents’ and teachers’ feeling pressure to conform, religious bias, LGBT bias, racism, civics class, improper Bible instruction, and comparative religion. The exact wording of the survey questions of interest is listed in the Appendix.

### **Methods**



To measure the frustration levels of Evangelicals in public schools, I created dummy variables that took the value of one if respondents indicated that a particular issue was a “Major problem/Very concerned” or a “Problem/Somewhat concerned” at their oldest child’s school and the value zero if they selected “Minor problem/Not so concerned” or “Not a problem/Not concerned at all.” I ran regressions for all seven outcome variables (i.e. pressure to fit in or conform, religious bias, racism, bias against LGBT students, Bible class, civics content, comparative religion) and used the dummy explanatory variable “*Evangelical*” to indicate parents and teachers who identified themselves as Evangelical Christians. Since most of the questions were only asked to K-12 public school parents and teachers, the sample is naturally restricted to that population.

To make the estimation even more precise and to limit potential omitted variable bias, I added to the model the demographic controls of the parents’ age, gender, race, household income (which takes the value of one at or below the median income range of \$60,000 to \$74,000 and the value of zero if above that range), education, marital status, geographic region (including an indicator variable for the Northeast where polling surveys show residents tend to be less religious and an indicator variable for the South where people tend to be more religious), and family size (which took the value of one if there were three or more people in the household and the value of zero if family size was less than three).

Using Ordinary Least Squares, I set up four linear probability regression models by which to conduct a factor competition between religion, race, and political ideology. The first model has race (i.e., Black, Hispanic, Asian, and bi-racial) as the variable of interest, with all eight control variables. The second model has religion (i.e. Evangelical Christian) as the variable of interest, with controls. The third model uses political ideology (i.e., liberal and conservative)

as the variable of interest, with controls. The fourth model is fully specified with race, religion, and political ideology as the variables of interest, plus all eight control variables.

$$\text{Model 1: } \textit{Concerned}_i = \beta_o + \beta_1 \textit{Race}_i + \varphi X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

$$\text{Model 2: } \textit{Concerned}_i = \beta_o + \beta_1 \textit{Religion}_i + \varphi X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

$$\text{Model 3: } \textit{Concerned}_i = \beta_o + \beta_1 \textit{Political Ideology}_i + \varphi X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

$$\text{Model 4: } \textit{Concerned}_i = \beta_o + \beta_1 \textit{Race}_i + \beta_2 \textit{Religion}_i +$$

$$\beta_3 \textit{Political Ideology}_i + \varphi X_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Therefore, I ran four linear probability models for each of the seven frustration outcomes, totaling 28 regressions. In these analyses, I collapsed the ideological spectrum into three distinct categories: liberal, moderate, and conservative. I assigned a one to the variable *liberal* if a person self-identified as “liberal” or “extremely liberal” and a zero to anyone that did not. I created the omitted or reference variable *moderate* and assigned a one to those who said they were either “slightly liberal,” “moderate,” or “slightly conservative” and a zero to anyone in the sample that did not. The logic for including people who were slightly left- or right-of-center with those who deemed themselves “moderate/middle of the road” was that they were likely to have more in common with a centrist ideology than with the extreme versions of liberalism or conservatism. Together the moderate variable consists of about half of the analytic sample. Finally, I constructed a *conservative* variable and assigned a one to those who self-identified as “conservative” or “extremely conservative” and coded a zero for everyone else. Since Evangelical Christians have a reputation of being politically conservative, I cross tabulated the collapsed *conservative* variable with those who answered yes to being “born again/Evangelical Christian.” There were 178 conservative Evangelicals, or 11.3% of the full sample in this analysis. See Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Tabulation of Evangelical Christians and Conservatives Among Teachers and Parents in Sample*

Would you describe yourself as a born-again or Evangelical Christian?	Conservative or Extremely Conservative?		Total
	No	Yes	
No	997	175	1,172
Yes	223	178	401
Total	1,220	353	1,573

*Note:* The chi-square statistic is 148.9538. The p-value is < 0.00001. Significant at  $p < .01$ .

The chi-square statistic with Yates correction is 147.2662. The p-value is < 0.00001. Significant at  $p < .01$

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 below reflect the analytic sample size, three variables of interest, and demographic makeup of the study respondents, as well as the percentage of all parents, teachers, and parent-teachers in the data. See Table 2 below.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics*

Analytic Sample N = 1,573		
Evangelical Christian	#	%
Yes	401	25.5
No	667	39.9
Did not answer	505	34.6
Political Ideology		
Liberal	303	19.3
Moderate	800	50.9
Conservative	353	22.4
Did not answer	117	7.4
Race		
Black	119	7.6
White	1,092	69.4
Hispanic	212	13.5
Asian	117	7.4
Bi-Racial	33	2.1
Population		
Parent	1,017	64.6
Teacher	382	24.3
Parent-Teacher	174	11.1
Control Variables		
Female	986	62.7

Table 2 (Cont.)

Control Variables	#	%
High school or less	307	19.5
Married	1,206	76.7
Family size 3+	1,214	77.2
Northeast	264	16.8
South	573	36.4
Income < \$65-74K	481	30.6

### Results

All things being equal, this section explicates the findings of the regressions of all seven outcomes of concern as it pertained to our sample of K-12 public school parents and teachers.

#### Pressure to “Fit in” or Conform

Overall, 30% of parents and 37% of teachers in the survey reported feeling pressure to “fit in” or conform in their public school. There was no statistically significant difference between Evangelical and non-Evangelical respondents regarding fitting in. However, race and political ideology did appear to play a modest role in this area of concern. Conservatives were 8.9 percentage points less likely than moderates and 11 percentage points less likely than liberals to acknowledge pressure to fit in. These effects were significant at the 90% confidence level and not significant, respectively.

Regarding racial differences, Black parents and teachers were 9.8 percentage points less likely than White parents and teachers to report pressure fitting in; however, this was statistically significant only at the 90% confidence level, which is not considered highly reliable. Hispanics in the sample were 18.8 percentage points more likely than Blacks and 17.8 percentage points more likely than Asians to report feeling pressure to fit in at the 95% confidence level.<sup>1</sup> As such,

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<sup>1</sup> I used the “test” command in the Stata statistical software program to generate the F-statistics that determined significance between all the regression coefficients of race and political ideology in this study.

we see racial identity playing a more dominate role in parents' or teachers' sense of belonging in their public schools, with political ideology having modest influence and religion being otherwise null. See Table 3 for the regression output chart.

**Table 3**

*RQ1: Teachers and Parents Report Pressure to “Fit In” or Conform as a Problem at Their Public School*

	Pressure to ‘fit in’ or conform			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Black	-.084 (.060)			-.098* (.056)
Hispanic	.097* (.057)			.090 (.057)
Asian	-.079 (.053)			-.088 (.054)
Bi-racial	.125 (.115)			.112 (.115)
Evangelical Christian		.053 (.047)		.077 (.048)
Liberal			.009 (.048)	.011 (.050)
Conservative			-.062 (.043)	-.089* (.046)
Teachers	.051 (.064)	.065 (.067)	.061 (.067)	.040 (.063)
Parent-Teachers	-.006 (.055)	.010 (.053)	.011 (.053)	-.017 (.055)
Female	.062* (.037)	.060 (.038)	.056 (.039)	.061* (.037)
High school or less	-.078* (.044)	-.041 (.044)	-.043 (.045)	-.079* (.045)
Married	-.019 (.053)	.005 (.054)	.008 (.054)	-.020 (.050)
Family size 3+	-.020 (.073)	-.030 (.082)	-.029 (.083)	-.026 (.071)
Northeast	-.057 (.052)	-.064 (.052)	-.070 (.054)	-.055 (.051)
South	-.080** (.040)	-.091** (.040)	-.085** (.040)	-.086** (.040)
Median income or less	.023 (.045)	.020 (.044)	.016 (.043)	.013 (.044)
_cons	.352*** (.085)	.326*** (.093)	.350*** (.096)	.366*** (.087)
Observations	1,513	1,513	1,513	1,513
R-squared	.031	.017	.017	.039

*Robust standard errors are in parentheses*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

## Religious Bias

Overall, 10% of parents and 9% of teachers in the study indicated that religious bias in their public school was problematic. The rate of discontent about religious bias was not statistically significant based on religion or political ideology. Race, however, seemed to drive perceptions about this issue. Hispanic parents and teachers were 8.3 percentage points more likely than their White counterparts and 8.4 percentage points more likely than Black counterparts to report concern about religious bias. These findings were statistically significant at the 95% and 90% levels of confidence, respectively. Interestingly, parents who also worked as public school teachers were 5.9 percentage points less likely to be concerned about religious bias in public schools than parents who were not employed as teachers; this was statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. See Table 4 for the regression output chart.

**Table 4**

*RQ2: Teachers' and Parents' Report Religious Bias as a Problem at Their Public School*

	Religious Bias			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Black	0.00 (.046)			-.001 (.044)
Hispanic	.084** (.038)			.083** (.039)
Asian	.072 (.055)			.073 (.054)
Bi-racial	.053 (.067)			.053 (.067)
Evangelical Christian		.008 (.036)		.013 (.040)
Liberal			.023 (.036)	.021 (.036)
Conservative			-.004 (.034)	.001 (.037)
Teachers	.009 (.043)	-.003 (.047)	-.006 (.048)	.005 (.044)
Parent-Teachers	-.058*** (.020)	-.063*** (.022)	-.063*** (.022)	-.059*** (.021)
Female	-.005 (.027)	-.004 (.027)	-.006 (.028)	-.005 (.027)

Table 4 (Cont.)

	Religious Bias			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
High school or less	.030 (.027)	.044 (.031)	.045 (.032)	.030 (.027)
Married	.025 (.041)	.037 (.048)	.036 (.047)	.023 (.041)
Family size 3+	-.039 (.059)	-.044 (.062)	-.045 (.062)	-.040 (.058)
Northeast	-.034 (.040)	-.042 (.039)	-.044 (.041)	-.034 (.040)
South	-.025 (.030)	-.029 (.029)	-.027 (.028)	-.025 (.031)
Median income or less	-.031 (.036)	-.028 (.034)	-.028 (.034)	-.031 (.037)
_cons	.108* (.062)	.124* (.067)	.124* (.074)	.104 (.064)
Observations	1,508	1,508	1,508	1,508
R-squared	.027	.012	.013	.028

*Robust standard errors are in parentheses*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

## Racism

Overall, 16% of parents and 17% of teachers in the sample believed that racism at their public school was a problem. Not surprisingly, race, particularly among people of color, was the most dominant driver of discontentment with racism. Compared to White parents and teachers, Black parents and teachers were 17 percentage points more likely to report racism in public schools, significant at the 95% confidence level. Hispanics were 12.9 percentage points more likely and Asians were 8.9 percentage points more likely to be disconcerted by racism in public schools than Whites; these findings were statistically significant at the 99% and 90% confidence levels. Much more surprisingly was that the factors of being an Evangelical Christian or politically liberal, moderate, or conservative had null influences on the problematizing of racism. It appears that one's race drives perceptions of what behavior is racist in nature, not necessarily one's religion or political ideology. See Table 5 for the regression output chart.

**Table 5***RQ3: Teachers and Parents Report Racism as a Problem at Their Public School*

	Racism			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Black	.177** (.073)			.170** (.071)
Hispanic	.133*** (.042)			.129*** (.042)
Asian	.094* (.051)			.089* (.051)
Bi-racial	.094 (.087)			.085 (.088)
Evangelical Christian		.043 (.042)		.058 (.042)
Liberal			.003 (.041)	0.00 (.041)
Conservative			-.061* (.032)	-.054 (.033)
Teachers	.001 (.052)	-.026 (.056)	-.030 (.056)	-.006 (.052)
Parent-Teachers	-.030 (.037)	-.041 (.039)	-.041 (.038)	-.037 (.037)
Female	.045 (.035)	.041 (.038)	.037 (.038)	.045 (.035)
High school or less	.007 (.043)	.025 (.043)	.023 (.043)	.007 (.043)
Married	.014 (.046)	-.010 (.057)	-.006 (.055)	.014 (.046)
Family size 3+	-.095 (.081)	-.090 (.088)	-.089 (.088)	-.098 (.081)
Northeast	.016 (.053)	.021 (.058)	.015 (.058)	.019 (.052)
South	-.038 (.035)	-.033 (.037)	-.030 (.036)	-.042 (.036)
Median income or less	.042 (.040)	.055 (.042)	.051 (.042)	.035 (.040)
_cons	.141* (.077)	.197** (.090)	.219** (.095)	.147* (.078)
Observations	1,511	1,511	1,511	1,511
R-squared	.056	.023	.025	.061

*Robust standard errors are in parentheses*\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$ **LGBT Bias**

Some 11% of parents and 13% of teachers in the sample considered bias against LGBT students a problem in their public school. Of religion, race, and political ideology, the race variable was the only factor that influenced respondents reporting LGBT bias as an issue.



Hispanic parents and teachers were 9.3 percentage points more likely than White parents to see LGBT bias as a problem within public schools; this difference was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Hispanic parents and teachers were also 10.5 percentage points more likely than Asian parents and teachers to be bothered by LGBT bias in public schools; this finding was also statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Interestingly, parents who worked as public school teachers were 5 percentage points less likely to report LGBT bias than parents who were not professional teachers. See Table 6 for the regression output chart.

**Table 6**

*RQ4: Teachers and Parents Report LGBT Bias Against Students as a Problem at Their Public School*

	LGBT Bias			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Black	.059 (.067)			.054 (.065)
Hispanic	.094*** (.035)			.093*** (.035)
Asian	-.009 (.027)			-.012 (.027)
Bi-racial	.074 (.067)			.067 (.067)
Evangelical Christian		.035 (.040)		.044 (.042)
Liberal			-.020 (.030)	-.023 (.030)
Conservative			-.038 (.028)	-.044 (.03)
Teachers	.060 (.043)	.055 (.043)	.057 (.043)	.059 (.044)
Parent-Teachers	-.044 (.029)	-.042 (.031)	-.041 (.030)	-.050* (.030)
Female	.044 (.028)	.040 (.027)	.038 (.028)	.046* (.027)
High school or less	.008 (.032)	.030 (.030)	.029 (.030)	.007 (.032)
Married	.006 (.041)	.001 (.053)	.005 (.052)	.007 (.040)
Family size 3+	-.006 (.049)	-.006 (.051)	-.005 (.052)	-.008 (.048)
Northeast	-.033 (.035)	-.032 (.033)	-.036 (.034)	-.031 (.034)
South	-.022	-.023	-.021	-.027

Table 6 (Cont.)

LGBT Bias				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	(.032)	(.034)	(.033)	(.033)
Median income or less	.032	.038	.035	.027
	(.033)	(.033)	(.033)	(.034)
_cons	.049	.065	.083	.057
	(.057)	(.055)	(.062)	(.055)
Observations	1,510	1,510	1,510	1,510
R-squared	.031	.018	.018	.037

*Robust standard errors are in parentheses*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

### Bible Class

Overall, 33% of parents and 36% of teachers in the sample were concerned that Bible classes in public school might improperly promote Judeo-Christian religious beliefs. Interestingly, being an Evangelical Christian parent or teacher contributed no statistically significant influence on support for or concerns about Bible instruction in public schools. Most of the predictive power came from respondents' political ideology. Liberals were 20.5 percentage points more likely to worry about Bible instruction might improperly promote Judeo-Christian religious beliefs in public schools than moderates; meanwhile, conservatives were 14.5 percentage points less likely than moderates to be apprehensive about such threat. Both differences were significant at the 99% confidence level. The divide between conservative and liberal parents and teachers over Bible instruction spanned 35 percentage points and was significant at the 99% confidence level. Regarding race, though bi-racial parents and teachers showed weakly significant results, the group's sample size is small, and the racial category is vague. This makes the effect unreliable and difficult to interpret. See Table 7 for the regression output chart.

**Table 7**

*RQ5: Teachers and Parents Report Concern That Bible Studies Classes Might Improperly Promote Judeo-Christian Religious Beliefs in Public School*

	Bible Class			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Black	.072 (.078)			.035 (.078)
Hispanic	.108* (.056)			.080 (.053)
Asian	.123* (.064)			.093 (.065)
Bi-racial	.225** (.112)			.206* (.111)
Evangelical Christian		-.064 (.046)		-.001 (.047)
Liberal			.207*** (.052)	.205*** (.052)
Conservative			-.160*** (.036)	-.145*** (.039)
Teachers	.093 (.064)	.070 (.065)	.027 (.063)	.045 (.062)
Parent-Teachers	.003 (.053)	.004 (.050)	-.010 (.048)	-.009 (.050)
Female	-.038 (.042)	-.041 (.043)	-.052 (.041)	-.052 (.041)
High school or less	-.042 (.052)	-.031 (.051)	-.032 (.048)	-.040 (.050)
Married	.041 (.056)	.043 (.057)	.034 (.055)	.030 (.054)
Family size 3+	.001 (.084)	-.001 (.088)	-.010 (.085)	-.005 (.082)
Northeast	-.064 (.050)	-.073 (.050)	-.079 (.048)	-.073 (.048)
South	-.048 (.045)	-.041 (.046)	-.035 (.043)	-.035 (.044)
Median income or less	.079* (.047)	.088* (.047)	.075* (.044)	.071 (.044)
_cons	.286*** (.086)	.343*** (.091)	.353*** (.088)	.318*** (.086)
Observations	1,563	1,563	1,563	1,563
R-squared	.025	.015	.066	.073

*Robust standard errors are in parentheses*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

### Civics Class

The sample showed that 30% of parents and 16% of teachers were concerned that civics classes might include political content that they disagreed with. Here, race and political ideology

drove apprehension about civics instruction, while religion bore no statistical weight on the issue. Race-wise, Black parents and teachers were 26.3 percentage points more likely to be uneasy about the political content in civics class than their White counterparts; this finding was statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. In addition, Asian parents and teachers were 12.3 percentage points and Hispanic parents and teachers were 10.3 percentage points more likely to be concerned than White parents about the political messaging of civics class. Both differences were significant at the 95% confidence level. Interestingly, while both Black and Hispanic respondents were concerned about civics content in public schools, the 16 percentage point gap in their rate of concern was statistically significant at the 90% confidence level.

In terms of political ideology, conservative parents and teachers were 15.3 percentage points more likely than their moderate counterparts to be worried by civics class content, while liberal parents and teachers were 12.7 percentage points less likely than moderates to be concerned about civics. Both findings were significant at the 99% confidence level. Moreover, conservatives were 28 percentage points more likely to be troubled by political content in civics class than liberal parents, which was statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. Interestingly, teachers were 12.9 percentage points less likely than parents to be concerned about political content with which they disagree in civics class; this was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. See Table 8 for the regression output chart.

**Table 8**

*RQ6: Teachers and parents report concern that civics class might include political content that they disagree with*

	Civics Class			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Black	.231*** (.079)			.263*** (.079)

Table 8 (Cont.)

	Civics Class			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Hispanic	.075 (.053)			.103** (.051)
Asian	.089 (.059)			.123** (.058)
Bi-racial	-.006 (.110)			.015 (.111)
Evangelical Christian		.108** (.046)		.059 (.050)
Liberal			-.121*** (.037)	-.127*** (.037)
Conservative			.140*** (.049)	.153*** (.050)
Teachers	-.165*** (.058)	-.194*** (.062)	-.164*** (.063)	-.129** (.058)
Parent-Teachers	-.062 (.044)	-.083* (.044)	-.068 (.042)	-.052 (.043)
Female	-.004 (.040)	-.005 (.041)	.001 (.041)	.008 (.038)
High school or less	.010 (.048)	.014 (.049)	.014 (.047)	.011 (.047)
Married	.067 (.055)	.020 (.063)	.025 (.061)	.068 (.054)
Family size 3+	-.115 (.086)	-.108 (.096)	-.098 (.098)	-.112 (.085)
Northeast	.003 (.054)	.018 (.060)	.017 (.058)	.014 (.052)
South	-.002 (.043)	.002 (.046)	.006 (.044)	-.015 (.042)
Median income or less	.057 (.046)	.068 (.046)	.080* (.044)	.064 (.044)
_cons	.271*** (.088)	.321*** (.102)	.316*** (.101)	.221** (.087)
Observations	1,568	1,568	1,568	1,568
R-squared	.041	.024	.043	.084

*Robust standard errors are in parentheses*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

### Comparative Religion Class

Overall 26% of the parents and 16% of teachers in the sample were concerned that comparative religion classes in public school might improperly encourage students to change their religious beliefs. This outcome was primarily driven by respondents' political identity. Conservative parents and teachers were 8.7 percentage points more likely than their moderate

counterparts to be apprehensive of the effects of comparative religion class; this difference was statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Moreover, conservative parents and teachers were 14.3 percentage points more likely than liberal parents and teachers to worry about the influence of comparative religion class on students' faith; this finding was statistically significant at the 99% confidence level.

Race had a much weaker association with concern about comparative religion class. While Asian parents and teachers were 10 percentage points more likely than their White counterparts to believe that comparative religion might encourage students' change of religious views, the finding was only statistically significant at the 90% level of confidence. Overall, parents who were also teachers were 7.5 percentage points less likely be concerned that their children might be inspired to change their faith because of comparative religion class than parents who did not teach in public schools; this difference was statistically significant at the 90% confidence level as well. See Table 9 for the regression output chart.

**Table 9**

*RQ7: Teachers and Parents' Concern that Comparative Religion Classes Might Improperly Encourage Students to Change Their Religious Beliefs*

	Comparative Religion			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Black	.098 (.074)			.115 (.076)
Hispanic	.036 (.045)			.052 (.044)
Asian	.078 (.058)			.100* (.057)
Bi-racial	.161 (.127)			.173 (.129)
Evangelical Christian		.090** (.041)		.064 (.042)
Liberal			-.058 (.038)	-.056 (.039)
Conservative			.088** (.042)	.087** (.043)
Teachers	-.088	-.108*	-.091	-.070

Table 9 (Cont.)

Comparative Religion				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	(.055)	(.055)	(.056)	(.054)
Parent-Teachers	-.079**	-.087**	-.076**	-.075*
	(.039)	(.038)	(.039)	(.039)
Female	.013	.015	.018	.020
	(.036)	(.038)	(.037)	(.037)
High school or less	-.028	-.030	-.030	-.026
	(.047)	(.046)	(.046)	(.047)
Married	.149***	.128**	.130***	.146***
	(.045)	(.050)	(.050)	(.046)
Family size 3+	-.079	-.081	-.074	-.079
	(.075)	(.078)	(.079)	(.075)
Northeast	-.110**	-.102**	-.104**	-.102**
	(.043)	(.041)	(.042)	(.043)
South	-.039	-.041	-.036	-.048
	(.041)	(.042)	(.041)	(.041)
Median income or less	.122***	.126***	.134***	.125***
	(.043)	(.043)	(.043)	(.043)
_cons	.177**	.200***	.199**	.142*
	(.075)	(.077)	(.079)	(.075)
Observations	1,566	1,566	1,566	1,566
R-squared	.041	.041	.044	.058

*Robust standard errors are in parentheses*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

### Discussion

The goal of this paper was to empirically discern whether many of the controversial school-related topics with which American society commonly associates with Evangelical Christians are driven by faith, racial identity, or political ideology. This study competed those three factors against each other to determine which identity had the strongest predictive power for making one concerned about pressure to fit in, religious bias, racism, LGBT bias, Bible instruction, civics instruction, and comparative religion instruction in public schools. The process of this analysis also shed light on the threat of omitted variable bias, as it is unusual in education policy research to ask parents and teachers about their political ideology—and even rarer to inquire about their religious faith.

Surprisingly, despite one-quarter of the sample self-identifying as Evangelicals, that religious identity was not associated with any statistically significant differences among non-Evangelicals on the seven perception outcomes on public schooling. Regarding civics and comparative religion classes, being an Evangelical showed modest significance in the model two, in the absence of the race and political ideology variables. However, once the regression models were fully specified, the religion effect was null. Therefore, Christianity may not be the root source of Evangelicals' perspectives on issues in public education; those concerns may well be driven by Evangelical's racial background or their political allegiances.

That said, race and/or political ideology showed persuasive power in all seven outcome measures in this study and were formidable competitors for the placement as the most the influential factor. Using the threshold of having a 90% or higher confidence level, political ideology narrowly emerged as having the most persuasive power. Since there were more race variables (4x) than ideology variables (2x) compared to the Evangelical Christian indicator variable (1x), race had four more chances to demonstrate a significant finding in regression Model 4 than did being an Evangelical Christian and twice as many chances as political ideology. Therefore, the best method to measure of relative impact was to calculate the percentage of model 4 results that are statistically significant within each identity cluster of indicator variables. For Evangelicalism, the relative influence is 0%. For race, it is 39.3%. For political ideology, it is 42.9%, surpassing the influence of the variable of race by less than 4 percentage points.

### **Limitations**

Firstly, the PDK survey presented some vague questions that may have caused respondents to misinterpret what exactly was being asked; in turn, this made it difficult for



researchers to clearly draw meaning from the responses. For example, subjects were asked if they thought religious bias in their public schools was a problem; however, it is unclear if their perception of bias was against religion or in favor of it. Also, study findings showed that people of color, Evangelicals, and conservatives alike were all discontent about the political ideas expressed in civics class, yet no questions on the survey attempted to define what type of content was objectionable. Based on the highly polarized nature of American politics, it is unlikely that those three groups of respondents were concerned about the same political content, but it would have been extremely interesting to have data showing what concepts in civics were most objectionable to each group. Secondly, this analysis was limited to just seven questions of the more than 70 questions that were in the PDK poll; perhaps Evangelicals would have been more frustrated by other topics, such as youth drug use, bullying, or sexual harassment in public schools. More exploration of the data is warranted. Finally, this study would have paired well with a qualitative study to get at the underlining reasons why people from the various religious, ideological, and racial groups carried the concerns that they demonstrated in the data. For example, a focus group of Hispanic parents and teachers might shed light on why their racial group was the only one to express high statistically significant sensitivity towards the existence of religious and LGBT bias in public school. A mixed methods approach would allow us to dig deeper into the “whys” of the findings of this study.

### **Conclusion**

This study did not find the high levels of frustration with public schools for whom Evangelical parents and teachers have come to be known. This study, which points to race and political ideology as the chief drivers of concern, has served to enlighten our understandings about Evangelical Christians and perhaps debunk some of the stereotypes that exist about them.

This study showed that Evangelical parents and teachers did not feel elevated levels of pressure to “fit in” and conform in school than non-Evangelical parents and teachers, nor did Evangelicals report the existence of religious bias, LGBT bias, racism, or problematic Bible, civics, or comparative religion instruction more than non-Evangelicals. Instead, attitudes about these issues were largely moderated by political ideologies and racial identities.

Another insightful finding was that only 44% of the Evangelical Christians in this survey sample was solidly politically conservative, which seemed low considering how they are portrayed in the American news media. In fact, 46% of Evangelicals in this study were moderate-leaning and 8% self-identified as liberals. After 60 years of sparring for moral authority in public schools, the Evangelicals in this study were not much different from their non-Evangelical counterparts in their views. Political ideology and race—not religious identity—appeared to be the main drivers of negative perceptions of public school relative to the hot-button issues of this study. Since political ideology was independent from religious identity after checks for collinearity, this paper demonstrated a need to do more research on conservative parents and teachers as well as parents and teachers of color. Both groups appeared to have some of the strongest opinions about public schools. They were most concerned with public education and the least likely to be pressured to fit in.

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## Appendix

**Table 1**

The seven survey questions were used in this analysis and bolded for emphasis:

- *“As far as you are aware, how big a problem is each of these at your child’s school?”*
  - Pressure to get good test scores
  - The physical safety and security of students overall
  - Physical bullying
  - Cyberbullying
  - Verbal harassment
  - Sexual harassment
  - Pressure to try alcohol or drugs
  - Pressure to smoke or use electronic cigarettes/”vape”
  - **Pressure to “fit in” or conform**
  - **Religious bias**
  - **Racism**
  - **Bias against gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender students**
- *How concerned, if at all, are you about each of the following?*
  - **Civics classes might include political content that you disagree with**
  - **Bible studies classes might improperly promote Judeo-Christian religious beliefs**
  - Comparative religion classes might encourage students to question their family’s faith
  - **Comparative religion classes might improperly encourage students to change their religious beliefs**

**One or the Other: Parent Religiosity or Private School Choice May Reduce  
Crime and Paternity Disputes in Milwaukee**

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### **Abstract**

Religious faith is one of the strongest motivators known to man. For millennia, human beings have turned to a higher power to help them cope with the challenges of life and define their values and behaviors. Millions of people have died for their faith. Yet, when it comes to public education reform and research, the influence of religion has been grossly underexplored. This study takes some initial steps to change that. We analyze parent survey responses from the 2008 Milwaukee Parent Choice Program (MPCP) Longitudinal Education Growth Study Baseline Report merged with arrest data from the publicly searchable 2018 Wisconsin Court System's Circuit Court Access database. Our analysis compares MPCP students who were matched to students from Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) in 2006, and it sheds light on this vital research question: Does family religiosity impact the effect that a private school voucher program like the MPCP has on student life outcomes such as criminal conviction and being named in a paternity lawsuit? This study finds that either parental religiosity or private school choice in many cases serves to suppress criminal tendencies and paternity cases of students later in life, but these two factors have their most consistent positive effects on student character outcomes in isolation, not in combination. Students appear to be most aided by having religious parents OR private school choice, not necessarily by having religious parents AND private school choice—except when it comes to avoiding paternity suits.

**Keywords:** School voucher, character outcomes, crime, paternity suits, religiosity, religion and education

## Introduction

Religion is an unspoken word in most education policy debates. Fears of violating the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment of the US Constitution, commonly referred to as “separation of church and state,” may be the primary reason why religion and religiosity tend to be omitted variables in public education research. Though the First Amendment strictly prohibits the government from *establishing* a specific religion or religious mandates, its Free Exercise Clause has affirmed freedom of religion and religious expression as a fundamental right of American citizenship. The U.S. government cannot establish its own church, but it also cannot hinder U.S. citizens in practicing their chosen faith.

Religion, however, is deeply woven into the historic fabric of public education in the U.S. The nation’s first public school, the Boston Latin School, was established in 1635 under the influence of John Cotton, a Puritan scholar and preacher who sought to codify his religious sect and classical education in the New World (BLS History, n.d.). Religion intersected freely with public schools throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1830s and 40s mainstream Protestant schools in New England states mandated the teaching of the King James Bible (Glenn, 1988). Catholics established their own system of parochial schools throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in response. In the late 1800s, Protestant politicians and education policymakers sought to squash Catholic education by establishing Blaine Amendments which were state laws that prohibited “sectarian” (meaning Catholic) religious schools from receiving public funding even in the most indirect or trivial ways (Berner, 2019). Many U.S. public schools continued to have an overt Judeo-Christian tenor until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Cook, 1909). Then the 1960s saw a series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions such as *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), *Abington School District v. Schempp*



(1963), and *Epperson v. Arkansas* (1968) that drastically restricted religious content in public schools, including banning teacher-led prayer and mandatory Bible reading in the classroom.

Contrary to popular belief, however, “the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause does not create a no-contact zone between religious and governmental institutions” (Berner, 2019, p. 7). In fact, in 2020, the U.S. Department of Education, with the help of the U.S. Department of Justice, updated its “Guidance on Constitutionally Protected Prayer and Religious Expression in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools” as required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to inform the public of the many ways in which religion and public education may legally intermingle. For instance, while teachers are prohibited from encouraging or discouraging prayer with students in their official capacity as public employees, educators “may take part in religious activities such as prayer even during their workday at a time when it is permissible to engage in other private conduct such as making a personal telephone call” (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). In addition, “students may organize prayer groups and be given access to school facilities” on par with student rights to pursue secular extra-curricular activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Despite laws protecting some measure of religious expression in public schools, social norms have stigmatized or silenced discussions about how religion can influence matters in public education, namely how the religiosity of families might impact educational programs designed to improve student outcomes. In the spirit of neutrality, for example, the U.S. Department of Education rarely, if ever, includes family religion or religiosity as a variable in its educational research studies. Most state-level education data collection procedures also treat religion or religiosity as an irrelevant demographic characteristic. The standard operating procedure of ignoring the influence of religion in education research studies greatly hinders what

we can learn about what factors motivate family and student choices and outcomes. If education researchers do not collect data on family religion or religiosity, then they will never learn the extent to which those characteristics might cause certain shifts in outcomes, independently or in combination with other variables. Those motivating factors will remain in the proverbial “black box.”

The U.S. remains a nation of believers. A 2020 religious landscape study found that 80% of U.S. adults who responded to the question were affiliated with an organized religion. Specifically, 37% of them were Protestants, 9% were Christians (unspecified denominations), 20% were Catholics, 2% were Jews, 1% were Mormon, and 6% were a mix of various other religions (Gallup, 2021). Though the percentage of U.S. adults that are members of a church or synagogue fell below 50% (at 47%) for the first time since 1992, the percentage of Americans who believe religion is gaining more influence in the U.S. (33%) is the highest it has been since 2007 (Gallup, 2021). Taken together, these statistics suggests that religious faith still inspires a significant portion of the American public.

Given the preponderance of people of faith in the U.S., it is logical that private religious schooling remains viable. In 2015, 67% percent of all K-12 private schools in America were religious, enrolling 78% of private school students and employing 70% of private school teachers (Broughman et al., 2017). The 2019 PDK Poll found that 39% of K-12 public school teachers self-identified as “born again/Evangelical Christians.” If the purpose of religion is to seek guidance from a higher power for comfort, morality, community connection (Stibich, 2021), and self-control (Association for Psychological Science, 2011), then education researchers ought to study the extent to which religiosity influences students’ character development, discipline records, thirst for knowledge, and long-term success in life. To that end, this study is the first we

know of to measure the impact of family religiosity on the effects of a private school choice program.

Fortunately, the authors of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP) evaluation baseline report collected data on the religion and religiosity of 1,503 parents who answered those specific survey questions (Witte et al., 2008). Still, none of the subsequent longitudinal reports analyzed the family religiosity responses (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2019, 2020; Witte, et al., 2014; Wolf et al., 2018;). These unexplored data provide us with the opportunity to conduct a re-evaluation of the MPCP to specifically examine the extent to which parental religiosity moderates the Milwaukee private school voucher program's effect on student character outcomes including the legal matters of criminal activity, traffic violations, fines, and involvement in paternity suits.

Our main question is simple: Are religious parents and private schools substitutes or complements in affecting character outcomes? In other words, does having parents who attend religious services one or more times a week and who also enroll you in a private, predominantly religious, school produce clearly better life outcomes for students than for students who experience only one or neither of these potentially character-building forces? In some of our statistical estimations we find that the character-enhancing effects of private school choice are clearer and stronger for children without highly religious parents. In only one of our results do we find that combining school choice with highly religious parents enhances its effects. These results suggest that religious parents and private schools are substitutes. That is, students do not necessarily need both resources; if they lack one, they do about as well in life if they have access to the other.

## **Background**

The MPCP is the oldest urban school voucher program in the United States. The program was co-developed by Black activist and former Milwaukee Public Schools superintendent Dr. Howard Fuller as the “next step in a logical progression of the struggle” after his proposal to create a separate school district for the underserved Black families of Milwaukee narrowly failed in the Wisconsin State Senate (Fuller & Page, 2014, p. 205). Fuller then worked with Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson and State Assembly Member Annette Polly Williams to pass school choice legislation in 1989 (Witte & Wolf, 2017). Under the MPCP, state tax dollars are used to cover full private school tuition for low-income students who might otherwise attend public charter schools or traditional public schools in the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) district. The MPCP began as a pilot program limited to 337 students enrolled in seven secular private schools in 1990. The program has since grown to serve 28,958 students in 129 private schools in Milwaukee in the fall of 2022 (EdChoice, 2023, p. 80). If a specific grade in a specific MPCP school is oversubscribed, students are selected by lottery to receive a private school voucher for the school. Oversubscribed schools were a rarity during the time of the data collection for the MPCP baseline study in 2006. Most students in the program received automatic enrollment in the participating private school of their parents’ choosing.

In 1996, the Republican-controlled Wisconsin state legislature lifted the ban on private religious schools in the choice program, allowing faith-based schools to accept school vouchers along with non-religious private schools. In 1998, the Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld that decision as constitutional (Fuller & Page, 2014), leading to a quadrupling of the number of schools participating in the MPCP in a single year (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2020). In 2006, 82% of the private schools in the MPCP identified as religious and 7.4% were classified as non-religious but following a religious tradition (Kisida, Jensen, & Wolf, 2009).

In 2008, the School Choice Demonstration Project at the University of Arkansas published the “MPCP Longitudinal Educational Growth Study Baseline Report” (Witte et al., 2008), which described the design, implementation, and baseline results for a planned five-year evaluation of the voucher program. The study matched 2,727 MPCP students one-to-one with the same number of MPS students in three stages: 1) students were exact-matched by grade and neighborhood using U.S. Census tracts, 2) students were matched within the same 5 percentile bandwidth of the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE) annual standardized test, and 3) students were matched by nearest-neighbor propensity scores to break any ties. Though this process reduced selection bias, none of the comparisons related to standardized test scores from the baseline data drew causal inferences because the purpose was solely to collect descriptive data by which to compare future student outcomes.

At baseline, there were no significant differences in student academic performance among 6-9th graders. However, the study found that MPCP 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> graders scored slightly lower in math and reading on the state exams than their matched MPS counterparts, even though baseline test score was a key matching variable, at least within a tight range. More interestingly, researchers conducted a telephone survey to which 1,783 MPCP and 1,407 matched MPS parents responded. A wide range of questions were asked, including the religious affiliation of the parents and whether they attended worship services more than one time per week, once a week, once a month, only on religious holidays, or never. One noteworthy distinction was that “MPCP parents received more information from churches and valued religious instruction more than MPS parents” (Witte, 2008, p. 3).

### **Literature Review**

Since the baseline MPCP report was released in 2008, several research teams have used the data to evaluate various aspects of the nation's oldest urban school voucher program. An initial study of the effect of the MPCP on student test scores reported statistically significant positive effects in reading but null effects in math in the fourth (and final) outcome year of the study (Witte et al., 2012). A follow-up publication explored the impact of high-stakes testing for the purpose of school choice accountability on test-score performance and found that students in the MPCP voucher program grew significantly in their math scores the year after tests changed from low- to high-stakes (Witte et al., 2014). Analyses of the effect of the private school choice program on high school graduation, college enrollment, and persistence in college reported consistently positive effects (Cowen et al., 2013). A follow-up analysis found that MPCP alumni who had been in 3<sup>rd</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade at baseline in 2006 had higher college completion rates by 2017 than the MPS students in the comparison group (Wolf et al., 2018). Researchers also investigated how the MPCP impacted contact with the legal system, reporting that students enrolled in the voucher program in 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade had a reduction of about 53 percent in drug convictions, 86 percent in property damage convictions, and 38 percent in paternity suits by age 28 compared to their matched MPS peers (DeAngelis & Wolf, 2020).

Numerous private school voucher studies outside of Milwaukee show null to positive effects of these choice programs on student outcomes, especially measures of character outcomes (Wolf, 2020). Chingos and his colleagues (2019) found that the Florida Tax Credit (FTC) scholarship that sends more than 100,000 students to private K-12 schools increased the college enrollment rates of 8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> graders by 10 percentage points and doubled the rate of those attending a four-year private college over non-FTC students in the state. The latest evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program (OSP), the only federally funded private school

voucher program for low-income students in the nation, showed that after three years in the program student outcomes in reading and math, as well as rates of school satisfaction and parental involvement, were statistically similar between the voucher and control groups. Chronic absenteeism, however, was 5.4 percentage points lower for students who participated in the DC OSP program than the control group (Webber et al., 2019).

Of all the studies conducted in Milwaukee, Florida, and DC, none of them sought to measure the impact of family religious affiliation or religiosity on the ability of school choice programs to impact student outcomes. This omission is noteworthy because most of the private schools that opt into the school choice programs are indeed religious schools and almost all parents availing themselves of these programs select a religious school for their child. Might these schools be capitalizing on the religiosity of families in a way that is not achievable in secular public schools? There is great gain in knowing if a family's propensity toward religious faith might advantage or disadvantage the outcomes that result from participation in private school voucher or scholarship programs.

Unlike in education, the domains of medicine and psychology are not as phobic about including religion as an appropriate and meaningful indicator variable in empirical research and practical care. Hospitals and mental health centers frequently ask patients for their religious affiliation on intake questionnaires. VanderWeele (2017) conducted a comprehensive literature review of the impact of religion on human flourishing and found that "participation in religious services is associated with numerous aspects of human flourishing, including happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships" (p. 476).

Another literature review of research studies at the intersection of faith and education suggests that high religiosity among students is correlated with improved grades, higher academic attainment, and reduced substance abuse (Fagan, 2010). Students who attended worship services weekly had a combined math and reading GPA of 2.9 compared to 2.6 for students who never attended religious services (Regnerus, 2000). Religious practice seemed to have a greater influence on the educational achievement and attainment of students in high-poverty areas compared to those in affluent communities, as high-poverty, high-religiosity students get a much more concentrated dose of positive influence through faith engagement than more affluent students who have more options (Brown & Gary, 1991; Elder & Conger, 2000; Jaynes, 2003; Regnerus, 2003). One study found that the high school dropout rate was 19.5% for students who attended worship infrequently compared to 9.1 percent for students who frequently attended religious services (Coleman, 1988). Worldwide, Jewish students are associated with the highest educational attainment (Pew Research Center, 2016).

There may be negative correlations between religious faith and education, as well. Generally, children of conservative fundamentalists and Pentecostals are among the lowest in educational attainment among Christian denominations (Beyerlein, 2004; Darnell & Sherkat, 1997; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). Regardless of the particular faith, higher levels of education, income, and social capital tend to reduce the intensity of one's religious convictions (Fan, 2008; Johnson, 1997; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999).

This study seeks to learn if parental religiosity moderates the effect that Milwaukee's private school voucher program has on 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade students' character outcomes by age 28.

### **Hypothesis**



The null hypothesis of this study is that attending a worship service at least once a week has no effect on the MPCP's impact on student outcomes. However, since religion and religiosity can be a powerful motivating force in people's daily lives, we suspect that the alternative hypothesis will be affirmed. As such, we predict that higher levels of religiosity among parents will be associated with more positive effects of the MPCP on students' academic and life outcomes compared to MPCP students with parents who have lower levels of religiosity and MPS students with high and low religiosity (the comparison group). The tenets of religious faith often promote virtues that drive success, such as respect, responsibility, hope, and perseverance in the face of adversity (Horwitz, 2022). These attributes are particularly emphasized in the Christian faith, to which 85% of the parent sample in the Milwaukee study said they subscribed. We expect that the opportunity to have those values from home reinforced in private schools that are predominately faith-based will increase the character-building effects of a school choice program such as the MPCP, making religiosity a complement to school choice. On the other hand, Christian identity in America is often a cultural default rather than a deep, abiding personal faith. Therefore, parents who reported attending church regularly could very well be nominal believers who are not markedly different in character or behavior from those in the comparison group who profess little or no faith. In that case, parents' self-reported religiosity would have a null effect on the MPCP program's effect on student character outcomes. Finally, it is possible that parent religiosity diminishes the effect of private schooling on character outcomes. One set of values-based messages, either from home or school, might be the ideal amount for low-income urban youth. If so, participating in the private school choice program will have its largest and most consistent effect on students with low-religiosity, as values-based guidance in school

substitutes for what they are not receiving at home. While all three of these patterns are theoretically possible, our priors are that parent religiosity complements private school choice.

### Methods

We designed three ordinary least square regression models to examine the impact of parent religiosity on MPCP's effect on students' long-term character outcomes. The outcome variables, or  $y_i$ , consist of convictions for 9 types of crimes (felonies, misdemeanors, drug-related offenses, property damage, thefts, batteries, restraining orders, resisting an officer, and total arrests) and three kinds of civil disputes (traffic violations, fines, and paternity suits).

The first indicator variable of interest is *HIRELIG*, which takes the value 1 if individual  $i$  (a parent) reported attending a religious worship service "more than one time a week" or "once a week," and takes the value of 0 if an individual reported attending religious services "once a month," "only during religious holidays," or "never." The other indicator variable of interest is *MPCP06*, which takes the value 1 if a student was attending a private school on a voucher in Milwaukee at baseline in 2006 and 0 if a student was a MPS match.

The first regression model includes the two indicator variables of interest (religiosity and MPCP) as well as student demographic variables for race, gender, grade (whether they were in 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade at baseline), and standardized reading and math scores. The second regression model includes all the variables in model 1 and adds parental controls for income, education level, and whether the student lived in a two-parent household. All student and parent demographic controls are captured in the matrix  $X$  and robust standard errors are clustered by census tract  $c$ . The first two models follow the basic linear equation below:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{HIRELIG}_i + \beta_2 \text{MPCP06}_i + \phi X_i + \varepsilon_{ic}$$

This equation allows us to determine if students in homes with high religiosity and/or students that make use of a private school voucher have life outcomes that are statistically different from students from homes with low-religiosity or students that attended schools in MPS. Models one and two measure the direct effect of religiosity on character-influenced life outcomes, controlling for the effects of the MPCP and student background factors, as well as the direct effect of the MPCP on character-influenced life outcomes, controlling for the effects of religiosity and student background factors.

The third regression model is a more complex linear equation that interacts the religiosity variable (*HIRELIG*) with the indicator variable for the private school voucher program (*MPCP06*). The outcome variables, or  $y_i$ , consist of the same set of outcomes as in the other two models, (i.e., criminal convictions, paternity suits). The following equation is for the regression model 3:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 HIRELIG_i + \beta_2 MPCP06_i + \beta_3 (HIRELIG_i * MPCP06_i) + \phi X_i + \varepsilon_{ic}$$

This model will help us determine if the effect of the MPCP on a given outcome is significantly different for students from families with high levels of religiosity compared to students from families with low levels of religiosity.

Except for the binary-only outcomes of “restraining order” and “paternity suit,” our criminal and civil dispute outcome variables are regressed as both binary and count data. The modal value for all of them except “total arrests,” however, is 0, with the second-most-common value being 1. Excluding “fines,” “traffic,” and “total arrests,” the percentage of observations for which our crime and civil dispute dependent variables take any value besides 0 ranges from a low of 1.2% for property damage to a high of 12.8% for misdemeanors. This highly skewed distribution of our count-based outcome variables suggests that the main distinction among the

participants in our study may be between those who committed any number of instances of a particular crime and those who committed no instances of that crime. In other words, the main difference appears to be whether an observation is a 0 or anything-but-0 regarding each crime and civil dispute outcome. Thus, in addition to conducting linear regressions on our count-based outcomes, we took the additional step of dichotomizing our count-based outcome variables by assigning the value 1 to observations in which the student had any non-0 value for that variable. We then estimate linear probability models for all three regression models, yielding changes in the likelihood of a given student observation being in the 1 category (e.g., convicted of any non-0 number of drug-related offenses) linked to variation in our two variables of interest (MPCP participation and having a highly religious parent).

Table 1 captures the descriptive baseline data from 2006 that is used in this study. These data inform our variables of interest, control variables, and outcome variables prior to the dichotomization process described above.

**Table 1***Descriptive statistics of all variables used in the analysis*

<b>Variable</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>
<b><i>Student</i></b>					
MPCP 2006	1223	.51	.50	0	1
Black	1223	.68	.47	0	1
Hispanic	1223	.21	.40	0	1
Asian	1223	.24	.15	0	1
White	1223	.09	.28	0	1
Female	1223	.57	.50	0	1
Grade 8 or 9 in 2006	1223	8.70	.46	8	9
Math Z-score	1223	.02	.94	-3.13	2.82
Reading Z-score	1223	.12	.96	-2.97	2.54
<b><i>Parent</i></b>					
High religiosity	1223	.33	.47	0	1
Income below 25k*	1223	.57	-	0	1
Income 25k -35k	1223	.18	.39	0	1
Income 35k – 50k	1223	.14	.35	0	1
Income over 50k	1223	.11	.31	0	1
Less than high school*	1223	.23	-	0	1
High school graduate	1223	.29	.46	0	1
Some college	1223	.34	.47	0	1
College degree	1223	.15	.35	0	1
Both parents in home	1223	.34	.48	0	1
<b><i>Crime Outcomes</i></b>					
Felonies	1223	.18	.81	0	16
Misdemeanors	1223	.23	.80	0	10
Drug-related crimes	1223	.11	.58	0	12
Property damage	1223	.01	.09	0	1
Thefts	1223	.03	.28	0	7
Disorderly conduct	1223	.06	.29	0	3
Batteries*	1223	.02	.18	0	3
Restraining order	1223	.03	.16	0	2
Resisting an officer	1223	.03	.22	0	3
Total arrests	1223	1.08	2.31	0	21
<b><i>Civil Outcomes</i></b>					
Traffic	1223	.65	1.61	0	15
Fines	1223	508.29	2031.33	0	37717.84
Paternity disputes	1223	.12	.38	0	3

\* Excluded reference category

**Limitations**

Though previous studies used the same baseline dataset to examine the effects of Milwaukee's school voucher program on adult criminal activity and paternity suits (DeAngelis and Wolf, 2019; 2020), we introduce the parental religiosity parameter and regard it as a quasi-treatment and as a potential treatment moderator in our analysis. Our main variable of interest, parent religiosity (*HIRELIG*), is drawn from parent surveys with both unit- and item-missing responses. Thus, our analytic sample is as much as 45% smaller than the full original sample that previous researchers used. The combination of a change in the analytic model and analytic sample leads us to generate findings regarding the direct effects of the MPCP on character outcomes that differ somewhat from those reported in previous analyses of these data.

Because this study uses more control variables and has a smaller sample size, it has fewer degrees of freedom and lower study power than previous analyses of the character effects of the MPCP. Study power also is reduced by the limited amount of variation in most of the dependent variables. Fortunately, 90.7% of the young adults in our sample were never convicted of a felony by age 28. However, with little variation in the distributions of most of our dependent variables, like felonies, our analytic power is low.

As a result of low power, detecting true effects is much more difficult in this extension of the original study. To minimize the risk of committing Type II errors by failing to detect such effects, we use a 90% level of confidence as an appropriate threshold for statistical significance for this analysis. We analyze 10 of 12 character outcomes as both dichotomized binary variables and as count variables in their original form, since either functional form might be more efficient than the other, depending on whether the main character effect of our variables of interest is to reduce the likelihood of ever committing the infraction or to reduce the number of such infractions a person is likely to commit. Thus, we estimate each of our three models on 10

dependent variables measured two different ways (3 x 10 x 2) and each of our three models on two dependent variables measured only one way (3 x 2), for a total of 66 model estimations. Except for our analysis of felonies, which we use to demonstrate the complete content of all 6 regression estimations of that outcome (three different models on two different measures of the outcome), we only present and discuss the results from our interaction model in the main text. Thus, the discussion below focuses on the results from 21 statistical model estimations. The results from the other 42 regression estimations are available in the Appendix. Even in drawing from 21 model estimations involving 12 different dependent variables (9 of which are measured two different ways), we are giving the data extra opportunities to demonstrate a significant association between our variables of interest and dependent variables. Thus, we interpret our findings as merely exploratory and not necessarily causal.

## **Results**

### **Felonies**

The independent effects of having highly religious parents and being in the treatment group (MPCP) on felony convictions were null. However, high parental religiosity did moderate the effect of the MPCP on student crime outcomes, just not in the way we hypothesized.

*Participating in the MPCP had a significantly larger effect on reducing subsequent felonious behavior for students with low religiosity parents than it did for students with high religiosity parents.* This interaction effect between religiosity and the school choice program was statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. We used the linear combination function in Stata to derive the total treatment effects of both religiosity and the MPCP and compared all findings to the reference category of students in MPS with low-religiosity parents.

**Table 2**

*Felony Convictions Regressed on Religiosity and Private School Choice, with Student Controls, Parental Controls, and Interaction Term.*

	Felony Convictions				Binary Variable	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
High religiosity	-.033 (.043)	-.019 (.044)	-.090 (.070)	-.008 (.014)	.000 (.015)	.004 (.021)
MPCP student	-.022 (.041)	-.003 (.043)	-.088 (.063)	-.005 (.015)	.003 (.017)	.008 (.021)
Hi-religious x MPCP			.146* (.078)			-.009 (.027)
Black	.17*** (.038)	.118*** (.039)	.125*** (.041)	.064*** (.015)	.041** (.017)	.041** (.017)
Hispanic	.037 (.031)	.025 (.038)	.032 (.038)	.021 (.014)	.016 (.018)	.016 (.018)
Female	-.324*** (.044)	-.336*** (.047)	-.331*** (.046)	-.143*** (.014)	-.147*** (.014)	-.148*** (.014)
Grade in 2006	.061 (.039)	.053 (.043)	.054 (.043)	.021 (.015)	.016 (.016)	.016 (.016)
Math scores	-.011 (.024)	-.004 (.026)	-.004 (.025)	-.013 (.009)	-.011 (.009)	-.011 (.009)
Reading scores	-.038 (.025)	-.035 (.028)	-.036 (.028)	-.016* (.009)	-.015 (.01)	-.015 (.01)
Income \$25-35K		-.029 (.042)	-.025 (.042)		.004 (.018)	.004 (.018)
Income \$35-50K		.025 (.048)	.023 (.049)		.031 (.02)	.031 (.02)
Parent high school		-.056 (.068)	-.060 (.067)		-.005 (.022)	-.004 (.022)
Parent some college		-.106 (.068)	-.104 (.067)		-.021 (.024)	-.021 (.024)
Parent college		-.096 (.077)	-.099 (.076)		-.029 (.026)	-.029 (.026)
Two-parent home		-.171*** (.034)	-.172*** (.034)		-.076*** (.013)	-.076*** (.013)
Cons	-.259 (.33)	-.037 (.367)	-.018 (.364)	-.057 (.129)	.033 (.142)	.031 (.142)
Observations	1326	1223	1223	1326	1223	1223
R-squared	.058	.069	.07	.096	.114	.114

*Clustered standard errors are in parentheses*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$



**Table 3**

*Felonies: Total Effects of Variables of Interest Estimated as Linear Combination Effects from Regression Model 3 (count) and Model 6 (binary)*

<b>Felonies (Count)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	T	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.056	0.043	1.290	0.199	-0.030 0.142
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	0.058	0.053	1.090	0.278	-0.047 0.163
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.032	0.075	-0.430	0.671	-0.180 0.116
<b>Felonies (Binary)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	T	P>t	[95%Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.005	0.020	-0.250	0.802	-0.044 0.034
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	-0.001	0.022	-0.030	0.975	-0.044 0.042
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.004	0.022	0.160	0.873	-0.040 0.047

**Table 4**

*Regression-Adjusted Effects of MPCP Participation and Religiosity on the Count of Felony Convictions*

<b>Felonies</b>		
Religiosity	School Sector	
	MPCP	MPS
High	-0.032	-0.090
Low	-0.088	Reference

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

Students in MPS with low religiosity parents provide the benchmark for the regression-adjusted subgroup effects of the private school voucher program and religiosity presented in Table 4. All else being equal, students in MPS with high-religiosity parents commit an average of .090 fewer felonies than students in MPS with low-religiosity parents. Students in the MPCP

with low-religiosity parents commit an average of .088 fewer felonies than their low-religiosity peers in MPS. Neither of these effects of parent religiosity nor private school choice on the accumulation of felonies are, themselves, statistically significant. The direction of the effects, however, are as expected. High-religiosity students in MPCP with high-religiosity parents commit an average of .032 fewer felonies than students in MPS with low-religiosity parents, with the difference, again, not statistically significant. The coefficient on the interaction term from our main regression of .146 is statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. This indicates that the effect of the MPCP in reducing felonies averages .146 more for students with low-religiosity parents (-.088) than for students with high-religiosity parents (+.058). Because there were null results in our simple regressions and our linear combinations but a statistically significant finding in our interaction regression, we can only confidently assert this: *The MPCP has a stronger effect on suppressing future felony behaviors for students with low-religiosity parents than for students with high-religiosity parents.* These results suggest that private schooling (of which 90% was religiously affiliated) and a highly religious upbringing are not necessarily complementary in curbing felony behavior later in life. Instead, our data show that high-religiosity students who attend public school and low-religiosity students who attend private schools have the lowest felony counts as adults, suggesting the two factors instead act as substitutes.

### **All Outcomes**

To be succinct, we have restricted our reporting on the nine crime outcomes, traffic citations, fines, and paternity suits to only feature our three variables of interest: 1) students with high-religiosity parents, 2) students enrolled in MPCP schools, and 3) the interaction of parent religiosity and the private school choice program. All the control variables described in Table 2

were also included in these regressions, that is, the results are drawn exclusively from our Model 3 and Model 6 estimates, but we leave the control variable results in the background because they are not the focus of our study. The heterogeneous effects on outcomes are displayed in Table 5 below. All other relevant regression and linear combination charts can be found in the Appendix.

We highlight the pattern of results on our three variables of interest in three ways. First, in Table 5, we present all the coefficients for the effect of the MPCP on legal outcomes by parent religiosity subgroup and report the coefficient on the interaction of experiencing the MPCP and having a highly religious parent. We highlight the statistically significant coefficients via shading as well as the standard series of asterisks. Second, through most of this section, we describe the total effects of the MPCP and parent religiosity variables on the 11 remaining non-felony character outcomes for the four MPCP/religiosity subgroup combinations of MPCP & high religiosity, MPCP & low religiosity, MPS & high religiosity, and anchor those estimates with the reference category of MPS & low religiosity. Finally, in Tables 16 and 17 at the end of this section, we summarize the substantive conclusions we can draw from the statistically significant findings highlighted in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Heterogeneous treatment effects of religiosity and the MPCP on crime and civil suits using 12 count vs. binary measures*

	<b>Felonies</b>		<b>Misdemeanors</b>		<b>Drugs</b>		<b>Property Damage</b>	
	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)	
	<b>Count</b>	<b>Binary</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Binary</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Binary</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Binary</b>
High religiosity in MPCP	.058 (.053)	-.001 (.022)	-.009 (.061)	-.011 (.024)	-.042 (.037)	-.017 (.017)		-.004 (.007)
Low religiosity in MPCP	-.088 (.063)	.008 (.021)	-.075 (.070)	-.054** (.025)	-.128*** (.049)	-.040* (.021)		-.014 (.010)
Difference	.146* (.078)	-.009 (.027)	.066 (.096)	.044 (.035)	.086 (.064)	.023 (.027)		.011 (.014)
Observations	1223	1223	1223	1223	1223	1223		1223

	<b>Thefts</b>		<b>Batteries</b>		<b>Restraining Orders</b>		<b>Resisting an Officer</b>	
	(5)		(6)		(7)		(8)	
	<b>Count</b>	<b>Binary</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Binary</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Binary</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Binary</b>
High religiosity in MPCP	.013 (.026)	-.003 (.014)	-.008 (.016)	-.004 (.012)		.022** (.010)	.020 (.016)	.017 (.011)
Low religiosity in MPCP	.001 (.014)	-.007 (.011)	-.008 (.015)	-.007 (.012)		.014 (.018)	-.020 (.021)	-.023 (.018)
Difference	.011 (.030)	.004 (.018)	.000 (.020)	.003 (.016)		.008 (.018)	.040 (.027)	.040* (.027)
Observations	1223	1223	1223	1223		1223	1223	1223

Table 5 (Cont.)

	<b>Total Arrests (9)</b>		<b>Traffic Citations (10)</b>		<b>Fines (11)</b>		<b>Paternity (12)</b>	
	<b>Count</b>	<b>Binary</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Binary</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Binary</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Binary</b>
High religiosity in MPCP	-.066 (.169)	-.067* (.035)	-.168 (.124)	-.073** (.034)	-55.591 (184.237)	-.082** (.036)		-.041 (.029)
Low religiosity in MPCP	-.319* (.190)	-.093** (.190)	-.060 (.149)	-.033 (.037)	82.757 (139.830)	-.081** (.039)		.043 (.030)
Difference	.253 (.245)	.025 (.048)	-.108 (.197)	-.040 (.048)	-138.348 (211.819)	-.002 (.046)		-.065 (.038)
Observations	1223	1223	1223	1223	1223	1223		1223

Standard errors are in parentheses \*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

\*Student and parent controls as well as the religiosity x MPCP interaction were included in the regressions, though not displayed on this table

## Misdemeanors

A grave misconception about a misdemeanor conviction is that it is frivolous or largely inconsequential since it is a lesser offense than a felony. The reality, however, is that misdemeanors—vandalism, shoplifting, trespassing, public intoxication—are punishable by a fine, community service, and/or up to 12 months in jail. Misdemeanors are often included on one’s permanent criminal record. Therefore, a person who is convicted of a misdemeanor could end up owing a debt that they cannot pay or spending months in jail, which could jeopardize their employment, education, and ability to care for family members.

About 13% of the students in this sample went on to have 1 to 17 misdemeanors by age 28. The mean number of convictions is .23. A regression on the continuous variable of misdemeanors shows a null result for all three variables of interest (religiosity, MPCP, and their interaction). However, statistical significance emerges when we dichotomize the variable by coding 0 for no misdemeanors and 1 for one or more misdemeanors. The findings of this linear probability model suggest that the difference between having zero misdemeanors compared to having just one is substantially more profound than a person going from having one misdemeanor to having two or three.

**Table 7**

*Regression-adjusted effects of MPCP participation and religiosity on the likelihood of a misdemeanor conviction*

Misdemeanors		
Religiosity	School Sector	
	MPCP	MPS
High	-.046**	-.036
Low	-.054**	Reference

*See full regression and linear combination charts in Appendix Tables 1A and 2A*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

All else being equal, MPCP students with low-religiosity parents are on average 5.4 percentage points less likely to commit misdemeanors than MPS students with low-religiosity parents. This subgroup effect of the school choice program is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Students in MPCP with high-religiosity parents are on average 4.6 percentage points less likely to get a misdemeanor conviction than students in MPS with low-religiosity parents. This subgroup effect also is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Within MPS, students with high-religiosity parents are on average 3.6 percentage points less likely to commit a misdemeanor offense than their low-religiosity counterparts, though this difference is not statistically significant.

The interaction term of having high-religiosity parents and participating in the MPCP suggests these students are 4.4 percentage points more likely to commit a misdemeanor than students in MPCP with low-religiosity parents. The coefficient on the interaction term is not statistically significant, however, so our interpretation is that the MPCP has a total effect on reducing the likelihood of being convicted of any number of misdemeanors and that effect is similar for students with high- and low-religiosity parents.

## **Drugs**

Among all the measured outcomes in this study, the drug-related crime results may provide the strongest empirical evidence to suggest that the MPCP reduces adult criminality. Statistically significant results emerge from having both high- and low-religiosity parents and being in the MPCP compared to the reference of students with low-religiosity parents in MPS.

**Table 8**

*Regression-Adjusted Effects of MPCP Participation and Religiosity on the Count of Drug Convictions*

Religiosity	Drugs	
	School Sector	
	MPCP	MPS
High	-.130***	-.088
Low	-.128***	Reference

*See full regression and linear combination outputs in Appendix Tables 3A and 4A*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

All else being equal, MPCP students with low-religiosity parents commit on average .128 fewer drug offenses than MPS students with low-religiosity parents. On average, students in MPCP with high-religiosity parents were convicted of .130 fewer drug crimes than students in the MPS with low-religiosity parents. When comparing public versus private school drug convictions in our sample, MPCP students commit .078 fewer drug-related offenses than MPS students. All three findings are statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. Being an MPS student with a highly religious parent reduces drug crimes by .088 compared to being an MPS student with a less-religious parent; however, this difference is not statistically significant.

The coefficient on the interaction term from our Model 3 regression is .086, which indicates that the effect of the MPCP in reducing felonies averages .086 more for students with low-religiosity parents (-.128) than for students with high-religiosity parents (-.042). This finding, however, is not statistically significant.

### **Thefts**

About 3.4% of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade students in the sample received theft convictions by age 28. Among them, there is no statistically significant distinction among any combination of



religiosity level and type of school. However, a surprising finding is the correlation between high-religiosity and stealing.

**Table 9**

*Regression-Adjusted Effects of MPCP Participation and Religiosity on the Count of Theft Convictions*

Thefts		
Religiosity	School Sector	
	MPCP	MPS
High	.039	.026
Low	.001	Reference

*See full regression and linear combination outputs in Appendix Tables 5A and 6A*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

Interestingly, the total effect of having high-religiosity parents *increases* theft convictions by an average of .032 thefts compared to being a student with low-religiosity parents. This finding is statistically significant at the 95% confident level. When turning the continuous theft outcome variable into a dichotomous one for ease of interpretation, we find that students with high-religiosity parents are on average 1.9 percentage points *more likely* to get convicted of theft than students with low-religiosity parents. This result is also statistically significant at the 95% confident level. There are, however, null independent effects of being in the MPCP as well as for the interaction term of having high-religiosity parents and being in the MPCP. Using the linear combination function, we learn that students in the MPCP with high-religiosity parents have a 2.1 percentage point increase in the likelihood of getting a theft conviction over all the students with low-religiosity parents. This was statistically significant at the 90% confidence level.

### **Restraining Orders**

About 3.2% of the study sample had court-mandated restraining orders placed on them. The restraining order outcome variable is binary; therefore, a linear probability model is used to derive the results in the form of marginal percentage point differences.

**Table 10**

*Regression-Adjusted Effects of MPCP Participation and Religiosity on the Likelihood of Having a Restraining Order*

Restraining Orders		
Religiosity	School Sector	
	MPCP	MPS
High	-.002	-.024**
Low	.014	Reference

*See full regression and linear combination outputs in Appendix Tables 7A and 8A*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

All else equal, MPS students with high-religiosity parents are, on average, 2.4 percentage points less likely to have a restraining order placed on them compared to students in MPS with low-religiosity parents. This finding is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. The total effect of being a student with a high-religiosity parent is associated with being 2 percentage points less likely to receive a restraining order than students with low-religiosity parents. This result is statistically significant at the 90% confidence level (see Model 2 in Table 7A). In addition, being in the MPCP is associated with an increase in the likelihood of getting a restraining order by 1.9 percentage points compared to students who were enrolled in MPS. This finding is statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. Using the linear combination function, we find that students with high-religiosity parents moving from MPS to MPCP increases the likelihood for the use of a restraining order by 2.2 percentage points.

Taken altogether, we see that students in MPS having high-religiosity parents are associated with suppressing criminal behavior that would require the use of a restraining order.

This suggests that public school—not predominately religious private school—is the sector where highly-religious parents are more pivotal in suppressing restraining order-level violent behavior later in life. These results fuel the emergent “either/or” theory of this study; that is, attending worship services once or more a week for parents may have substitutionary effects for the student character-building power of mostly faith-based private schooling and vice versa.

### **Resisting an Officer**

Nearly 97% of the students in the sample avoided resisting an officer convictions as adults. We have chosen to focus on whether religiosity and private school choice might have prevented students from resisting arrests, not how many arrests they might have resisted. Therefore, we are highlighting the binary resisting arrest variable over the continuous one.

**Table 11**

*Regression-Adjusted Effects of MPCP Participation and Religiosity on the Likelihood of Resisting an Officer Convictions*

Resisting an Officer		
Religiosity	School Sector	
	MPCP	MPS
High	-.021	-.039**
Low	-.023	Reference

*See full regression and linear combination outputs in Appendix Tables 9A and 10A*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

On the continuous regression, all else being equal, MPS students with high-religiosity parents are associated with an average of .035 fewer resisting an officer convictions than MPS students with low-religiosity parents. This finding is statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. While high-religiosity parents in the MPCP and low-religiosity parents in the MPCP are associated with an average decrease of .015 and .020 resisting an officer convictions,

respectively, compared to MPS students with low-religiosity parents, these findings are not statistically significant.

On the dichotomous regression, all else being equal, the independent effect of having highly religious parents is associated with a 1.9 percentage point decrease in resisting arrest convictions compared to students with low-religiosity parents. This result is statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. Students in MPS with high-religiosity parents have, on average, a 3.9 percentage point decrease in resisting an officer convictions compared to students in MPS with low-religiosity parents. This finding is also statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. The effect of being in the MPCP on being convicted of resisting arrests is, on average, 4 percentage points higher for students of high-religiosity parents (.017) than for students of low-religiosity parents (-.023). This heterogeneous effect within MPCP is statistically significant at the 90% confidence level.

Taken together, our “either/or” theory is affirmed, as public school students with highly religious parents outpace their non-religious counterparts in avoiding resisting arrest convictions, as do students in private school with low-religiosity parents seem to suppress the urge to resist arrest more than their high-religiosity peers.

### **Total Arrests**

Nearly one-third of the study sample had at least one arrest on their adult criminal record. About 11.3% of the young adults had only one arrest by age 28, though one study participant maxed out the arrest count at 17. The total arrest outcome provides the greatest amount of variance in our study, and therefore offers the most statistical power. Still, we regressed on both the continuous and the dichotomized arrest records to analyze the effect of religiosity and private school choice on reducing arrests (counts) and stopping students from getting arrested (binary).

**Table 12**

*Regression-Adjusted Effects of MPCP Participation and Religiosity on the Likelihood of Getting Arrested*

Religiosity	Arrests	
	School Sector	
	MPCP	MPS
High	-.078**	-.011
Low	-.093**	Reference

*See full regression and linear combination outputs in Appendix Tables 11A and 12A*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

Using the count regression and all else being equal, MPCP students with low-religiosity and high-religiosity parents have on average .319 and .309 fewer total arrests respectively than MPS students with low-religiosity parents. This result is statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. MPS students with high-religiosity parents experience .243 less arrests than their public school peers with low-religiosity parents. The interaction of high-religiosity and the MPCP increases arrests by .253 compared to MPCP students with low-religiosity parents; however, this difference is not statistically significant.

When we dichotomize the total arrest variable and run a linear probability regression, we find that MPCP students with low-religiosity parents are on average associated with a 9.3 percentage point reduction in the likelihood of being arrested compared to MPS students with low-religiosity parents. This difference is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Students with high-religiosity parents are on average 7.8 percentage points less likely to be arrested than MPS students with low-religiosity parents. This finding also is statistically significant at the 95% level of confidence. On the simple binary regression model, the independent effect of the MPCP is associated with lowering arrests by an average of 7.8

percentage points compared to students who were in MPS. This result is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level.

All these results suggest that the private school choice program substantially reduces future student arrests, and the greatest beneficiary of these private schools (which are mostly religious) appears to be students with low-religiosity parents.

### Traffic

One-quarter of the students in the sample received at least one traffic citation by the state of Wisconsin by the age of 28. The number of traffic violations ranged from 1 to 21. The continuous count regressions showed no statistical significance among any of the variables of interest; however, when we made the traffic variable binary we found several points of statistical significance. This suggests that the act of receiving one traffic ticket was more consequential than the number of citations received.

**Table 13**

*Regression-Adjusted Effects of MPCP Participation and Religiosity on the Likelihood of Getting a Traffic Citation*

Traffic Citations		
Religiosity	School Sector	
	MPCP	MPS
High	-.053	.020
Low	-.033	Reference

*See full regression and linear combination outputs in Appendix Tables 13A and 14A*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

All else equal, there are null results for all three religiosity-type of school combinations that compared traffic outcomes to the reference category of students in the MPS with low-religiosity parents. However, using the linear combination function, we find that shifting a student with high-religiosity parents from MPCP to MPS would decrease their expected traffic

violations by 7.3 percentage points. Also, the direct effect of the MPCP is associated with a 5.6 percentage point decrease in the likelihood of getting a traffic ticket compared to being in MPS. This result is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. The direct effect of having high-religiosity versus low-religiosity parents was null.

As such, students' religious background did not seem to impact their driving record; however, enrollment in a private school choice program seems to have made a difference. Again, this traffic finding might support the theory that a substitutionary—not complementary—relationship between mostly religious private schooling and family religiosity may exist. This also suggests that the impact of going from no traffic violations to getting one versus going from one ticket to two or three has a greater statistical (and perhaps practical) impact on students.

### **Fines**

Nearly 44% of the sample experienced being fined by the state of Wisconsin by age 28. The average amount of fines that students in this sample were expected to pay was \$526, though the total ranged from \$10 to \$37,717. Continuous regressions did not detect statistical differences; therefore, we also regressed using a binary outcome variable (Model 6), which yielded some statistically significant results. This suggests that the difference between getting fined and not getting fined is more profound than differentiating between the number of fines given among those in the sample.

**Table 14**

*Regression-Adjusted Effects of MPCP & Religiosity on the Likelihood of Getting State Fines*  
**Fines**

Religiosity	School Sector	
	MPCP	MPS
High	-.087**	-.005
Low	-.081**	Reference

*See full regression and lincom outputs in Appendix Tables 15A and 16A \*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$*

Students in the MPCP with low-religiosity parents were on average associated with an 8.1 percentage point decrease in the likelihood of receiving a fine compared to students in the MPS with low-religiosity parents. Students in the MPCP with high-religiosity parents were on average 8.7 percentage points less likely to receive a fine compared to MPS students with low-religiosity parents. There was no non-zero heterogeneous effect of having high or low religiosity within the MPCP. Students with high-religiosity parents in MPS were .5 percentage points less likely to get a fine than their low-religiosity counterparts in public school; however, this finding is not statistically significant.

Much like the traffic outcomes, fines are not significantly influenced by the independent religiosity variable. However, all else equal, being in the MPCP is associated with an 8.2 percentage point decrease in fines compared to students who were enrolled in MPS. This finding is statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. For students with high-religiosity parents, moving from MPS to MPCP is on average associated with an 8.2 decrease in the likelihood of a student getting fined later in life. These findings are yet another data point to suggest that the substitutionary theory of this study: a predominately religious, private school OR family religiosity can have a remarkable long-term effect on student life outcomes—but both are not needed together.

### **Paternity Disputes**

Ten percent of the students in this study were named in paternity suits by the age of 28. Only 1.5% of those students were involved in two or three paternity suits, therefore a binary, not continuous, regression is the most appropriate statistical model to use. Our regressions show null effects for the independent religiosity and private school choice variables. However, out-of-



wedlock births with contested paternity are the sole outcome in this study that is substantially improved by possessing BOTH high-religiosity parents and a private school choice option.

**Table 15**

*Regression-Adjusted Effects of MPCP Participation and Religiosity on the Likelihood of Being Named in a Paternity Suit*

<b>Paternity Suits</b>		
Religiosity	School Sector	
	MPCP	MPS
High	-.042	.017
Low	.043	Reference

*See full regression and linear combination outputs in Appendix Tables 17A and 18A*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

Participating in the MPCP had a significantly larger effect on reducing subsequent paternity suits among students with high-religiosity parents than it did for students with low-religiosity parents. The coefficient on the interaction term from our main binary regression is -.065. This indicates that the effect of the MPCP in preventing unwanted, out-of-wedlock births is 8.4 percentage points greater for students with high-religiosity parents (-.041) than for students with low-religiosity parents (+.043). This result is statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. All else equal, being an MPCP student with a high-religiosity parent is associated with having a 4.2 percentage point decrease in paternity suits compared to MPS students with low-religiosity parents; this finding, however, is not statistically significant. Being an MPCP student with a low-religiosity parent and being an MPS student with a high-religiosity parent is associated with increases in paternity suits by 4.3 and 1.7 percentage points respectively compared to MPS students with low-religiosity parents. These results are not statistically significant.

Interestingly, being in a private school choice program with a highly religious parent is, on average, associated with a 4.5 percentage point reduction in paternity cases compared to all students with low levels of parent religiosity in either private school or public school. While going to worship services at least once a week cannot and should not be a public policy, it appears to pair well with private school choice in reducing contentious out-of-wedlock births. In this case our “either/or” theory of substitutionary effect of either family religiosity or private school choice options is rejected. In terms of influencing sexual morality among young adults, religiosity and private schooling may have a “both/and” relationship.

### **Null Findings for 2 of the 12 Outcomes**

This study finds that religiosity, participation in Milwaukee’s private school choice program, or the interaction of the two, have no statistically significant effect on students’ future involvement in property damage and physical batteries. This was the case for the regression outcomes as well as the linear combinations (See Appendix Table 19A).

### **Overview**

What does the overall pattern of results suggest about whether access to private schooling through a choice program and parent religiosity act as complements or substitutes when it comes to reducing the likelihood of criminal behavior? First, we examine the subgroup effects of the MPCP on students with high- and low-religiosity parents (Table 16). The pattern of subgroup effects provides no evidence of complementarity. For the four outcome estimates (out of 22) for which participation in the MPCP is associated with a statistically significant reduction in criminal behavior for young people with highly religious parents, the school choice program has a similar positive effect on reducing crime outcomes for young adults with low religiosity parents. Parent religious fervor neither magnifies nor substitutes for the overall helpful effects of

private school choice in reducing the likelihood of young adults being convicted of misdemeanors, drug crimes, total arrests of all types, and criminal fines. Young adults who do not participate in the MPCP, but who have highly religious parents, demonstrate lower rates of being served with restraining orders and resisting an officer, compared to their low-religiosity MPS peers. These findings suggest that religious parents substitute for, and may be more impactful than, the school choice experience regarding those two crime outcomes.

**Table 16**

*Statistically Significant Subgroup Effects of the MPCP and Parent Religiosity Relative to MPS/Low Religiosity*

	MPCP High Religiosity	MPCP Low Religiosity	MPS High Religiosity
Significant Reductions in Crime and Civil Suit Outcomes Compared to MPS Low Religiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misdemeanors (-.046**) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drugs (-.130***)</li> <li>• Total Arrests (-.078**)</li> <li>• Fines (-.087**)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misdemeanors (-.054**) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drugs (-.128***)</li> <li>• Total Arrests (-.093**)</li> <li>• Fines (-.081**)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restraining Orders (-.024**)</li> <li>• Resisting an Officer (-.039**)</li> </ul>

The coefficients on the MPCP x High Religiosity interaction term in our regressions provides the most direct test of the extent to which parent religion complements or substitutes for the effects of private school choice on crime outcomes. In three (of 22) estimations, the coefficient on the interaction term is statistically significant, signaling heterogeneity in the MPCP effect based on parent religion (Table 17). The results support the complementarity of school choice and high parent religiosity for only one character outcome: paternity suits. That finding is unsurprising given that sexual behavior and its consequences is perhaps the most moralistic outcome measure in our study. Young adults from highly religious families whose

parents were able to choose a private school for them as a child—presumably one that reinforced the family’s view of sexual morality—are significantly less likely to be involved in paternity suits than their differentially situated peers.

**Table 17**

*Statistically Significant Interaction Effects of the MPCP and Parent Religiosity*

<b>Item/Support</b>	<b>Complements</b> Reduction Greater for High Religiosity	<b>Substitutes</b> Reduction Greater for Low Religiosity
Significant Differences in the Effect of the MPCP on Crime and Civil Suit Outcomes by Parent Religiosity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paternity Disputes (-.065*)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Felonies (.146*)</li> <li>• Resisting an Officer (.040*)</li> </ul>

The results of the interaction between school choice and parent religiosity support the substitution hypothesis in two cases. Participating in the MPCP has a much larger effect on reducing the count of felony convictions for young adults with low-religiosity parents than for those with high-religiosity parents. Similarly, experiencing private schooling through the choice program has a greater effect on reducing cases of resisting an officer for young adults from a low-religiosity background compared to those from a high-religiosity one. Moral messages from school personnel to avoid the commission of serious crimes and to cooperate when confronted by police appear to be most effective in shaping the future behavior of low-income urban youths who received less religion-based moral messaging from their parents.

In sum, we find only one empirical result that supports a hypothesis that participation in a school choice program complements the positive effects of highly religious parents on the subsequent criminal behavior of young adults. That finding involved paternity disputes, which are markers of irresponsible sexual behavior, not crimes. We find at least four empirical results

that support the substitution hypothesis. Young adults who do not experience school choice but do have highly religious parents avoid restraining orders and charges of resisting an officer at rates comparable to MPCP students and significantly higher than MPS alums with low-religiosity parents. Furthermore, the MPCP experience has a significantly greater effect on reducing convictions for felonies and resisting arrest for young adults with low-religiosity backgrounds than for those with high-religiosity ones. In these four cases, private school choice and highly religious parents are substituting for each other in shaping the legal and moral behavior of young people.

### **Conclusion**

Administrators, teachers, and students all bring their religious faith to school, whether that faith is big, small, or non-existent. This study provides a rare glimpse into the impact that parental religious activity may have on students' long-term life outcomes, particularly among children who participated in a private school voucher program in Milwaukee in 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades in 2006. These students were closely matched with Milwaukee Public School students, and we analyze their criminal and civil data from when they were 25 to 28 years old. With 82% of the participating private schools being religious or non-religious but following in a religious tradition at the time, it is most appropriate to question which families are best served by such a school voucher program: highly religious families or families with little to no religiosity?

The results of this study suggest that the students in this sample—of which 70% are low-income, urban, African American students—benefit most by having either parental religiosity at home or access to predominately religious private schools through the MPCP. In other words, of the ten percent or less of the sample that went on to acquire criminal records, fines, and traffic violations, they were disproportionately among the students who had little to no ties to a religious

community and attended public school. These students had “neither/nor”—neither religiosity nor private school choice. The emergent theory of this study is that students who have “either/or”—either religiosity or private school choice—are statistically predicted to have better life outcomes than those who do not have those character-building resources. This theory was affirmed in the heterogeneous effects in the felony and resisting an officer regressions, which showed that students with low-religiosity in the MPCP experienced a stronger benefit from the school choice program than the students in the MPCP with high-religiosity parents. This emergent theme can also be applied to the finding that students with high-religiosity parents in MPS were statistically significantly less likely to have a restraining order place on them or resist an officer compared to MPS students with low-religiosity parents.

Paternity suits are the unique case in which having high-religiosity parents and private school choice is clearly complementary, not substitutionary. Students in the MPCP with high-religiosity parents had the lowest rate of being named in a paternity suit compared to low-religiosity students in both MPS and the MPCP. This suggests that a “double dose” of religion at home and potentially religion and character formation at a private school worked together to suppress unplanned and contested out-of-wedlock births. In fact, having “either/or”—religion or private school choice—may have contributed to an increase of these unwanted pregnancies, which exceeded the reference group which had “none,” though these findings were not statistically significant.

Of the 12 studied outcomes, only two (property damage and batteries) had completely null results for the variables of interest in every regression model and the linear combinations.

The findings in this study are not always straightforward with a clear path that affirms the “either/or” theory, yet the theory presents itself often enough to be taken seriously. More

research is needed to further explore the impact that family religiosity and religious faith can have on private school choice programs as well as other highly studied educational interventions. Now is the time for the research community to re-assess our assumptions about when and how religious faith can appropriately influence outcomes in education. When we begin asking new and different questions, we may discover just how much religious faith matters in schools—and in life.

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## Appendix

Table 1A

*Misdemeanor Convictions Regressed on Religiosity and Private School Choice, with Student Controls, Parental Controls, and Interaction Term. Count Outcomes (Models 1-3) and Binary Outcomes (Models 4-6)*

	Misdemeanor Convictions					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
High religiosity	-.025 (.039)	-.031 (.044)	-.064 (.070)	-.017 (.016)	-.014 (.017)	-.036 (.028)
MPCP student	-.072 (.047)	-.037 (.044)	-.075 (.070)	-.031* (.017)	-.029* (.017)	-.054** (.025)
Hi-religion x MPCP			.066 (0.96)			.044 (.035)
Black	.151*** (.038)	.137*** (.042)	.140*** (.044)	.067*** (.020)	.053** (.023)	.055** (.023)
Hispanic	.025 (.042)	-.029 (.046)	-.026 (.045)	-.007 (.022)	-.025 (.026)	-.023 (.026)
Female	-.365*** (.051)	-.362*** (.050)	-.360*** (.050)	-.158*** (.017)	-.163*** (.018)	-.162*** (.018)
Grade in 2006	.001 (.052)	-.032 (.057)	-.031 (.057)	.014 (.019)	.006 (.02)	.006 (.020)
Math scores	-.117*** (.036)	-.081** (.035)	-.081** (.035)	-.030** (.012)	-.022 (.013)	-.022 (.013)
Reading scores	-.006 (.023)	.002 (.026)	.002 (.026)	-.014 (.011)	-.013 (.012)	-.013 (.012)
Income \$25-35K		-.025 (.046)	-.023 (.045)		-.010 (.021)	-.008 (.020)
Income \$35-50K		-.115*** (.036)	-.116*** (.036)		-.048** (.021)	-.049** (.021)
Parent high school		-.106 (.078)	-.107 (.079)		-.034 (.025)	-.035 (.025)
Parent some college		-.165** (.081)	-.164** (.080)		-.040 (.027)	-.040 (.027)
Parent college		-.203** (.085)	-.205** (.086)		-.055* (.032)	-.056* (.032)
Two-parent home		-.127*** (.033)	-.127*** (.033)		-.046** (.019)	-.046** (.019)
Cons	.379 (.467)	.844 (.531)	.853 (.532)	.061 (.167)	.210 (.178)	.216 (.177)
Observations	1,326	1,223	1,223	1,326	1,223	1,223
R-squared	.083	.098	.099	.103	.116	.117

Standard errors are in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

**Table 2A**

*Misdemeanor: Linear Combinations Effects for Regression in Model 3 (Count) and Model 6 (Binary)*

<b>Misdemeanor (Count)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.002	0.060	0.040	0.971	-0.117 0.121
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	0.009	0.061	-0.150	0.881	-0.129 0.111
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.073	0.062	-1.170	0.243	-0.195 0.050
<b>Misdemeanor (Binary)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.008	0.021	0.370	0.709	-0.034 0.049
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	-0.011	0.024	-0.450	0.656	-0.058 0.036
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.046	0.023	-2.030	0.044	-0.092 -0.001

**Table 3A**

*Drug-Related Convictions Regressed on Religiosity and Private School Choice, with Student Controls, Parental Controls, and Interaction Term. Count Outcomes (Models 1-3) and Binary Outcomes (Models 4-6)*

	Drug Convictions					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
High religiosity	-.060* (.033)	-.046 (.033)	-.088 (.058)	-.025** (.012)	-.018 (.013)	-.029 (.021)
MPCP student	-.074*** (.027)	-.078*** (.029)	-.128*** (.049)	-.025** (.012)	-.026** (.013)	-.040* (.021)
Hi-religion x MPCP			.086 (.064)			.023 (.027)
Black	.084*** (.026)	.062** (.029)	.066** (.030)	.034** (.015)	.025 (.018)	.026 (.018)
Hispanic	.024 (.025)	.023 (.030)	.027 (.032)	.004 (.015)	-.003 (.018)	-.002 (.018)
Female	-.215*** (.032)	-.228*** (.035)	-.225*** (.034)	-.108*** (.013)	-.115*** (.014)	-.114*** (.014)
Grade in 2006	.053* (.032)	.053 (.034)	.053 (.034)	.019 (.015)	.018 (.016)	.018 (.016)
Math scores	-.021 (.014)	-.022 (.015)	-.023 (.015)	-.010 (.007)	-.010 (.008)	-.010 (.008)
Reading scores	-.018 (.016)	-.017 (.018)	-.018 (.018)	-.010 (.007)	-.009 (.009)	-.009 (.009)
Income \$25-35K		.036 (.035)	.038 (.035)		.020 (.017)	.021 (.017)
Income \$35-50K		.039 (.050)	.038 (.050)		-.004 (.016)	-.004 (.016)
Parent high school		.009 (.049)	.007 (.048)		-.025 (.020)	-.026 (.020)
Parent some college		-.027 (.040)	-.026 (.040)		-.033 (.022)	-.033 (.022)
Parent college		-.032 (.046)	-.034 (.046)		-.035 (.024)	-.036 (.024)
Two-parent home		-.075*** (.025)	-.075*** (.026)		-.026* (.014)	-.026* (.014)
Cons	-.218 (.259)	-.174 (.288)	-.163 (.286)	-.046 (.127)	.004 (.138)	.007 (.138)
Observations	1,326	1,223	1,223	1,326	1,223	1,223
R-squared	.057	.062	.063	.081	.089	.090

Standard errors are in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

**Table 4A***Drugs: Linear Combinations Effects for Regression in Model 3 (Count) and Model 6 (Binary)*

<b>Drugs (Count)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.002	0.027	0.070	0.941	-0.055 0.051
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	-0.042	0.037	-1.130	0.260	-0.116 0.032
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.130	0.049	-2.670	0.008	-0.227 -0.034
<b>Drugs (Binary)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.007	0.017	-0.390	0.697	-0.040 0.027
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	-0.017	0.017	-1.010	0.315	-0.050 0.016
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.046	0.018	-2.640	0.009	-0.081 -0.012

**Table 5A**

*Theft Convictions Regressed on Religiosity and Private School Choice, with Student Controls, Parental Controls, and Interaction Term. Count Outcomes (Models 1-3) and Binary Outcomes (Models 4-6)*

	Theft Convictions					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
High religiosity	.028** (.013)	.032** (.014)	.026 (.016)	.015* (.008)	.019** (.008)	.017 (.013)
MPCP student	-.001 (.016)	.008 (.017)	.001 (.014)	-.007 (.008)	-.005 (.009)	-.007 (.011)
Hi-religion x MPCP			.011 (.03)			.004 (.018)
Black	.023* (.012)	.019 (.013)	.020 (.013)	.017* (.009)	.013 (.011)	.013 (.011)
Hispanic	.000 (.014)	-.016 (.016)	-.016 (.015)	-.001 (.010)	-.007 (.012)	-.007 (.012)
Female	-.047** (.019)	-.049** (.020)	-.049** (.020)	-.028*** (.010)	-.032*** (.010)	-.032*** (.010)
Grade in 2006	-.020 (.024)	-.027 (.025)	-.027 (.025)	-.002 (.010)	-.005 (.011)	-.005 (.011)
Math scores	-.014* (.009)	-.007 (.007)	-.007 (.007)	-.008 (.006)	-.005 (.006)	-.005 (.006)
Reading scores	-.003 (.006)	-.001 (.008)	-.001 (.008)	-.003 (.004)	-.002 (.005)	-.002 (.005)
Income \$25-35K		.001 (.013)	.001 (.013)		.010 (.013)	.010 (.013)
Income \$35-50K		-.015 (.011)	-.015 (.011)		-.007 (.009)	-.007 (.009)
Parent high school		-.032 (.032)	-.033 (.033)		-.015 (.016)	-.015 (.016)
Parent some college		-.052 (.035)	-.052 (.035)		-.031* (.016)	-.031* (.016)
Parent college		-.044 (.038)	-.044 (.038)		-.017 (.019)	-.017 (.019)
Two-parent home		-.034*** (.011)	-.034*** (.011)		-.024*** (.007)	-.024*** (.007)
Cons	.205 (.205)	.315 (.248)	.316 (.250)	.047 (.092)	.096 (.105)	.097 (.105)
Observations	1,326	1,223	1,223	1,326	1,223	1,223
R-squared	.017	.027	.027	.020	.031	.031

*Standard errors are in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$*



**Table 6A**

*Thefts: Linear Combinations Effects for Regression in Model 3 (Count) and Model 6 (Binary)*

<b>Thefts (Count)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf.	Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.038	0.024	1.540	0.126	-0.011	0.086
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	0.013	0.026	0.490	0.627	-0.039	0.064
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.039	0.026	1.490	0.137	-0.012	0.090
<b>Drugs (Binary)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf.	Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.021	0.011	1.960	0.052	-0.000	0.042
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	-0.003	0.014	-0.230	0.821	-0.030	0.024
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.014	0.013	1.100	0.272	-0.011	-0.039

**Table 7A**

*Restraining Orders Regressed on Religiosity and Private School Choice, with Student Controls, Parental Controls, and Interaction Term. (Binary Outcomes Only)*

	Restraining Orders		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
High religiosity	-.017* (.009)	-.020* (.011)	-.024** (.011)
MPCP student	.016* (.009)	.019* (.010)	.014 (.018)
Hi-religion x MPCP			.008 (.020)
Black	.020** (.009)	.023* (.013)	.024* (.013)
Hispanic	.000 (.009)	-.010 (.010)	-.010 (.010)
Female	-.011 (.010)	-.011 (.011)	-.011 (.011)
Grade in 2006	.006 (.009)	.004 (.009)	.004 (.009)
Math scores	.002 (.005)	.007 (.005)	.007 (.005)
Reading scores	-.019*** (.006)	-.021*** (.007)	-.021*** (.007)
Income \$25-35K		.001 (.012)	.001 (.012)
Income \$35-50K		-.004 (.011)	-.004 (.011)
Parent high school		-.034** (.015)	-.034** (.015)
Parent some college		-.032* (.017)	-.032* (.017)
Parent college		-.039** (.015)	-.039** (.015)
Two-parent home		.006 (.011)	.006 (.011)
Cons	-.035 (.078)	.009 (.086)	.010 (.087)
Observations	1,326	1,223	1,223
R-squared	.022	.031	.031

*Standard errors are in parentheses*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

**Table 8A***Restraining orders: Linear Combinations Effects for Regression in Model 6 (Binary-Only)*

<b>Restraining orders (Binary)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.016	0.017	-0.940	0.346	-0.050 0.018
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	0.022	0.010	2.310	0.022	0.003 0.041
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.002	0.012	-0.140	0.888	-0.025 0.022

**Table 9A**

*Resisting an Officer Convictions Regressed on Religiosity and Private School Choice, with Student Controls, Parental Controls, and Interaction Term. Count Outcomes (models 1-3) and Binary Outcomes (models 4-6)*

	Resisting an Officer					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
High religiosity	-.015 (.012)	-.015 (.013)	-.035* (.020)	-.018* (.010)	-.019* (.010)	-.039** (.016)
MPCP student	-.001 (.012)	.003 (.013)	-.020 (.021)	-.004 (.009)	.000 (.010)	-.023 (.018)
Hi-religion x MPCP			.040 (.027)			.040* (.021)
Black	.032*** (.011)	.023** (.011)	.025** (.012)	.027*** (.010)	.019* (.011)	.021* (.011)
Hispanic	.003 (.010)	.001 (.013)	.002 (.014)	.005 (.010)	.004 (.012)	.005 (.012)
Female	-.057*** (.013)	-.059*** (.013)	-.058*** (.013)	-.052*** (.010)	-.054*** (.010)	-.052*** (.010)
Grade in 2006	-.002 (.013)	-.005 (.014)	-.004 (.015)	.001 (.010)	-.002 (.011)	-.002 (.011)
Math scores	-.002 (.007)	-.001 (.008)	-.001 (.008)	-.001 (.006)	.000 (.007)	.000 (.007)
Reading scores	-.012* (.007)	-.011 (.007)	-.011 (.007)	-.010 (.006)	-.008 (.006)	-.008 (.007)
Income \$25-35K		-.012 (.014)	-.011 (.014)		-.012 (.010)	-.011 (.010)
Income \$35-50K		-.012 (.012)	-.013 (.012)		-.008 (.011)	-.009 (.011)
Parent high school		-.004 (.020)	-.005 (.020)		-.004 (.014)	-.005 (.014)
Parent some college		-.014 (.018)	-.014 (.018)		-.010 (.014)	-.010 (.014)
Parent college		-.017 (.020)	-.017 (.019)		-.008 (.015)	-.009 (.015)
Two-parent home		-.033*** (.008)	-.033*** (.008)		-.027*** (.007)	-.027*** (.007)
_cons	.070 (.117)	.126 (.131)	.131 (.129)	.044 (.089)	.092 (.095)	.097 (.094)
Observations	1,326	1,223	1,223	1,326	1,223	1,223
R-squared	.033	.04	.042	.041	.049	.052

*Standard errors are in parentheses*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

**Table 10A**

*Resisting an officer Linear Combinations Effects for Regression in Model 3 (Count) and Model 6 (Binary)*

<b>Resisting an officer (Count)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.005	0.017	0.310	0.755	-0.028 0.039
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	0.020	0.016	1.240	0.218	-0.012 0.051
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.015	0.019	-0.770	0.441	-0.052 0.023
<b>Resisting an officer (Binary)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.001	0.013	0.110	0.916	-0.025 0.028
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	0.017	0.011	1.610	0.109	-0.004 0.038
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.021	0.016	-1.350	0.178	-0.053 0.010

**Table 11A**

*Total Arrests Regressed on Religiosity and Private School Choice, with Student Controls, Parental Controls, and Interaction Term. Count Outcomes (Models 1-3) and Binary Outcomes (Models 4-6)*

	Total Arrests					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
High religiosity	-.135 (.124)	-.119 (.129)	-.243 (.192)	-.009 (.023)	.001 (.025)	-.011 (.036)
MPCP student	-.201 (.127)	-.171 (.132)	-.319* (.190)	-.073*** (.026)	-.078*** (.029)	-.093** (.039)
Hi-religion x MPCP			.253 (.245)			.025 (.048)
Black	.607*** (.170)	.427** (.189)	.440** (.195)	.138*** (.036)	.092** (.039)	.093** (.039)
Hispanic	-.011 (.175)	-.170 (.204)	-.159 (.206)	-.042 (.040)	-.055 (.046)	-.054 (.046)
Female	-1.206*** (.140)	-1.241*** (.147)	-1.234*** (.147)	-.231*** (.027)	-.236*** (.028)	-.235*** (.028)
Grade in 2006	.005 (.123)	-.054 (.141)	-.052 (.141)	.033 (.025)	.029 (.027)	.029 (.027)
Math scores	-.156** (.069)	-.089 (.074)	-.089 (.074)	-.011 (.016)	-.003 (.017)	-.003 (.017)
Reading scores	-.074 (.065)	-.064 (.072)	-.065 (.072)	-.023 (.016)	-.020 (.017)	-.021 (.017)
Income \$25-35K		-.003 (.147)	.004 (.147)		.017 (.031)	.018 (.032)
Income \$35-50K		-.036 (.163)	-.040 (.164)		-.014 (.036)	-.014 (.036)
Parent high school		-.364* (.200)	-.371* (.202)		-.029 (.035)	-.029 (.035)
Parent some college		-.455** (.228)	-.452** (.227)		-.056 (.040)	-.056 (.040)
Parent college		-.724*** (.244)	-.729*** (.245)		-.088* (.050)	-.089* (.050)
Two-parent home		-.484*** (.123)	-.485*** (.124)		-.118*** (.028)	-.118*** (.028)
Cons	1.508	2.716**	2.749**	.128	.288	.291
Observations	(1.066)	(1.257)	(1.257)	(.221)	(.244)	(.245)
R-squared	1,326	1,223	1,223	1,326	1,223	1,223
High religiosity	.104	.121	.122	.111	.126	.126

*Standard errors are in parentheses \*\*\* p<.01, \*\* p<.05, \* p<.1*

**Table 12A**

*Total arrests: Linear combinations effects for regression in Model 3 (Count) and Model 6 (Binary)*

<b>Total arrests (Count)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.010	0.161	0.060	0.949	-0.308 0.329
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	-0.066	0.169	-0.390	0.696	-0.399 0.267
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.309	0.180	-1.720	0.088	-0.663 0.046
<b>Total arrests (Binary)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	0.014	0.032	0.440	0.663	-0.050 0.078
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	-0.067	0.035	-1.900	0.060	-0.137 0.003
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.078	0.037	-2.140	0.033	-0.151 -0.006

**Table 13A**

*Traffic Citations Regressed on Religiosity and Private School Choice, with Student Controls, Parental Controls, and Interaction Term. Count Outcomes (Models 1-3) and Binary Outcomes (Models 4-6)*

	Traffic Citations					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
High religiosity	-.077 (.093)	-.063 (.097)	-.010 (.145)	-.007 (.024)	.000 (.026)	.020 (.036)
MPCP student	-.098 (.091)	-.123 (.093)	-.060 (.149)	-.048** (.024)	-.056** (.026)	-.033 (.037)
Hi-religion x MPCP			-.108 (.197)			-.040 (.048)
Black	.294** (.147)	.179 (.174)	.174 (.177)	.114*** (.033)	.079** (.035)	.077** (.035)
Hispanic	-.027 (.147)	-.120 (.173)	-.125 (.175)	.007 (.037)	.005 (.041)	.003 (.042)
Female	-.476*** (.109)	-.499*** (.118)	-.503*** (.118)	-.129*** (.028)	-.129*** (.029)	-.130*** (.029)
Grade in 2006	-.088 (.093)	-.107 (.102)	-.108 (.102)	-.005 (.025)	-.006 (.027)	-.006 (.027)
Math scores	-.031 (.049)	-.012 (.054)	-.012 (.054)	.001 (.015)	.004 (.016)	.004 (.016)
Reading scores	-.005 (.048)	.001 (.054)	.001 (.054)	-.006 (.013)	-.003 (.014)	-.003 (.014)
Income \$25-35K		.025 (.116)	.022 (.116)		.001 (.031)	.000 (.031)
Income \$35-50K		.056 (.131)	.057 (.132)		.006 (.037)	.006 (.037)
Parent high school		-.161 (.151)	-.158 (.152)		.018 (.032)	.019 (.032)
Parent some college		-.156 (.161)	-.158 (.161)		-.009 (.037)	-.010 (.037)
Parent college		-.435*** (.166)	-.433*** (.166)		-.061 (.042)	-.060 (.042)
Two-parent home		-.180* (.099)	-.180* (.099)		-.076*** (.025)	-.076*** (.025)
Cons	1.586** (.793)	2.084** (.879)	2.07** (.877)	.308 (.22)	.377 (.239)	.372 (.238)
Observations	1,326	1,223	1,223	1,326	1,223	1,223
R-squared	.035	.044	.045	.044	.051	.052

*Standard errors are in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$*



**Table 14A**

*Traffic citations: Linear combinations effects for regression in model 3 (Count) and Model 6 (Binary)*

<b>Traffic citations (Count)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.118	0.130	-0.900	0.368	-0.374 0.139
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	-0.168	0.124	-1.360	0.177	-0.412 0.076
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.178	0.125	-1.430	0.155	-0.423 0.068
<b>Traffic citations (Binary)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.020	0.034	-0.590	0.555	-0.088 0.048
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	-0.073	0.034	-2.140	0.034	-0.140 -0.006
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.053	0.034	-1.540	0.125	-0.121 0.015

**Table 15A**

*Municipal Fines Regressed on Religiosity and Private School Choice, with Student Controls, Parental Controls, and Interaction Term. Count Outcomes (Models 1-3) and Binary Outcomes (Models 4-6)*

	Fines					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
High religiosity	84.033 (114.717)	114.040 (119.679)	181.624 (164.630)	-.016 (.024)	-.006 (.025)	-.005 (.036)
MPCP student	-46.654 (119.893)	2.103 (130.236)	82.757 (139.830)	-.077*** (.027)	-.082*** (.029)	-.081** (.039)
Hi-religion x MPCP			-138.348 (211.819)			-.002 (.046)
Black	299.995** (148.429)	149.844 (162.855)	142.691 (159.178)	.150*** (.035)	.107*** (.037)	.107*** (.037)
Hispanic	-84.337 (131.611)	-158.608 (158.251)	-164.784 (156.376)	-.028 (.039)	-.038 (.045)	-.038 (.045)
Female	683.530*** (114.975)	-701.510*** (120.459)	-705.770*** (121.865)	-.230*** (.026)	-.235*** (.026)	-.235*** (.026)
Grade in 2006	85.652 (88.733)	60.266 (95.799)	59.210 (95.823)	.024 (.024)	.018 (.027)	.018 (.027)
Math scores	13.972 (57.332)	57.366 (57.826)	57.542 (58.029)	-.014 (.016)	-.007 (.017)	-.007 (.017)
Reading scores	-102.115* (54.828)	-103.992* (60.895)	-103.653* (61.089)	-.014 (.015)	-.011 (.016)	-.011 (.016)
Income \$25-35K		-171.528** (84.745)	-175.413** (84.516)		.007 (.032)	.007 (.032)
Income \$35-50K		46.160 (227.541)	48.091 (229.053)		-.019 (.036)	-.019 (.036)
Parent high school		-120.028 (137.710)	-116.106 (139.095)		-.022 (.034)	-.022 (.034)
Parent some college		-201.880 (151.048)	-203.437 (150.866)		-.044 (.040)	-.044 (.040)
Parent college		-347.901* (180.569)	-345.283* (180.018)		-.089* (.050)	-.089* (.050)
Two-parent home		-411.600*** (92.301)	-411.270*** (92.153)		-.109*** (.028)	-.109*** (.028)
Cons	-56.288 (761.333)	583.544 (864.254)	565.672 (871.662)	.210 (.217)	.369 (.240)	.369 (.241)
Observations						
R-squared	1,326	1,223	1,223	1,326	1,223	1,223
High religiosity	.044	.055	.055	.11	.122	.122

*Standard errors are in parentheses*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

**Table 16A***Fines: Linear Combinations Effects for Regression in Model 3 (Count) and Model 6 (Binary)*

<b>Fines (Count)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	43.276	154.127	0.280	0.779	-260.830 347.381
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	-55.591	184.237	-0.300	0.763	-419.106 307.924
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	126.033	132.244	0.950	0.342	-134.897 386.962
<b>Fines (Binary)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.007	0.033	-0.210	0.832	-0.071 0.057
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	-0.082	0.036	-2.320	0.022	-0.152 -0.012
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.087	0.038	-2.320	0.022	-0.162 -0.013

**Table 17A**

*Paternity Suits Regressed on Religiosity and Private School Choice, with Student Controls, Parental Controls, and Interaction Term. Binary outcomes only*

	Paternity Lawsuits		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
High religiosity	-.017 (.017)	-.014 (.018)	.017 (.027)
MPCP student	-.002 (.018)	.005 (.020)	.043 (.030)
Hi-religion x MPCP			-.065* (.038)
Black	.067*** (.020)	.059*** (.022)	.056** (.023)
Hispanic	.010 (.021)	-.001 (.025)	-.003 (.025)
Female	.005 (.018)	.002 (.019)	.000 (.019)
Grade in 2006	.008 (.018)	.006 (.019)	.006 (.019)
Math scores	-.011 (.009)	-.008 (.009)	-.008 (.009)
Reading scores	-.002 (.009)	-.002 (.010)	-.002 (.010)
Income \$25-35K		-.031 (.023)	-.033 (.022)
Income \$35-50K		-.015 (.023)	-.014 (.024)
Parent high school		.003 (.030)	.005 (.030)
Parent some college		-.032 (.026)	-.033 (.026)
Parent college		-.041 (.029)	-.040 (.029)
Two-parent home		-.004 (.019)	-.004 (.019)
Cons	-.006 (.154)	.040 (.168)	.032 (.168)
Observations	1,326	1,223	1,223
R-squared	.013	.017	.020

*Standard errors are in parentheses*

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

**Table 18A***Paternity: Linear Combinations Effects for Regression in Model 6 (Binary Only)*

<b>Paternity (Binary)</b>	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]
Hi-Religion x MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.045	0.026	-1.710	0.090	-0.097 0.007
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP	-0.041	0.029	-1.420	0.158	-0.099 0.016
Hi-Religion x MPCP + MPCP + Hi-Religion	-0.042	0.029	-1.440	0.152	-0.099 0.016

**Table 19A**

*Property damage (Model 1 -Binary) and Batteries (Model 2/Count and Model 3/Binary) Had Null for Religiosity, MPCP, and the Interaction.*

	Property Damage (binary) (1)	Batteries (count) (2)	Batteries (binary) (3)
High religiosity	-.011 (.011)	.005 (.015)	.003 (.012)
MPCP student	-.014 (.01)	-.008 (.015)	-.007 (.012)
Hi-religion x MPCP	-.005 (.005)	.002 (.012)	-.003 (.007)
Black	.011 (.014)	.000 (.020)	.003 (.016)
Hispanic	.010** (.004)	.014 (.015)	.005 (.012)
Female	.011* (.007)	-.016 (.013)	-.017 (.013)
Grade in 2006	-.018** (.007)	-.007 (.010)	-.014 (.009)
Math scores	.000 (.007)	.001 (.010)	.000 (.009)
Reading scores	.001 (.003)	-.007 (.007)	-.007 (.007)
Income \$25-35K	-.003 (.004)	.004 (.008)	.001 (.005)
Income \$35-50K	-.004 (.006)	.011 (.015)	.013 (.013)
Parent high school	.002 (.009)	-.020*** (.008)	-.014*** (.005)
Parent some college	-.001 (.007)	-.014 (.013)	-.016 (.011)
Parent college	.007 (.007)	-.011 (.016)	-.019 (.013)
Two-parent home	.000 (.008)	-.032** (.014)	-.029** (.014)
Cons	.025 (.062)	.029 (.094)	.042 (.081)
Observations	1,223	1,223	1,223
High religiosity	.017	.011	.017

*Standard errors are in parenthesis*

\*\*\* $p < .01$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \* $p < .1$

**Note:** Regression-adjusted interaction coefficients and standard errors using the linear combination function are as follows:

Property damage (binary): -0.004 (0.007)

Batteries (count): -0.008 (.016)

Batteries (binary): -0.004 (.012)

**“Are you sure his prayers were ‘silent’”? A Critical Discourse Analysis of Church-State  
Separation in Public Schools on Twitter Following *Kennedy v. Bremerton***

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### Abstract

In the United States, the concept of separation of church and state constitutes a long-running legal controversy in public education due to inherent clausal tensions within the First Amendment of the Constitution. These conflicts arise when attempting to balance the Establishment Clause, which outlaws establishing state-sponsored religious activity; the Free Exercise Clause, which prohibits governmental interference of individuals' religious observances; and the Free Speech Clause, protecting personal expression, including religious expression. In a landmark decision, the U.S. Supreme Court attempted to balance the rights guaranteed within these clauses, when it decided that a Christian high school football coach was wrongfully fired for kneeling in prayer on the field after games. In this article, we present the findings from a critical discourse analysis of 442 Twitter comments written in response to former Vice President Mike Pence's tweets celebrating the *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* decision. Through this analysis, we describe four major discursive themes: winners and losers; (mis)understandings about the Founders' constitution; ancillary, interdiscursive perspectives about Kennedy's prayers; and non-Christian religious inclusion in public schools. We conclude with a discussion about questions that *Kennedy* spawned relating to teacher neutrality, fake faiths, critical race theory, and religion's intersection with science, as well as implications for school districts going forward.

**Keywords:** separation of church and state, religious freedom, Twitter, critical discourse analysis, Kennedy v. Bremerton School District, praying football coach

## Introduction

On June 27, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court attempted to balance the First Amendment's mandate that the government neither promote nor inhibit religion with an individual's constitutional right to freely exercise their faith and free speech. As a result, the Court ruled that a Christian football coach at a public high school was wrongfully fired for kneeling in prayer on the field in front of and sometimes with his players after games. The landmark case of *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* was decided 6-3 along ideological lines, and it reversed 52 years of legal precedence of how the courts translated the Establishment Clause into appropriate public school policy.

The potential ramifications of *Kennedy* on public education are many. For decades, public educators have widely understood that the separation of church and state dictated that teachers ought not ever pray in front of students or express their faith in a moral or devotional context. The Supreme Court's new ruling, however, has equated teacher prayer with a "personal phone call," setting the stage for public educators to openly pray at school during certain moments in the school day. This interpretation of the Establishment Clause has drawn praise but also much criticism. Public school policy that governs the religious expression of teachers and coaches will likely need to be rewritten.

In this article, we conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Twitter comments to explore the power dynamics that influence the understanding of the separation of church and state, the tension between freedom of and freedom from religion, and how these arguments play out in the context of public education and school-sponsored sports. First, we briefly examine the complicated concept of the separation between church and state, before locating these perspectives in prior and contemporary views of public education, sports, and religion. Next, we

discuss our methodology and the ways in which Twitter provides a base for understanding public sentiment, then we move to a presentation of our findings. To conclude, we explore the deeper questions that *Kennedy* evokes about the expectation of teacher neutrality, religious branding, critical race theory, and the intersection of religion and science, before presenting our implications for religion-related school policy.

## **Literature Review**

### **Separation of Church and State**

The freedom of religion, often called the “first freedom,” is considered one of the United States’ most fundamental rights (Clough, 2018; Duesing et al., 2016; Gaddy & Lynn, 2008). The first 16 words of the Bill of Rights reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” (U.S. Const. amend. I). The first half of the law is known as the Establishment Clause, which forbids the state to set religious preferences, and the second half is referred to as the Free Exercise Clause, which affirms an individual’s right to religious practice without government intrusion. Clough (2018) posits that religions have long been powerful interest groups that tend to be inflexible and corruptible:

America's Founders followed the hard road of refraining from either endorsing or restricting any establishment of religion, but submitting religious individuals to the rule of law. The courts have had to sort out how those ideals are to be applied in actual cases ever since (p. 4).

While popular, the phrase “separation between church and state” is not found in the Constitution, but instead was popularized after Thomas Jefferson penned it in 1802 in a letter to Baptist pastors who sought clarity on the government’s position on religious expression (Dreisbach,

2002). Jefferson did not suggest that the government be religion-free, but indifferent toward religion (Dreisbach, 2002).

Conventional wisdom suggests that the separation of church and state means that government institutions—particularly public schools—must be *free from* all religion, as opposed to being welcoming and impartial toward all religions (Chen, 2022). The simplistic treatment of this complex ideal leaves many public school educators unclear about which religious activities are prohibited or protected by law (McCarthy, 2009). This lack of clarity and the assumption that schools should be free from religion intersects with the ways in which the Supreme Court has leaned on major decisions impacting religion in public schools. The Supreme Court first applied the Establishment Clause to schools in 1947 when it prohibited state aid to religious schools. The following 75 years have been replete with litigation to settle church-state concerns in education (McCarthy, 2009). For example, in the early 1960s the Court banned daily prayer and Bible readings in public schools. In 1971, the Court applied a stringent standard in various contexts known as the “Lemon” test to ensure that public schools remain non-religious (United States Courts, n.d.). The tenets of the Lemon standard suggested that the government could only assist in religious activity if: 1) the primary purpose for the intervention was secular, 2) the government support did not promote or inhibit religion, and 3) there was little to no entanglement of church and state (United States Courts, n.d.). The Lemon test had been the standard used to settle religion-related disputes in schools, that is until the 2022 ruling of *Kennedy v. Bremerton*.

### **The Role of Church in School Sports**

The tenuous relationship between religion and public school is often mirrored in the context of school-sponsored sports. Yet, researchers have placed little attention on interrogating the role of religion in K-12 public school sports. Perhaps the *Kennedy* decision will inspire

academics to fill this gap in knowledge. Increasingly, however, scholars are studying Evangelical Christianity's role in American college and professional sports, with some propositioning that sports in the United States mimics religiosity. Blazer (2012) noted that sports have become a "platform for evangelical witnessing" (p. 287). The alignment of religion and sports in the United States has been seen since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century when muscular Christianity associated rigorous athletic training with men's spiritual development. By the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, American sports became intertwined with "patriotism, manliness, and moral education" (Blazer, 2012, p. 292).

In 1976, Deford wrote a scathing criticism of Evangelical Christianity in sports, which he termed "sportianity," for proclaiming Christian edicts while not holding athletes and staff morally accountable (Blazer, 2012; Putz, 2016; Uszynski, 2017). Since that early critique, scholarship has continued to focus on how "Christian athletic institutions fail to address the moral contractions of combining sport and evangelical Christianity" (Blazer, 2012, p. 295). Matz (2023) argued that sports present the ideal condition by which coaches can nurture what is "inner morality of sport" or character development, and religion is often the easiest means to that end. This is where issues of the "separation of church and state" and youth sports in public schools present a tricky conundrum. In many instances, a coach's religious belief may be safely leveraged to enhance players' mindset and values, yet the coach must be careful not to propagandize impressionable students toward religious observance (Matz, 2023). Herein lies some of the tensions of the *Kennedy v. Bremerton* case.

### **Research Context**

In 2021, liberal voters in the United States were fearful that three justices appointed by former President Donald Trump created a conservative, partisan tilt to the court (Liptak, 2022).

The summer of 2022 was earmarked by multiple Supreme Court decisions that were perceived by many to favor religion, but not all the rulings were divided by ideology. Most famous was the Supreme Court's 6-3 reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, the constitutional right to abortion, which had been upheld for almost half a century prior to this decision. Anti-religious discrimination was the crux of the 6-3 decision in *Carson v. Makin*, where the Court ruled that a Maine tuition assistance program could not exclude religious schools from receiving state-paid tuition. The Court unanimously decided in *Shurtleff v. Boston* that the city of Boston violated the First Amendment by refusing to allow a Christian flag to be raised in front of City Hall when it had allowed 284 other private groups to fly their flags there. Also, in an 8-1 decision, in *Ramirez v. Collier*, the Court protected religious freedom by allowing a death row inmate to have the physical touch and audible prayer of his pastor during his execution. The full set of rulings, including *Kennedy v. Bremerton*, which is discussed in detail below, has diminished the public approval of the majority conservative Supreme Court bench (Liptak, 2022).

### ***Kennedy v. Bremerton School District***

The issue of the proper role of religion in public school came to a head in the United States on June 27, 2022, when the Supreme Court decided *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*. Joseph Kennedy, an assistant football coach at Bremerton High School in Bremerton, Washington, brought the case before the Supreme Court for wrongful termination due to a violation of the First Amendment. For several years prior to his firing, Kennedy offered silent prayers of gratitude for “what the players had accomplished and for the opportunity to be part of their lives through the game of football” (*Kennedy v. Bremerton*, 2022, p. 7). Kennedy testified that when players asked to join him, he responded “This is a free country. You can do what you want” (*Kennedy v. Bremerton*, 2022, p. 7). For seven years, the coach and team prayed in the

locker room before games and on the field after games with no complaints. However, in 2015, a Bremerton district official learned of this practice and instructed Kennedy to stop all religious observance unless the stadium was empty. When Kennedy kneeled and prayed at the 50-yard line after three games in October 2015, he was suspended and later fired. The district argued that Kennedy's role as a public employee, even after games, risked his prayers being misconstrued as government speech, thus putting the district at "risk of constitutional liability" under the Establishment Clause (*Kennedy v. Bremerton*, 2022, p. 14). The district also argued that Kennedy's religious activity could coerce students to pray (*Kennedy v. Bremerton*, 2022).

In the majority opinion, the Court ruled that the Bremerton School District misapplied the Establishment Clause and violated Kennedy's free exercise and free speech rights. In the majority opinion, Justice Gorsuch wrote that Kennedy's firing was an unlawful punishment for "brief, quiet, personal religious observance" (i.e., praying). Gorsuch wrote that the school district had "a mistaken view that it had a duty to ferret out and suppress religious observances even as it allows comparable secular speech. The Constitution neither mandates nor tolerates that kind of discrimination" (*Kennedy v. Bremerton*, 2022 p. 31-32). Meanwhile, the Court's dissenting opinion by Justice Sotomayor vehemently disagreed and presented an entirely different set of facts that depicted Kennedy's behavior as overtly proselytizing religious dogma in public school and abusing his authority as a coach to coerce students to pray. Sotomayor wrote, "A school district is not required to permit such conduct; in fact, the Establishment Clause prohibits it from doing so" (*Kennedy v. Bremerton*, 2022, p. 53-54).

This case centered on two essential questions of religious freedom: 1) When do limitations on employee prayer in public schools violate the Free Exercise Clause? 2) When does the allowance of public prayer in public schools violate the Establishment Clause? The

conservatives on the Court ruled in favor of Kennedy's prayers being private speech, which is protected in question one; however, the liberal justices held Kennedy's prayers amounted to government speech, which is prohibited in question two. With the complexities of this case, it is no surprise that Twitter discourse mimicked the same divisions of the Court.

### **Pence's Tweets on Kennedy v. Bremerton**

Shortly after the Court announced its ruling on June 27, 2022, former Vice President Pence, an Evangelical Christian, tweeted three posts celebrating the landmark decision. His first tweet announced the decision, writing, "Today, Religious Liberty Won! In a 6-3 decision in Kennedy v. Bremerton School District, the Supreme Court upheld our first Freedom, the Freedom of Religion, in siding with Coach Kennedy!" (Pence, 2022a). Pence followed with a direct quote from the opinion of the Court:

As Justice Gorsuch said, 'Respect for religious expressions is indispensable to life in a free and diverse Republic—whether those expressions take place in a sanctuary or on a field, and whether they manifest through the spoken word or a bowed head' (Pence, 2022b).

Pence concluded by praising Kennedy tweeting, "Grateful for Coach Kennedy's courageous stand for Religious Freedom and proud that at @AmericanFreedom. we will always stand for the Freedom of Religion of every American of every Faith!" (Pence, 2022c).

### **Research Purpose and Questions**

Pence's tweets became the foundation for our data generation. Recognizing Pence as a polarizing political figure, we were interested in how the public would respond to his tweets. In so doing, we sought to better understand the public discourse around the highly controversial idea of the separation of church and state in public school sponsored sports. Through a critical



discourse analysis, we examined the discursive strategies respondents used in arguing for or against the ruling, specifically looking for ways in which tweeters sought power. Throughout our analysis we were guided by a primary research question and two secondary research questions:

1. *How do Twitter users conceptualize, position, and articulate their perspectives regarding the Kennedy v. Bremerton School District decision?*
  - a. *How do Twitter users interpret the concept of separation of church and state?*
  - b. *What social issues do Twitter users intersect in their responses?*

### **Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis**

Through a critical discourse analysis (CDA), researchers interrogate the relationship between language and power, grounded in the belief that language is non-neutral and not innocent but has political implications (Fairclough, 1993). The analytic goals of CDAs for researchers are to uncover unequal power relations and implicit ideological forces at work in spoken or written texts (Jahedi et al., 2014). As Foucault (1984/1997b,) wrote, language establishes “a set of rules and norms” which change over time but is always linked to power (p. 3). These discursive “games of truth” (Foucault, 1984/1997a) function as a “critical ontology of ourselves” (Foucault, 1984/1997b) in which individuals wrestle with accepting or resisting the “costs” of certain forms of truth (Foucault, 1989).

Core to a CDA is uncovering how discourse, power, and ideology merge to establish and reproduce hegemony through the “naturalisation of practices and their social relations as well as relations between practices, as matters of common sense.... in achieving and maintaining relations of domination” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 24). Van Dijk (2006) suggested that CDA can uncover manipulation, dominance, and abuse at play—not merely power—particularly when political leaders emphasize “Our good things” and “Their bad things” (p. 359).

In other words, while discursive texts overtly express one's ideas, CDA principles assert that texts also covertly seek to create political power for the speaker/writer as well as fortify their preferred identity (i.e., expert, friend, advocate). The goal of a CDA is not to describe the text in exhaustive detail but features that are “most interesting from a critical perspective, those that appear to be textual manipulations serving non-democratic purpose” (Huckin, 1997, p. 80). Kress (2008) posited that qualitative researchers often use CDA to examine discursive power dynamics in political speech; however, “these phenomena are to be found in the most unremarkable and everyday texts—and not only in texts which declare their special status in some way” (p.84). A CDA was appropriate for this study because we were interested in the sociality of text and the ways that discourse reproduces or dismantles systems of power as related to popular beliefs on the separation of church and state.

### **Analyzing Social Discourse via Twitter**

The use of social media has increased rapidly over the past decade, changing the way people communicate and the extent of their reach. Among social media platforms, Twitter offers a distinctive data source to understand social commentary and cultural discourse due to its broad reach and real-time engagement. Although the 79.6 million U.S.-based Twitter users are not representative of the U.S. population, users do represent a wide demographic breadth, uniquely, discursively engaged with each other (Ruby, 2023).

We found Twitter to provide us with a unique view into public sentiment about the *Kennedy v. Bremerton* case due to the ways in which it “offers the potential for the common person to engage with other users and mass media” providing “a space that allows counter narratives to be introduced to the majority” (Dyer & Hakkola, p. 2022, p. 30). Twitter also provides a public forum where politicians can promote their policies and the public can express

support or opposition to those policies. Importantly, all the tweets in this analysis were written months before Elon Musk bought Twitter in October 2022 and instituted major, disruptive personnel and content policy changes within the company.

### **Analytic Approach**

There are many ways to conduct a critical discourse analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996; Richardson, 2017; Rasinger, 2010; Huckin, 1997); we followed Mullet's (2018) CDA analytical framework for educational research due to its simple, flexible design. Mullet's framework "condenses many CDA approaches into a set of easily conceptualized levels of analysis without sacrificing core principles of CDA" (Mullet, p. 6-8). The framework consists of seven stages of analysis, including:

1. Select a discourse related to societal power or inequality.
2. Locate and prepare text to serve as data sources.
3. Explore the historical and social contexts in which the texts were developed.
4. Code the data, through a variety of coding mechanisms, to identify major themes and subthemes.
5. Analyze the external, which includes the social and reciprocal relations of the data, focused on how social practices influence the creation of the data, and subsequently, the data influences social practices.
6. Analyze the internal relations, including language used and linguistic devices of the data, to understand what the text aims to accomplish, the positionality of the author, and the ways language is used to accomplish these aims.
7. Complete a final analysis to integrate the meanings of the major themes, with the internal and external relations identified in stages four through six.

In the following, we describe in detail each stage of our analytic process.

In stage one, we were guided by our interest in how people interpret the Establishment Clause and religious worship in public spaces as either a freedom or violation of the U.S. Constitution. Given the public's response to *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, we selected the U.S. Supreme Court decision as our case for analysis. Moving into the second stage, we reviewed multiple social media outlets to hone in on an information-rich source of data that addressed issues of church versus state. Recognizing that Twitter has become a source for unfiltered, real-time, and diverse reactions to political and cultural events, we focused our analysis on responses to Mike Pence's tweets celebrating the decision. Using the website ExportComments.com, we extracted 2,289 comments posted from June 27 to Aug. 14, 2022, a seven-week period. Given the extensive volume of responses that Pence's thread elicited, we bounded our sample to 20% of the total, capturing every fifth tweet, or 457 comments. We eliminated six duplicates and discarded nine emoji-only tweets, given that emojis have multiple meanings. Whenever a user included a link to their post, we took a screenshot of the linked images or memes and included it in the data pool. Our final sample was 442 unique tweets, comprised of text and memes. Though the data is still publicly accessible, we changed the Twitter usernames (besides Pence's) to add a layer of anonymity to the subjects of this study. We have also quoted the tweets verbatim, leaving in all grammatical and typographical errors.

In the third stage, we researched the historical, judicial, and current social context of the issue of freedom of religion, particularly as it pertains to public schools and sports. We also explicated the overarching context of the U.S. Supreme Court in recent years. The information we gathered was synthesized in the literature review and research context, which aided our interpretations for stages five and six.

During stage four, the first author engaged in first and second cycle coding, as outlined by Saldaña (2021). First cycle coding was guided by in vivo coding, which used the actual spoken or written words of the participants to create the codes. The first author then engaged in second cycle coding to refine the codes and establish categories to develop themes (Saldaña, 2021). Through this coding process, the first author developed a final codebook comprised of 577 codes and 42 categories, definitions of those categories, and exemplar tweets illustrating the categories. In addition, the first author practiced analytic and reflexive memoing throughout all stages of the coding process to aid in our early interpretations. Together, both authors collapsed the themes into four major discursive themes, which we further explored during stages five through seven.

In the fifth stage, we probed the data and our themes for evidence of power or “the chance that a person in a social relationship can achieve his or her own will against the resistance of others” (Mullet, 2018 p. 3). Using the themes as an organizational mechanism for the analysis, we examined how external, social forces were evidenced in the Twitter users’ comments. That is, we explored how the power structures in society (i.e., political ideologies; religious beliefs, foreign affairs, current events) infiltrated the tweeted discourses of the separation of church and state; this helped us understand the reciprocal relations between the text and the social context (Mullet, 2018). Put another way, we questioned how the tweets resisted, yielded to, or emboldened social power structures and how relations of power informed the tweets. Moving into the sixth stage, we analyzed the commenters’ internal linguistic devices, such as diction, use of passive and active voice, punctuation, tone, and other discursive tools like emojis and memes. This word-by-word, phrase-by-phrase, semiotic analysis allowed us to explore the speaker’s

positionality and power relations. These features and our initial reflections were recorded in our journals to facilitate our interpretation and increase our trustworthiness (Mullet, 2018).

Finally, in the seventh stage of our analytical approach, we synthesized and merged all aspects of the data to not just provide critical analysis but interpretation. The fundamental premise of CDA is to address social injustice by acknowledging that discourse is never neutral and functions to exact power (Fairclough, 2001; Kress, 1990; Mullet, 2018; Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Mayer, 2009). Therefore, the final stage of our analysis allowed us to develop an overall interpretation of how the differing Twitter discourses were used to advance one belief over another concerning religious expression in public school and sports, as described in our findings and discussion sections below.

### **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

Mullet (2018) provides guidelines for evaluating qualitative rigor in CDA research, which include: researcher reflexivity, subjectivity, ensuring adequacy of data, adequacy of interpretation, searching for disconfirming evidence, authenticity, consequential validity, accessibility, and theoretical triangulation. Following these guidelines, we sought to ensure a credible, rigorous, and trustworthy design. For example, in keeping a reflective journal throughout the study, we developed the below positionality statements. To ensure the adequacy of the data, we randomized the sample of comments to ameliorate potential selection bias and capture a true representation of thought. In addition, we discarded only a small amount of evidence (3%) from the sample because of duplicate ( $n = 6$ ) and difficult-to-interpret, emoji-only tweets ( $n = 9$ ) for a total sample of 442 unique tweets. To ensure interpretive adequacy, we followed Mullet's (2018) systematic, well-researched analytical framework. Our study provides ample disconfirming evidence, as we were careful to highlight tweets that presented multiple

views under the overarching themes of our findings. While it was impossible to give voice to every disconfirming viewpoint, we attempted to elevate many of them, thus enhancing our study's level of authenticity or fairness.

The methodology of CDA is complex and transdisciplinary in nature, requiring a mix of knowledge about linguistics, politics, history, and cultural and digital literacy. As a result, we have written our empirical analysis with the goal of minimizing jargon, defining specialized terminology, and being as clear and concise as possible. We want anyone who might have written a tweet in our sample to be able to understand our analysis of it. Finally, we have included all four levels of context to achieve theoretical triangulation: 1) analyzing the language used in tweets, 2) providing interdiscursive relations that combines two or more genres of discourse in singular tweets, 3) examining context specific to the circumstances of the *Kennedy v. Bremerton* case that inspired the Twitter discourse, and 4) supplying the broader historical context of the First Amendment so that readers can situate Americans' (mis)understandings of the phrase "the separation of church and state."

### **Researcher Positionality**

As the lead investigator of this research study, I am situated with the research as an urbanized, African American woman in her 40s who has professed a deep faith in Jesus Christ from her youth. I am a former New York City reporter, Chicago Public Schools teacher, education blogger, TEDx speaker, and the founder of Teachers Who Pray, a national Christian nonprofit for teachers. For years, I had pressed the U.S. Department of Education to update its long-outdated guidelines for appropriate religious expression in public schools. (New guidelines were released in January 2020 and may have factored into the Court's *Kennedy* decision.) In addition, I am a strong proponent of racial equity and opportunity, particularly as it pertains to

children and education. I approach this paper well-aware of my bias toward supporting private prayer in professional practice and racial justice, especially in public schools. However, the circumstances of the *Kennedy v. Bremerton* case are unique and demonstratively different from how I have promoted faith integration to public school educators in the past. The nuances of this case are complex and legally entrenched, leaving me ambiguous about what the “right” outcome should have been and concerned about the unintended consequences that may result.

As the second author, I am a cisgender, white, heterosexual woman growing up in the American South, the heartland of the Bible Belt. I never felt particularly drawn to religion. Although I grew up in a home church led by a justice-oriented preacher, I mostly felt religion was the cause of much heartache and hatred, most prominently displayed at the Christian Nationalist and Ku Klux Klan rallies in my South Carolina town. Rather than declaring belief or not, I described myself as a lazy agnostic, someone who respects others' beliefs and wishes to be left alone with my lack of belief. My scholarly agenda is grounded in uncovering racial and colonial injustice perpetrated by white people in the United States. Much of that research illustrates how whiteness is wrapped into forms of Christianity. At the same time, I am also coming to terms with how my commitment to and beliefs in social justice are wrapped into the Protestant white Christian ideals with which my parents raised me. When asked to work on this analysis, I was initially hesitant. I see Christianity used as a cudgel by white Americans to decry their oppression in the so-called culture war and to shield themselves from recognizing the privileges that they have. However, speaking with the first author, it became clear that we could learn from each other while being accountable to our own and each other's beliefs and commitments as we sought to make sense of a complex and contentious issue.



## Findings

Specific to the goals of this study, and aligned with the focus of a CDA, we seek to understand how Twitter users conceptualize, position, and articulate their perspectives regarding the *Kennedy v. Bremerton* decision, which legally-realigned how the separation of church and state in public schools should be interpreted. Based on the Twitter discourse on *Kennedy*, framed by Pence's original tweets, we also sought understanding of how people weighed the personal rights of public educators versus the rights of public school districts that employ them. From our analysis, we found responses trended to the negative, with some tweets expressing moderate support. Only a few expressed ambivalence about the validity of the decision. At the same time, a broad range of ideological and religious perspectives were expressed, including components of atheism and what is commonly referred to as liberal ideology. Interestingly, the Twitter users who identified themselves as Christian were split in their support of the ruling: some offered support due to a belief that Christianity is under attack in the culture, while others argued against *Kennedy*, citing Jesus' instructions to pray privately.

In the following, we illustrate the four overarching themes resulting from our analysis. Our first theme, *Winners' and Losers' Discourse*, explores the different ways in which Twitter users expressed their satisfaction or discontent about the decision. Our second theme, *(Mis)understandings About the Founders' Constitution*, shows the various ways in which Twitter users interpreted the separation of church and state. Our third theme, *Perceptions About Coach Kennedy's Mid-Field Prayers*, details the interdiscursive elements that engage social issues tangential to religious freedom. Our final theme, *Christianity vs. All Other Religions* highlights the voices of people who either demanded non-Christian religious inclusion for religious liberty or called for provocative acts of public worship to undermine the decision. While these themes

overlap at times, there are major aspects that make them distinct. We include at least one image to explicate the photographic and semiotic discourse that accompanied the linguistic discourse.

### **THEME 1: Winners and Losers**

Our first theme, “Winners and Losers Discourse,” illustrates the way that religious freedom is discursively positioned as a zero-sum game. Here, Pence positions Kennedy as the winner of an existential fight for religious freedom in America and those who did not support his open midfield prayers as the losers. Often lacking from these tweets were the nuances and complexities pertaining to the role of religion in public education, instead likening the issue to that of competitive sport. This theme is comprised of two subthemes. The subtheme, *Winners’ Discourse*, describes how the “winners” agreed with the ruling and expressed their satisfaction by naming Christians as the winners, antagonizing the liberal party who they see as the losers, or rationalizing why the Supreme Court made the right, judicious decision. The subtheme, *Losers’ Discourse* illustrates how those who were positioned as losing expressed bitter contempt toward conservative politicians and the Supreme Court who they believe is turning America into a racist, Christian fascist state.

#### ***Winners’ Discourse***

The subtheme, *Winner’s Discourse*, represented the tweeters who voiced support of the *Kennedy v. Bremerton* ruling. These supporters utilized language that relied on common refrains seen in political and media circles on the culture wars, as seen in @sh102195’s tweet: “Religious freedom has been under attack since I was a child. This is a great victory for christians.” This writer refers to the belief that Christians are besieged by an unnamed aggressor. At the same time, other tweeters made clear who the aggressor was. Writer @Tod11370’s tweet names the

loser by writing in “us-versus-them” language common in political modes of speech, interdiscursively blending with the genre of religion. They write:

Its respect for other's beliefs. I know extreme libs have a hard time respecting anyone's view if it's different then theirs. Teach kids to respect religious beliefs, especially if it's different then their families. How is anyone harmed by seeing others practice their religion?

Repeating the word “respect” three times, the writer positioned upholding diverse religions as virtuous, not threatening, and argued that the power struggle was based on politics not beliefs. They accused far-left liberals (i.e., the losers) of religious intolerance, an accusation also heavily waged against conservatives in this study (see theme four). This winners’ discourse ended with a rhetorical question that suggested that public worship would not harm children but would enrich their character; this idea was heavily challenged by the losers (see theme four).

Feeding into political polarization, @MW62835 wrote two posts to celebrate the win: “It’s so great to see the intolerant left implode. ... We love diversity. And freedom to pursue religious acts. And constitutional rights. This is a great country” In the first tweet, the commenter gloated about seeing the intense anger and frustration of the losing team, that is, liberals who they find to be stubborn and inflexible. In the second tweet, the writer spoke on behalf of all conservatives, using the word “we.” As such, this commenter positioned conservatives as stalwarts of the United States patriotism and framed liberals as anti-American. Taken together, this writer presents a strong, passive-aggressive discourse that positioned the winners (conservatives) as righteous lovers of America and the losers (liberals) as narrow-minded haters of the country.

Other supporters reacted to Pence's tweet through the language of moderation, inclined to explain why the *Kennedy* ruling was correct. For example, @li181185 offered no direct criticism toward anyone, but provided a rationale for the decision, writing:

Usually these rulings are based on the maturity level of the students - are they old enough to not succumb to undue influence when observing a teacher exercising personal rights or offering opinions? By high school and university, almost anything goes.

From the lens of a CDA, no language is innocent. Within our data, the attempt at neutrality still positioned a discourse of winners and losers. It appears that the writer has implied that Kennedy was an individual exercising his constitutional rights of free religion and speech, appropriate for the maturity of high school students. The author takes on an expert tone, in both legal matters and human development, conveying authority to suggest that the Court made the right decision in favor of an educator's free speech. Interestingly, this tweet appears to directly contradict the ethos of current conservative-led legislation in numerous states that bars teachers from exposing even high school and college-level students to curriculum they deem is related to critical race theory (World Population Review, 2023). In these instances, "almost anything goes" in classes with more mature students does not apply.

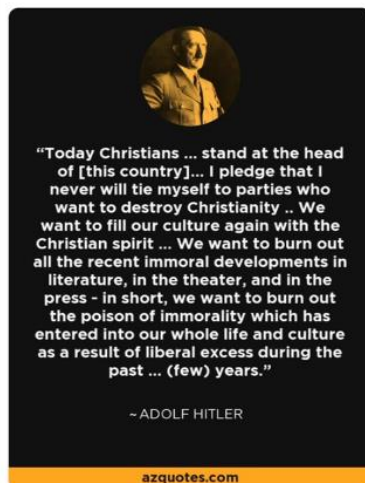
### ***Losers' Discourse***

The subtheme *Losers' Discourse* centers on the ways that our data evinced fears of Republicans and the conservative-leaning Supreme Court destabilizing the United States. For example, to Pence's declaration that "Religious Liberty won," @jken2205 tweeted, "Actually, the opposite is true. Religious liberty lost today. Freedom and truth took a horrible beating." Implicit in this rebuttal is a disappointment in the prudence of the Supreme Court, whose duty is to defend the Constitution. Across the data, much of the opposition discourse heightened the

winners-losers discourse through sarcasm, anger, and accusation, intermingled with assertions of fascism, White supremacy, fake piety, and religious bias. For example, @joan1830 tweeted: “Christian fascism won. Anti-Semitism won. Nazism won. Freedom of religion lost.” As with many commenters that opposed the *Kennedy* ruling, this writer links the decision to Hitler’s totalitarian, anti-Jewish ideology. Twitter user @Joel1640 enforced a similar point by ending their tweet with the hashtags, “#WhiteSupremacists #SCOTUSRepublicanChristoFascism.” This tweet accuses Pence and the Court of both manipulating the system to advantage Christianity and aligns them with White supremacy and Christian fascism. Other dissenters merged the discourse on Nazism with the discourse on the constitution, as seen in @miid605’s tweet: “Spoken just like Hitler. He to wanted to force his views of Christianity onto others. This is Fascism and goes against the US Constitution where forefathers pushed separation of church and state.” The tweeter then added a link to an image of Hitler, with a quote attributed to the dictator, seen in Figure 1 below.

### Figure 1

*Comparing Pence’s Position on Public Religious Expression to That of Hitler’s*



3:18 AM · Jun 18, 2022 · Twitter Web App

Note: (Phillips, 2022)

A common strategy in political argumentation is the use of false equivalence, asserting that two very different things are alike because the debater can suggest some minor similarities. We see this rhetorical device in the above tweet and imagery, as the writer demonizes Pence by falsely linking Pence's words to the words—and, by proxy, the atrocities—of Hitler.

At the same time, there was a trend in the data wherein fascism was linked to Christianity and Whiteness, as seen in @Di181950's tweet: "Christofascism: use of the faith of Chritianity as a cover for totalitarian ideology. This radical phenomenon is embodied among American Christians." This tweeter also described the movement as "various Militia movements, White Supremacist, Christian Identity movements, radical, armed, racist & right 2 life GOP." Problematically, while the writer's use of the term "American Christians" was meant to lobby against racist, alt-right ideology found among radicalized White Evangelical Christians, it inadvertently reinforces Whiteness as a fundamental aspect of being both an American and a Christian. Essentially, their comment exacerbates racism and religious bias in popular discourse by its erasure of people of color and progressive individuals who are also "American Christians."

## **THEME 2: (Mis)understandings about the Founder's Constitution**

In this theme, we examine how popular understandings of the First Amendment and religious freedom were discussed within the tweets. Twitter users in this discourse positioned themselves as having a clear understanding of what the Founding Fathers intended when they drafted the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses. Ironically, many of these tweeters attempted to explain what the separation of church and state meant while wrongly asserting that the phrase was written into the Constitution. As such, diametric views of the meaning were in large supply. Ultimately, the discourse interpreting constitutional religious rights was evidenced through three subthemes: 1) debating whether the separation of church and state promotes freedom of religion

vs. freedom from religion, 2) debating the religious rights of private citizens vs. public employees, and 3) debating whether Kennedy's role as a coach made his personal free exercise of religion coercive and an infringement of students' religious rights.

***Discourse on the "Separation of Church and State": Freedom from vs. Freedom of Religion***

This discourse interrogates tweeters' views on the fundamental ethos of religious expression in the Constitution: whether the founders intended for religion to proceed organically with little to no governmental oversight or if the founders wished to eliminate all religion from government interaction. Many people tweeted the belief that the Founding Fathers wanted to protect citizens from having to contend with other people's religions. Thus, they believe that the idea of a church-state separation was intended to promote the freedom *from* religion, more than the freedom *of* religion. For example, Twitter user @thns880 asks Pence:

How is it so hard for you to understand why this country was founded. SEPERATION OF CHURCH AND STATE. Did they not teach history at whatever schools you attended. Is it religious liberty to turn one religions beliefs Into to federal law? Please define liberty?

This writer uses three linguistic devices to try to leverage power and shame over Pence: rhetorical questions, sarcasm, and exaggerated capitalization that infers Pence lacks the ability to understand concepts of history and governance, belittling him as a person as well as a politician. As if to shout the obvious answer to the question of why the country was founded, the writer put the words "separation of church and state" in all caps. Still, capitalizing the phrase does not explain what the phrase means. While the commenter does not name Christianity, readers can infer that the Christian faith is the "one religion" that the writer laments is now federal law.

Across the data, Twitter users made explicit their belief that the phrase “separation of church and state” is written and defined in the Constitution. User @Ai25975 writes: We need Freedom from Religion. That is what is stated in the Constitution of the USA. Our forefathers stated clearly the SEPARATION OF STATE AND CHURCH.” Here, this commenter insisted that the separation of state and church (which was in all caps) is “stated clearly” in the Constitution. This is a classic example of how Twitter users attempted to gain power and credibility about their false beliefs and misconceptions of the First Amendment.

In Figure 2, Twitter user @ju57705 brings church-state separation into view visually, while also engaging into other hotly contested discourses.

## Figure 2

*A Visualization of ‘the Wall of Separation of church and State’*



Note: (Mike, 2022)

This visual discourse suggests that a strong impenetrable wall should separate religion and government in the United States. However, the title’s use of the word “only” simultaneously interjected an interdiscursive position that a high security wall should not be built along the



southern U.S. border to stymie illegal immigration from Mexico. Here, also, science is positioned on the side of the government, inciting an interdiscursive conflict between the scientific fact and religious belief. Taken together, this image suggests that government, public schooling, and science should all be free from religious influence. On the religion side of the wall, it appears that the illustrator drew a church in front, followed by a synagogue, a mosque, and a non-descript religious building to depict the current hierarchy of religious power and influence in the United States. Interestingly, despite the depiction of a thick, high partition, the wall stops within the frame of the drawing, leaving enough room for people to walk around either end to get to the other side. This is exactly what Kennedy decided to do when he brought prayer to a public school football game.

Several Twitter users argued that the founders' Constitution emphasizes religious liberation and proliferation, not separation. For example, @Miel1780 writes: "There is no separation of Church and State in any of our founding documents! There is to be no promotion or prohibition of any religion." Here, the commenter ends the sentence with an exclamation mark, which expresses a level of frustration while the word "any" clarifies the lack of church-state separation in founding documents. As such, the writer defends Pence and the Supreme Court's interpretation of religious liberty through precise, concise language.

Singling out the Free Exercise Clause, @Jog8260 adds, "We have religious liberty in this country and its a violation of Constitutional rights to deny a person that right. The Constitution protects religious people from anti-religious zealots as well." This writer demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the separation of church and state by asserting that prohibiting Kennedy from praying on the field violated the government's First Amendment promise to not interfere with religious expression. While many Twitter users claim that the founders wanted to

prevent people of faith from forcing their religion on others, this writer argues the opposite: the founders built the constitution to protect a person's religious choices. The writer's use of the phrase "anti-religious zealots" shifts the authoritative and legal tone of their argument to that of an agitator. This illustrates the power of a single clause to shift the tenor of a discourse and incite potential adversaries, namely those who champion freedom from religion.

Adding to the discourse on the founder's Constitution, Twitter user @Ca662000 replies to naysayers of the *Kennedy* decision, writing: "This is pure hogwash. The bill of rights dont restrict what citizens can do, it restricts how government can interfere. You are twisting what separation of church and state means". This tweeter attempts to discern that the First Amendment is written to restrict the government from denying key rights to citizens, not to restrict citizens. As such, the writer argues that many people are "twisting" the meaning of the separation of church and state. However, they did not address the central issue of whether Kennedy was operating in the capacity of a citizen or as a government employee.

### ***Discourse on Religious Rights of Private Citizens vs. Public Employees***

Tweeters also debated whether a private citizen's constitutional right to religious liberty ends when that person functions in the capacity of a public employee. Twitter users like @ri21495 were concerned with an individual's right to religious beliefs and their role as a public employee, writing:

BS! It's not religious freedom! As a public employee there is a separation between the church and state! The freedom of religion doesn't take precedent over the separation between a public employee on public land in a public capacity as a coach!

Every statement in this post ends in an exclamation mark and declares unambiguously that one's freedom of religion should not exceed one's duty to avoid endorsing a religion while working in

the capacity of a government agent or, in this case, as a public school football coach. This has been the conventional wisdom about the judicial interpretation of the religious rights of public employees, however, this may now be a thing of the past. Tweeter @Cltp1800 argued, writing: “The issue isn’t being able to pray. It’s a teacher leading students in prayer. On taxpayer’s dime.” Tweeter @16us1985 added, “If you want religion in school, go to a private religious school it’s that simple.” The point here in both comments is that taxpayers are not paying public school teachers to pray with students, so they should keep their prayers to themselves while on the job, unless they work at a private religious school. These writers base who has the right to pray openly at school on who signs the teacher’s paycheck.

While critical discourse analysts suggest that there is no neutral discursive content, a few tweets within our data appeared to broach a “both/and” stance. For example, Twitter user @Go95575 writes:

What do you mean, while the founders were very religious, America has always had separation of church and state. The problem is those lines have also always been blurred by what is a private act vs an official public practice. Publicly either none are allowed or ALL must be allowed

Providing a balanced and nuanced commentary of the *Kennedy* debate, the commenter acknowledges the religious orientation of many of the founders (a point that pro-liberation advocates often make to maximize religious expression) while also pointing to the founders’ desire to exclude religion from official state business (a point that pro-separation advocates tend to make to minimize religious expression). By writing “The problem is...” the tweeter expresses confidence that they can cut to the core issue. Unlike the comment above claiming that people are “twisting,” which implies that the parameters of the Constitution are clear but being distorted,

this Twitter user suggests the issue is “blurred,” indicating that the issue is nuanced and context dependent. To eliminate blurriness, the writer asserts that the government must allow all public acts of religious expression—or none at all. Little to no public religious expression by government employees was the precedent for the past 50 years in education, but the Kennedy decision has tilted the scale toward “ALL.”

***Discourse on Kennedy’s Religious Rights vs. Students’ Right Not to be Coerced to Pray***

This discourse centers on the power dynamics of a coach-player relationship, specifically on whether Kennedy’s on-field prayers subtly coerced students to participate in religious activity. Twitter opinion on coercion was split depending on whose set of facts one believed. Throughout the data, commenters argue that a coach giving his players the option to join him is a coercive tactic. For example, Twitter user @rh702240 rhetorically questioned: “coach is a ‘groomer’? And are you sure his prayers were ‘silent’?” Perhaps the harshest criticism of Kennedy is to deem him a “groomer,” a term indicating adults who gain children’s trust to exploit them. Contextualizing Kennedy’s actions as grooming denotes the idea that public prayer from a public official is a violation, a common refrain seen across the data.

Tweeter @unng1965 disagreed with Pence’s praise of Kennedy, writing, “Hold up there Mike. What happened in that decision was the misrepresentation of a fact. That fact being that he used his position to violate the religious liberty of others.” Through this firm rebuttal the writer suggests that the Supreme Court misrepresented the reality of Kennedy’s violations. The use of the word “fact” twice reads as an attempt to add authority to the argument; however this argument lacks specific evidence. Twitter user @lu201345 specifically cited the concerns of coercion, writing, “The players said they felt coerced when he ‘invited’ everyone to join in. That’s where he crossed the line.” The tweet centers the writer’s argument on the players’

feelings as evidence of coercion, which were disputed during the court case. Writing the word “invited” in scare quotes is meant to elicit doubt about the truthfulness of the word in quotes, inferring that Kennedy used mild manipulation rather than a simple invitation. The commenter states that Kennedy “crossed the line,” which is fitting for a football analogy where a player’s toe touching the out-of-bounds line is questionable but crossing the line is an obvious offense.

Writer @\_ie\_1330 tweeted that expecting players to opt-out of team prayer put an undue burden on young athletes:

It creates social pressure to participate. To say they can choose to not participate misses the point that the goal is to single out those that don’t participate. It keeps everything simple and solves that problem if we just don’t have school led prayer. Ever.

The challenges of social pressure and feeling singled out are common issues for teenagers; therefore, the writer’s “simple” solution to ban teacher-led prayer carries a tone that appeared compromising and reasonable. However, adding the word “ever” as its own sentence created a rigidity that seemed to abruptly shut down the opportunity for negotiation.

On the other hand, many tweeters argued that an American citizen does not shed their constitutional right to pray when they accept the job of a public high school football coach. These Twitter users defended Kennedy’s prayers as his legal right and non-coercive. For example, @ja741110 wrote:

So you just reacted to something without having any of the facts. Coach Kennedy prays at the end of the game by himself. He doesn't ask anyone to join him tho many do, even his opponents have joined in. It is voluntary. And that is why church vs state has no standing.

In the above, the commenter claimed those who opposed the Court's rulings are not operating on facts, before proceeding to offer the real "facts" of the case. This commenter inferred that Kennedy's praying at a game's conclusion meant that he was operating on personal time, by himself, as a private act of devotion. Also, the writer suggested that by not asking others to join and leaving it "voluntary," Kennedy bore no responsibility for the students who ran on the field to pray with him. This information presented as facts allowed the Twitter user to elide the heart of the coercion argument: When does a coach's "voluntary" opportunity to pray become a "volun-told" task to an athlete? The writer does not address the insidious and subtle form of coercion that can occur between educators and students.

Interestingly, Twitter user @Ms60675 asserted that Kennedy's players tried to coerce and retaliate against Kennedy, not vice versa, writing: "It's only because he's a Christian that it eas even brought up. A couple kids who thought they were starters git their feelings hurts when they rode the bench and tried to get back at him. And FAILED". The writer suggested that Kennedy was the victim, targeted for being a Christian, and positioned the players as emotionally fragile, athletically inadequate, and vindictive. Stating that the malicious, brat-like players "FAILED" (with all caps for emphasis) to entrap Kennedy, the tweeter signaled smug gratification.

Some argued that the coercion argument was a moot point because Kennedy did not represent the government and did not proselytize to students. Writer @Pa\_2995 wrote, "It's extremely simple. A part time coach is not Congress or a government official in any capacity firstly, and he didn't force others to accept his religious views." The writer's oversimplification of the conflict ignored the many caveats that the *Kennedy* case presented, which resulted in every lower court siding with the Bremerton School District and the Supreme Court ruling in Kennedy's favor on a bitterly divided bench. By calling Kennedy a "part time" coach, the writer

also discursively diminished Kennedy's potential as an agent of the state, thus holding him blameless and unaccountable to the Establishment Clause.

### **THEME 3: Ancillary, Interdiscursive Perspectives About Kennedy's Mid-Field Prayers**

Our third theme addresses social issues that are peripheral to issues of religious freedom but agitate people's views on the *Kennedy* case. To some Twitter users, evidence of White privilege, double standards, and racism was revealed, particularly when they compared to conservative's negative response to football star Colin Kaepernick's kneeling protest of racial injustice but high praise of Kennedy's midfield knee in prayer. Discourses also debated whether Kennedy's prayer was a violation of the very Christian principles that he professes to uphold. These issues matter in terms of the separation of church and state because school policy is influenced not only by laws governing religious expression but also by social norms and pressures from the school community and society at large. In the following sections, we describe the three major interdiscursive relationships that further complicate the way in which Twitter users wrestled with Kennedy's centerfield prayer.

#### ***Discourses on Kaepernick and Race-based Double Standards***

Interdiscursive relations of race, religion, and politics found their way into the *Kennedy* decision. Several Twitter users drew sharp contrasts between Pence's treatment of Kennedy and former National Football League (NFL) quarterback Colin Kaepernick. Pence, President Trump, and many Republicans suggested that Kaepernick (who is a Christian) should be fired, claiming he was ruining football and disrespecting the American flag by kneeling during the national anthem to protest police brutality against African Americans. Yet, when the Bremerton School District fired Kennedy for praying on the football field after the games, Pence and many other conservatives supported the coach's right to free speech and religious expression all the way to

the Supreme Court. In tweets, people wrestle with White Christianity being celebrated as an America virtue and noting how Black social activism is portrayed as unholy, disrespectful, and anti-American. For example, Twitter user @Cage1880 writes, “Translation: White man can take a knee on the 50-yd line! Black man CANNOT take a knee on the sideline! Gotcha! Don't make excuses for him America! He's typing it 'out loud'!” Juxtaposing the support that Kennedy's prayer on the football field has had, versus the public debasement of Kaepernick as unpatriotic for taking a knee on the field to fight against racism, the writer intended to expose how Kaepernick became a dog-whistle for socially acceptable racism among White conservatives, as seen in the use of “Gotcha!” to assert that Pence accidentally exposed his true racist self. This comment, and many others like it, hedged about the complexity involved with allowing public prayer on the field as a form of freedom of expression, beyond that of religious expression. What expression is deemed socially acceptable may depend less on what is being expressed but on the power base of those who are watching compared to those who are doing the expressing.

### ***Discourse on the Un-Christian Act of Public Praying***

Interestingly, an emergent discourse within our data pointed to Jesus' teachings, instructing Christians to avoid making a public spectacle of prayers. This intrareligious discourse deepened the complexity of religious freedom, as fellow Christians argued that Kennedy's praying was an act of religious rebellion, rather than freedom. To that point, Twitter user @KC111710 wrote, “Mike, sad to hear you jumping on that. Didn't Jesus say we should pray in private? Or are you one of those politicians that just uses the Bible as a political tool?” This writer questioned Pence's sincerity in his religion or using Christianity as a tool for political gain. User @sp712100 agreed, writing, “You may pray in the open all you want; the Lord and I will just think you a hypocrite.” This writer alluded to the verse in Matthew 6 wherein Jesus



called people “hypocrites” when they prayed in public to be celebrated by onlookers as pious. The irony is that Pence and Kennedy were fighting to express their Christian beliefs while fellow Bible readers argued that the act of prayer at the 50-yard line was antithetical to authentic Christian behavior.

To further this idea, @cria2220 used stronger language to rebuke Kennedy for his public demonstration of faith, writing:

Better to speak one's apostasy out loud and prove you're not a Christian rather follow Christ's direct teachings? Matthew 6:5-7. Did he love his neighbor, work for widows orphans, feed the hungry? Those are Christians' jobs. NOT football. Lev. 11:8 shows football is unChristian.

In this tweet, the writer accused Kennedy of “apostasy,” which is a rejection or betrayal of one’s faith, and they then further asserted that Kennedy is “not a Christian” for his “direct” disobedience to Jesus’ instructions to avoid self-glorifying prayer. Unlike other comments, this tweeter also cited Leviticus 11:8 to assert that handling footballs, which are made from pigskin, violates God’s law to Moses and Aaron that pigs are unclean and “you must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses.” Thus, to this Twitter user, the entire sport of football offends Christianity.

### ***Discourse on the Kennedy Decision and the Overturning of Abortion Rights***

Twitter users also intersected prayer at football games with abortion. Just three days prior to loosening restrictions on teacher religious expression in public schools, the Supreme Court settled *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* by overturning the constitutional right to an abortion, which the Court had granted in the 1973 landmark ruling of *Roe v. Wade*. In the data, discourse on the *Kennedy* ruling was positioned as an extension of the Christian-led anti-abortion movement. For example, @bi76290 tweeted, “So religious freedom unless it has to do

with womens healthcare right. We all know that Roe v. Wade overturn was based on Christian religious beliefs of the Supreme Court that was stacked purposely for that reason.” This writer called abortion a “healthcare right,” positioning it as a medical issue with more universal power than a moral dilemma, which would be a weaker position due to the lack of consensus. As such, the tweeter accused the Supreme Court heralding “religious freedom” in the Kennedy decision while also promoting an anti-abortion policy that is rooted in Christian values. Writer @Zapa780 made a similar point, citing three religious groups that might not agree with the Christian-led anti-abortion movement, writing, “The Supreme Court just took away religious freedom for millions of American Jewish, Muslim, and atheist women. GFY.” The acronym “GFY” is an obscenity that stands for ‘Go f—k yourself,’ making the anger of the tweeter come through loud and clear. Tweeter @ms77795 posted a meme to justify their support of government-sanctioned abortion in Figure 3 below:

**Figure 3**

*Calls for Abortion Rights were Peppered Throughout the Twitter Discourse on Prayer in Schools*



1:35 PM · Jun 27, 2022

Note: (Gibson, 2022)

The tweeter presented an image of an IRS 1040 Form that does not allow taxpayers to claim fetuses as dependents and thus argued that the government has already determined that an unborn child is “not a person.” Here, the writer interdiscursively positioned federal tax law above constitutional law, state law, medical science, and ethics to determine when human life begins. With all the complexities, inequities, and loopholes of the U.S. tax code, Americans on the left and the right do not tend to turn to the IRS for guidance on ethereal questions about life, including setting the standard for the significance or worth of a pregnancy.

Some Twitter users, however, argued that the *Dobbs* ruling was unrelated to *Kennedy* or faith. Writer @Imw11700 wrote, “religious liberty shouldn’t be a consideration in any case that doesn’t call religious liberty into question abortion has nothing to do with religious liberty.” While this writer did not opine about the central question of abortion, they insisted that it was not about religion. Twitter user @Tod12080 also claimed that their stand against abortion is not religiously motivated, tweeting, “I’m prolife, not religious, it’s science. It’s a baby who needs the mother to survive. Libs always demonize the other side, you don’t even try to see we want to protect 2 lives.” The writer names “Libs” or liberals as the problem because they refuse to compromise and vilify people who just wish to protect human lives.

Both pro-life and pro-choice tweets accused the opposing side of being intolerant ideologues. Pro-choice tweets held Christianity responsible for securing the constitutional right to pray on the field at football games but not to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. Pro-life tweets emphasized that there has never been a legitimate constitutional justification for abortion rights, which they liken to infanticide. A few tweeters had mixed reactions—each agreeing with *Kennedy* but not with *Dobbs*.

#### **THEME 4: Christianity vs. All Other Religions**

Our final theme contains discourse that interrogates whether Christians will share their power with minority religions now that the Supreme Court has expanded religious expression in public schools. Twitter discourse states that the government's more hands-off approach to regulating religious activity should empower free religious expression for people of all faiths, not just Christians. However, people voice concern that Christianity's influence in American society will impede true religious inclusion from occurring. As such, this theme branched into two diverging discourses: 1) Calls for Pence and other conservatives to protect religious freedom for people of all faiths, not just Christians, and 2) threats to test public tolerance for ecumenical religious expression in public schools with provocative, excessive, and even satirical acts of worship.

***Discourse on Inclusion of Non-Christian Religions in Pence's Religious Freedom Movement***

Twitter users in this discourse pushed for Pence to fulfill his promise to defend the rights of "every American of every faith" in his brand of religious liberty. The underlining sentiment of this discourse is that minority religions in America such as Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, atheism, and Satanism have been marginalized and ostracized in public education, culture, and politics, and these religious sects are demanding that Pence defend their right to pray on the 50-yard line and elsewhere as fervently as he did for Kennedy, a Christian. To this point, @He741190 wrote, it should mean "ALL religions, Mike, not just yours." Writing in "ALL" in capital letters stresses the required inclusivity pertaining to religious freedom. The writer doubled down on the point, by ending the sentence with "not just yours," which refers to Pence's own Christian faith. The underlying concern for many who tweeted against this ruling was that it will fail at being inclusive and further elevate evangelical Christianity over all other religious expression.

Throughout the data, Christianity was pitted against all other religions. While some commented that Pence and conservative Christians will never share their power with non-Christian believers, many Twitter users expressed this belief in the form of a question. For example, @peak815 tweeted “Honest question... what are you going to do when someone starts leading students in a prayer to Satan? Or Buddah? Or anything beyond your belief in Jesus Christ?” The writer preferences the question with the words “honest question” to indicate that they are not being rhetorical but would appreciate serious responses. The comment applies the merits of Kennedy to a coach who is a Satanist, a religion widely perceived to be the antithesis of Christian beliefs. The idea of Pence championing a Satanist football coach as “courageous” for defying the public school district by praying at the 50-yard line with students seems unlikely. Similarly, @guyf50 writes, “Cool. So satanism? Flying Spaghetti Monster? Buddha? Mohammed? Zeus? Cronos? Krishna? Agamemnon? Horus? Wtf are you even talking about?” Opening the tweet with sarcasm, the writer then listed a string of major non-Christian religious figures, Greek and Egyptian gods, and a satirical deity (i.e., the “flying Spaghetti Monster”) to show that religious worship in public would not work. Ending the tweet with “WTF”—an acronym for the vulgarity “What the f---k?,” speaks to their belief that Pence’s vision of free and unfettered religious freedom in public school will result in chaos. Writer @noay1930 added, “They opened up a can of worms that can’t be contained.” Calling non-Christian inclusion in the religious liberty movement “a can of worms,” the writer indicated regret and fear of the unintended consequences of the *Kennedy* decision. The image is that of disorder, confusion, and religious groups crawling over each other to be seen and heard the most. Commenter @Buie100 also predicts a form of religious freedom that Pence did not intend, writing, “You ain't gonna like the prayers you're gonna get. You didn't think this through, dude.”

The use of colloquial language such as “ain’t,” “gonna,” and “dude” shows the writer being plain-spoken, unpretentious, and forthcoming. The person does not position himself as a friend or foe, but as an objective observer who is more rational and thoughtful than Pence about the trouble with ecumenical religious expression in public schools.

Writer @Spad150 predicts that Pence’s claim to support all religions will only be true if everyone’s worship resembles the White Evangelical church, as depicted in Figure 4 below:

**Figure 4**

*Claims that American Religious Freedom Will Center Only on White Evangelical Christianity*

Replying to @Mike\_Pence and @AmericanFreedom

"every Faith", he says.

Just wait until every faith wants to pray differently than evangelicals think everyone should be praying.



10:36 AM · Jun 27, 2022 · Twitter Web App

Note: (Space, 2020)

This GIF provides one second of looping silent video that shows a middle-age White woman in what is, presumably, a White, Evangelical Christian church. She is standing up, eyes closed, arms lifted, and swaying as she prays. People around her are singing, clapping, and praying. This discourse depicts the dominant portrayal of religious devotion in the United States. The person who posted this image does not believe that Pence and mainstream White evangelicalism would tolerate public displays of religious expression that veer from their style of worship or draw attention to a god besides Jesus. Rejecting this assertion, Twitter user @Am111100 wrote, “As a

Christian, I would happily welcome their prayers as well.” Here, the call for inclusivity is met by a person who self-identifies as a Christian making a promise to accept all types of prayers. This is emblematic of the Twitter discourse on religious inclusivity; religious minorities made aggressive calls for inclusion and Christians responded with full acceptance, as if religious tensions were nonexistent and only imagined.

***“Can’t Wait” Discourse: Threats to Test Religious Liberty with Provocative Acts of Worship***

In this subtheme, tweeters called for non-Christians to test the limits of Pence’s brand of religious freedom by performing provocative religious rituals in public educational settings. The discourse repeated a common refrain of “Can’t wait to...,” which anticipated negative reactions to deliberate disruptions to normative religious observance in public schools. These comments landed as what could be seen as threatening to Christians. Through our analysis, we found that these discursive intimidations were rooted in the ethos that religion should exist outside the public square. To illustrate this point, commenters hoped that gregarious, non-Christian worship would take place in public schools and cause Pence’s scheme to proliferate Christianity under the guise of religious freedom to backfire.

With a comical undertone, @gooc805 wrote, “They can’t even handle yoga at schools.” This tweet implies that if Christian parents cannot accept yoga being practiced in public schools because of its origins in the Hindu religion, then they will not be able to tolerate Pence’s brand of religious liberty in their child’s school. To that point, tweeter @Jogs355 writes, “Can’t wait to see how they loose their sh1t when some teacher leads their class in a prayer to the east.” Within this tweet, the writer suggests that “they” (i.e., conservatives or Evangelical Christians) would go on an emotional tirade (i.e., “lose their s—t”) if a teacher led students in a Muslim or Jewish prayer in school (i.e., “prayer to the east”). More to the point, @Taon285 tweets, “I can’t wait to

sacrifice a goat to All Father Odin on the sidelines.” This tweet anticipates a firestorm of controversy if, in an act of devotion to the mythical father of Thor, they offered an animal sacrifice at a public school football game. More graphic than Kennedy’s silent prayer on bended knee, a blood offering at a game would surely push the limits of Pence’s freedom of religion. Tweeter @\_Zapa785 posted the image in Figure 5 below with the caption “Blessing to Kali.”

### Figure 5

*The Hindu Goddess of Time and Death as the Face of American Religious Freedom*



Note: (Zarleck, 2022)

This Hindu goddess of destruction effectively conveys the discourse about Pence and conservative Christians not being ready for true religious freedom. The writer presented this gruesome image of beheadings and the drinking of blood to suggest that Christians would not approve of their young children learning about Kali in public school classrooms.

The data also included a distinct discourse about the threat of Satanism on Christian dominance in public schooling. For example, @Sost1980 wrote, “I can’t wait for the Temple of Satan to get onboard. Your grandkids are gonna love those prayers.” This comment relied on the fears that many Christians have about Satanists, who are often positioned as the greatest enemies of Christianity. Here, the tweeter taunted Christian conservatives through presenting what might



seem to them as a worst-case scenario—converting their offspring to Satanism. Commenter @WTty1820 also spoke sarcastically to Christians about a Satanic takeover in public schools, writing, “Enjoy Satanic prayer it’s coming!” The writer punctuated their prediction with an exclamation point. This is meant to read as an ominous threat that strikes fear in the hearts of Christian parents. Many tweeters also responded with memes of Satanic worship to suggest that it will be a direct competitor to Christianity in public schools. Twitter user @saca375 posted the meme in Figure 6 to visually show religious liberty by a satanists football coach could look like on the field:

**Figure 6**

*Kennedy’s Christian Prayer Opens the Door Satanic Worship on the Football Field*



(Omnimon, 2022).

Here we see a depiction of Kennedy’s Christian prayers side-by-side with a pentagram and candles for a Satanic ritual at the 50 yard line. The discourse tells readers that agreeing with Kennedy’s public display of faith is tantamount to agreeing with sharing Satanism at football games. This is positioned as both a demand that Christians support religious inclusion and a

declaration that Satanism must be included by law, whether Christians approve of it or not. To these threats against Christian dominance in American schools and culture, @SA79580 retorted, “It looks like you will need another 2000 years to get as popular as Christianity.” Again, most of the responses from those defending Kennedy did not acknowledge fear or concern that greater non-Christian inclusion in the religious freedom movement would pose a threat to Christian prominence.

### **Discussion**

The Supreme Court’s approval of a high school football coach’s kneeling prayer at the 50-yard line after a game disrupted a half-century-old practice of school districts requiring teachers and coaches to conceal their religious faith while working in their official capacity as public school district employees. While there was little to no consensus-building through Twitter discourse on *Kennedy*, we generated four deep philosophical questions, undergirding both positive and negative arguments in the data. Parents, educators, and education policymakers will need to wrestle with these concepts if consensus can be built around the meaning of the separation of church and state in public education.

### **Discourse on Teacher Neutrality Exposes the Thin Line Between Transparency and Student Coercion**

The question of whether Kennedy “coerced” his players to pray with him was hotly contested in the data. However, the discourse largely failed to explain what behaviors qualified as coercion in an educator-student or coach-player relationship. Daily, most educators confront the thin line between what it means to be authentically themselves while not being overly influential in their beliefs and ideologies. The tension between transparency and coercion can occur organically when a student seeks the educator’s opinion on an issue or when a teacher

reveals aspects of their personal life to foster a trusting relationship with students. Regardless of the situation, the question remains: Where does a public educator's individuality end and their persona as an agent of the state begin?

For example, what does it mean to a high school student when they sit in a teacher's classroom that has a Black Lives Matter sign or Pride flag on the door? What if a student asks a teacher about her weekend and the teacher responds that she spent it protesting the overturn of *Roe V. Wade*? Are those teachers coercing students to accept their political commitments as right or just being true to themselves? What if a football coach takes a moment after the game to kneel on the field to thank God for an injury-free game? Is he coercing players to believe in Jesus? If the coach prevents players from praying on the field, is the coach violating the students' freedom of religion? The reality is that every human being has preferences, and when one's profession requires talking all day and building life-long bonds with children, those biases may eventually be revealed. In today's era of social media, students have access to adult content that is deeply divisive and political, 24-hours a day, that can provoke deep questions and concerns by students. They take these experiences into the classroom and potentially to their teachers. Therefore, it is becoming harder, if not impossible, for teachers to build authentic relationships with students from a place of neutrality.

Our data illustrated just how polarized this country is on issues of religion, race, history, abortion, and politics. It was difficult to find a neutral position on the *Kennedy* decision. It was not possible to defer to the Supreme Court for guidance on neutrality because even the Supreme Court justices had significantly different interpretations of the facts of the case, let alone theories behind the First Amendment freedoms concerning religion. When there is no neutral position, a teacher's default may be to say nothing; however, refusing to speak on certain topics does not

necessarily ensure neutrality, as silence may imply disagreement or support depending on the social context. The disagreements between liberal versus conservative ideologies have been painted as a culture war by the media, and the omnipresence of these discourses requires public school educators to wield their influence on students cautiously, so they do not cross the thin line between belief and coercion.

Specifically, the power dynamic of a coach-player relationship naturally tips the balance in the coach's favor because athletes want the coach to give them playing time. In the case of *Kennedy*, even if the coach would never retaliate against players who did not choose to join him in prayer, players' *fear* of retaliation may work as a coercive force. Does situating students in such a sensitive position—to pray or not to pray—violate their religious liberties? In *Kennedy*, the more conservative justices said that no coercion occurred, while the more liberal justices said it did. The circumstances are both unique and specific, and a slightly different set of conditions at a different school could have resulted in a different legal outcome. Therefore, the *Kennedy* decision should not be interpreted as if public educators have the religious freedom to proselytize to students openly and at will. Under the “Lemon” test, educators had a responsibility to exercise “sound judgment and follow well-established legal principles” regarding religious content in public schools, however, “balancing the competing interests can be daunting” (McCarthy, 2009, p. 718). However, now that *Kennedy* effectively overturned the Lemon test, while the Court issued confusing and contradictory opinions, the lower courts have little guidance on how to interpret religious liberty law in other school contexts (United States Courts, 2022). If the courts cannot easily discern the legality of educator prayer in schools, then how will teachers, coaches, and school district administrators respond in such situations? Religious liberty lawsuits in public education will likely continue.

### **Religious Freedom Discourse is Replete with Misconceptions, Stereotypes, and Fake Faith**

Those who opposed increasing religious liberties in public schools often pitted Christians against all other religions. However, they ignored the reality that most religions—not just Christianity—aspire to tenets and practices that other religions find false or incompatible with their faith. For example, one Twitter user asserted that Christians would not be accepting of “Islamic, Voodoo, Wiccans, and Satanists.” This writer and many others failed to acknowledge that many Islamic worshippers would likely also resist Voodoo, Wiccan, and Satanic worship because those faiths contradict sacred Islamic codes of conduct and belief. In addition, associating Islam with a series of religions that are often linked to paganism and the occult might be offensive to Muslims and advance misunderstandings and stereotypes about Islam. As Muslims strive to overcome false narratives of hostility and terrorism toward Americans, lobbying for their religious freedom in conjunction with faiths maligned in public opinion may not be a Muslim’s preferred way to demand more religious rights.

Likewise, Satanists might not want to be associated with Muslims, who worship Allah. Some tweeters promoted religious inclusion with false descriptions of Satanists, such as stating that they worship Satan. While there are theistic Satanists that do worship Satan and dark deities, the Church of Satan is atheistic and only uses Satan as their symbol. Instead, they believe in the individual as being the center of the universe, with each believer being the most important person in the world, thereby positioning each individual as their own “God,” offering “love to those who deserve it” (Church of Satan, 2018). Conversely, the nontheistic Satanic Temple promotes critical skepticism, living with compassion, and actively fighting for justice, including securing access to after-school clubs in public schools alongside other religious groups (TST, n.d.). Furthermore, some Satanists are hostile toward other sects of Satanism: “The Church of Satan

expresses vehement opposition to the campaigns and activities of The Satanic Temple, asserting themselves as the only ‘true’ arbiters of Satanism, while The Satanic Temple dismisses the Church of Satan as irrelevant and inactive” (TST, n.d.).

What these faiths believe, however, was a moot point in much of this discourse. While some tweeters legitimately argued for religious inclusion, a sizeable portion of the discourse positioned certain religions against Christians to present those faiths as scary and threats to children as to argue against allowing prayer in school or at school sporting events. People who want freedom from religion appear to have leveraged fear, not lobbied for religious equality, to try to sabotage the expansion of religious freedom.

Twitter users also brought up obscure religions and mythological gods that they would want included in religious freedom policies at school. This begged the question: What qualifies as religion? A tweeter stated that the constitution takes an all-or-nothing approach to religious freedom; either every religion is included in the Free Exercise Clause or none. Some tweeters cited their religion as The Flying Spaghetti Monster, a known satirical faith created by a 24-year-old Bobby Henderson in 2005 that now has protected religious status in many countries around the world. To subvert state laws that have banned the teaching of critical race theory, another tweeter wrote that they had made critical race theory their new religion and was thereby free to express CRT in class. Perhaps there is truth in the tweeter’s post that Pence and Kennedy have “opened a can of worms that cannot be contained.” Fake faiths and the free expression of them in public schools could pose a major threat to the intent of the law and could cause distractions within the learning environment. Instead of building cross-cultural and interfaith understandings that advance social harmony, religious freedom could become a pariah to schools if enough bad actors get involved.

### Elements of Critical Race Theory Undergirded Discourse on the *Kennedy* Decision

The data contained a strong undercurrent of racial tension, with many commenters presuming that the result of the case would have been different had Kennedy been a Black man, or a Muslim, or an atheist. In other words, the discourse pondered whether the Supreme Court realigned the religious freedom in public schools to expressly benefit Whiteness or was it just that only a White person could leverage the power needed to benefit “every American of every faith” (as Pence proclaimed in his tweet)? CRT suggests that the answer to both of those questions is likely yes. With CRT, the law and Whiteness have a symbiotic relationship that works to preserve each other. More specifically, one of the five tenets of CRT is the notion of *interest convergence*, which asserts that Whites will support issues of racial justice and social progress (e.g., religious freedom) to the extent that there is something positive in it for them (Bell, 2008). This “convergence” between the interests of Whites and non-Whites (e.g., non-Christians) elicits strong White advocacy as well as strong returns for Whites. As such, many tweeters expressed disbelief that the Supreme Court would have overturned a 52-year restriction on teacher-led prayer in public schools if a Muslim football coach of color had petitioned to roll out his prayer mat at the 50-yard line after the game. Tweeters recalled how Kaepernick was denigrated by White evangelical Christians and effectively blacklisted from the NFL for taking a knee in protest to anti-Black racism to further illustrate the power of Kennedy’s Whiteness to impact the politics and the law. There was no constitutional conflict of church and state at an NFL game, but there was a prominent conflict at a public school sporting event, yet Kennedy prevailed and Kaepernick did not. Kaepernick has remained unemployed by the NFL, while Kennedy was reinstated with the full weight of the Supreme Court and a former U.S. vice president legitimizing his midfield prayers with underage public school students.

## **The Potential Risks of Sanitizing Religion from School and Science**

The data contained discourse that led us to another philosophical question: Is public education limiting the creativity of students by restricting their access to religion in school? The image in Table 2 in the Findings section, for example, positioned a physical wall between church and state, then said that schools belonged to the state and that science belonged to schools; therefore, the discourse declared that science ought to be completely detached from religion. This is problematic, as history records numerous revolutionary scientists who stated how their faith in God inspired their pursuit of discovery: Sir Isaac Newton, a Protestant Christian physicist; Gregor Mendel, a Catholic geneticist; Mary Anning, an Anglican paleontologist; and George Washington Carver, a Methodist botanist, to name a few. In these instances, church, school, and science worked together instead of being divided by an arbitrary wall of separation enforced by the government.

The separation of church and state also presents unique challenges to the current cries to decolonize education. For example, many Indigenous worldviews, “do not share the dichotomous occidental worldview that separates the material from the spiritual, nature from culture, and humankind from all other life forms, and as a result they do not do science in isolation from other pursuits” (Nakashima & Roue, 2002, p. 314). When we ask students to separate their belief systems from their knowledge systems are we at risk of imposing colonial occidental value systems that these two things can, in fact, be separated? Moreover, public education has prided itself for upholding a wall of separation of church and state while simultaneously admitting its failure to eradicate the racial “achievement gap” between White and Black students. The irony of this situation is academic advancement for African Americans has largely occurred *because of* an integration of church and state. History shows that the



advancement of Black minds in America has been inextricably tied to the Christian church, particularly the Black Church (DuBois, 1903; Woodson, 1933; Hale, 2001; Payne, 2008).

Therefore, the attribute that the American public school system actively prohibits—religion—may be the essential ingredient of transformational Black education.

By positioning religion as outside of the bounds of public education, are we limiting the pool of inspiration that can drive student and societal progress? For many, faith provides tools to promote moral calibration, guidance toward finding meaning and purpose in life, inspiration to seek the greater good, and accountability to others. Is it possible that these ideals could be incorporated, from a variety of faith perspectives, to increase students' acceptance of those different from them, as well as commitment to civil discourse? We question if it is possible, and even desirable, for public education to consider how to promote ecumenical but agnostic religious expression as an appropriate mechanism to feed students' minds, hearts, and souls, and could this be done without religious coercion or erasing the existence of religion itself? The Supreme Court has tried to reset the balance of religious expression in public schools with *Kennedy*, and it is yet to be seen whether the Court made the right choice.

### **Limitations**

Because Twitter forces users to convey their beliefs in 280 characters or less, tweeters in this sample were forced to convey their viewpoints succinctly. This does not leave much room for making nuanced arguments; in fact, these sound-bite sized word limits may have created the conditions by which oversimplification of the Constitution led to misinformed tweets that were easily spread. Also, because we took every fifth tweet to get a randomized sample of the Twitter thread, we do not capture cohesive back-and-forth dialogue between respondents. Instead, we mostly capture independent thoughts that are detached from ongoing conversations in which

more nuances might have been explored. We made this tradeoff to include more diverse viewpoints, as some sections of the thread contained 70 responses to one a single tweet and including all those tweets would have limited the scope of the topics we could analyze.

Moreover, Twitter itself may not be the best venue to seek measured, nuanced, civil discourse. While Twitter has the potential to facilitate a meaningful exchange of ideas that bring people closer to compromise, it typically drives users further into their polarized, ideological corners (Dyer & Hakkola, 2020; Masroor et al, 2019). This appears to be true in this study as well. While there were voices of support for *Kennedy* sprinkled throughout the Twitter thread, the comments trended negative, some tweeters using the opportunity to ridicule and attack Pence with vulgarities.

### **Implications**

The ramifications of the *Kennedy* decision are expansive. They promise to provoke a long-overdue conversation about the role of religion and its intersections with race in K-12 public education. Now that the Supreme Court has empowered a football coach to pray midfield in a crowded stadium, school districts should rethink their policies on how teachers, students, and staff can lawfully express their religious faith in school. Those rules will need to be vetted by constitutional lawyers to try to ensure that they will pass the test of church-state separation litigation. Teacher preparation programs should also provide courses that specifically address the complexity of religion in public education, including the intersections of race, political ideology, and the law. Such courses are usually only offered at religious universities. The field of public education can no longer avoid the issue of how to address pluralistic forms of religious expression and mindfulness in public school.

That said, implementing policies and professional development training on the parameters of faith in public school is not enough. It is vital that education systems provide better discursive mechanisms to communicate and debate sensitive issues such as religion. School board meetings, townhalls, and online education forums are ideal venues for exchanging meaningful ideas about how religion can be practiced and discussed in public schools. It is vital that school leaders study the discourse or language that best engages with education policies and devise the most effective way to address opposing viewpoints without inadvertently marginalizing groups or widening the gulf of disagreement. There is no shortage of “logic bullies” in public education whose goal is to maintain power and shut down any opposing thoughts rather than engage in constructive dialogue that produces the best outcomes. Educators and school policymakers need to be trained in how to participate in informed and empathic discourse around diversity, equity, and inclusion, particularly regarding issues of religious freedom and racial justice.

### **Conclusion**

The proper role of religion in public education has been a source of controversy since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and it continues to be so today. In June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court upended a 60-year-old legal standard that had deemed teacher-led prayer a violation of the Establishment Clause when it ruled that a public high school football coach could pray midfield after games, even with players who voluntarily joined him. Based on our analysis of 442 Twitter comments that responded to former Vice President Mike Pence’s three celebratory tweets about the *Kennedy v. Bremerton* ruling, we found more negative discourse than positive. The negative discourse ranged from concerned to sarcastic to outraged, accusing Kennedy of coercing students, leveraging White privilege, promoting fascism, and practicing fake Christianity, among

other things. Positive discourse, however, positioned Christianity as the victim of religious bias, voiced that the ruling rightly interpreted the Founding Father's intent for the First Amendment, and shamed liberal ideology for being intolerant of religious views, among other things.

This discourse about *Kennedy* has shed a light on the need for educators, education policymakers, and researchers to stop ignoring religion's impact in public schools or considering it too taboo a topic to discuss or study in earnest. The reality is that public schooling is just as secular or religious as the teachers, students, and families who participate in it. More research is needed to understand how one's religious identity influences one's educational perspectives and outcomes. As American culture increasingly embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion as core values, public education policymakers will no longer be able to tell students, families, and teachers to bring racial, sexual, and cultural identities to school, but leave their religion at home.

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## CONCLUSION

The phrase the “separation of church and state” is a misnomer. Not only because many people use the term with the faulty belief that those words are written into the U.S. Constitution, but also because religious faith is ethereal and cannot easily be deactivated (Rhames, 2018; Rhames, 2019). The reality is that the “state” is made up of the people, for the people, by the people—and between 70% and 76% of American adults hold religious beliefs, with about 64% being Christian (Pew Research Center, 2022; Jones, 2021). Therefore, if there are people of faith governing the state, there can likely never be a fully implemented separation of church and state. More specifically, public education can only be as secular or religious as the parents, teachers, and students are who operate in it. While the influence of faith may not be observable to the naked eye, researchers can design scientific methods to help uncover such influences.

The three studies in this dissertation reveal the hidden ways in which religion/religiosity has likely impacted educational outcomes, from the knee-jerk responses from ordinary individuals engaging in a Twitter discourse, to the perceptions recorded on a survey of concerned parents and teachers, to the long-term effects of childhood church attendance on adult crime rates in an inner city. Religion matters. Race matters. The intersection of religion and race in K-12 public education matters.

Individually, each of the papers contributed to a specific aspect of knowledge about the role of religion and race in public schools. The paper, *Religion, Race, or Politics? Which Identity Most Drives Concerns About Public Schooling in the United States?* challenged the popular narrative that Evangelical Christians perceive public education primarily through a religious lens. Instead, I competed the observable characteristics of religion, race, and political ideology to

determine which variable had the greatest influence on perceptions of problems in public schooling. None of the seven outcomes were influenced by religion, but racial identity and political ideology, which topped them all, had statistically significant effects. The second paper, *One or the Other: Parent Religiosity or Private School Choice May Reduce Crime and Paternity Disputes in Milwaukee*, presented a plausibly causal case that taking 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade low-income, urban African American students to religious services at least once a week or offering them a private, usually religious, education contributed to a statistically significant reduction in six of 12 of their negative criminal and civic outcomes by the age of 25. The third and final paper, “*Are You Sure His Prayers Were ‘Silent’?*” *A Critical Discourse Analysis of Church-State Separation in Public Schools on Twitter Following Kennedy v. Bremerton*, revealed myriad political, social, racial, and religious complexities that permeated discussions about how to appropriately exercise the freedom of religion in American public schools.

Taken together, these three papers present a powerful case that the influence of religion in public education is hidden in plain sight. The religious faith is operating inside the schoolhouse, and more social scientists are needed to thoroughly explore its impact. This nation’s reluctance to discuss religion, race, and politics in polite company may have led to the exceedingly polarized, sometimes inflammatory, discourse that was evinced in the Twitter comments about the praying coach Joseph Kennedy. Kennedy’s stand for prayer, however, was unique only in that it occurred in the liberal-leaning state of Washington; football coaches across the South and in communities of color have long prayed with their players with the full support of parents and community members.

As an African American woman, I understand my ethnic history: Had a church-state separation been fully enforced, there may have never been Southern one-room schoolhouses in

Black church basements, public and private Historically Black Colleges and Universities, freedom schools, or a Civil Rights Movement that propelled the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) all the way to the Supreme Court. The social progress of Black Americans is forever indebted to the Black Church. Moreover, I have personally benefited from a faith-infused approach to achieving success in my public school education. While my public school teachers did not overtly pray with me or talk to students about Jesus, the culture was such that my music instructors included religious Christmas carols, gospel music, and faith-based Negro spirituals in their curriculum. It was nothing to talk to my elementary and high school teachers about the happenings at my church and to learn what was going on at theirs. It was natural for students to discuss Dr. Martin Luther King's nonviolence resistance movement by drawing parallels to Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. And though we complained under our breath the entire year, my classmates and I respected why our 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher Mrs. Grant did not allow any in-class holiday or birthday celebrations: She was a devout Jehovah's Witness.

My school life naturally spilled over into my church life (or perhaps vice versa) when my pastors publicly acknowledged all the honor roll students in the congregation and/or had a baccalaureate service for those graduating. Everybody's church was full of teachers who after working a long week at the neighborhood school turned around and volunteered to run Children's Church for two to three hours every Sunday morning. We learned to sit still and pay attention at our desks in school because we practiced sitting still and paying attention on the church pews. For most African Americans my age and older, we learned the fundamentals of life at home, then at church, and then at school.

To that end, I believe that a more open interpretation of the First Amendment's guarantee of religious liberty might make more room for a partnership between religious institutions and

public schools that rekindles the inspiration and social progress it once induced for Black Americans and other racial groups that have historically left behind. My vision for faith-education collaboration is does not look like a public school teacher leading prayer at the front of the class. Instead, it begins with every Christian employee at the school striving to fulfill the two most important commandments that Jesus quoted: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (New International Version Bible, 1973/2011, Mark 12:30-31). The next aspect of a viable faith-education partnership would entail offering a wide-range of vetted faith- and community-based services and resources that parents may or may not choose to allow their children to participate (Rhames, 2020). Perhaps one day trained, volunteer chaplains of various religious affiliations can be on-call to console a broken-hearted child at school, in the same way chaplains are on hand to comfort ailing hospital patients or reassure overwhelmed soldiers in the military. The public rarely complains about prayer vigils or clergy being present on public school campuses immediately after they have been ripped apart by suicide or mass shootings. Why not acknowledge and normalize the need for spiritual support and healing in public schools before blood is streaming down the hallway? I do not believe that we need more religion or religiosity in public schools. What we need is more love in public schools. And “God is love ....” (New International Version Bible, 1973/2011, 1 John 4:16).

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