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DORMINEY: Religion next step in school reform

Faith community boosts student achievement

By Anna Dorminey

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Of all the issues being debated in preparation for the District of Columbia's mayoral primary today, education undoubtedly was the most controversial. Teachers are being evaluated for efficiency, trends in test scores are being examined, and D.C. Public Schools is offering bonuses at the slightest signs of improvement. But what if the best remedy for Washington's failed schools were as simple, if politically incorrect, as encouraging religion?

The District's schools consistently receive abysmally low rankings despite spending an astonishing \$28,170 per pupil per year, according to the [Cato Institute's Adam B. Schaeffer](#). Schools Chancellor [Michelle A. Rhee](#), Mayor [Adrian M. Fenty](#) and the [Washington Teachers Union](#) have offered various solutions to D.C. schools' dismal situation, from more professional development for teachers to altered conditions for tenure.

The problem that remains is a rather sticky one because it cannot be addressed in the teachers' contract or school budget. How much can even superior teachers and schools accomplish when a student's home environment does not contribute to - and perhaps damages - his ability to learn? How can a student learn reading, writing and arithmetic he has not first been taught focus, obedience or the importance of education or, more important, been nurtured in a stable environment? The solution lies with the church and the family.

Religious participation correlates directly to improved academic performance. According to a 2008 article in the *Sociological Quarterly* titled "Religious Involvement and Educational Outcomes: The Role of Social Capital and Extracurricular Participation," by Jennifer Glanville, David Sikkink and Edwin Hernandez, students regularly involved in religious activities have grade-point averages 14.4 percent higher than those who aren't. And in his 1987 article in the *American Journal of Sociology* titled "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital," James S. Coleman found a 10 percent decrease in a student's likelihood to drop out of school.

Religion affects students both internally and through external networks, such as the family. On an internal level, it fosters the development of character, high personal expectations, self-discipline and self-restraint, all of which contribute to success in school. It also helps students avoid socially unhealthy or deviant behavior, decreasing their risk of participation in activities that can damage them personally and academically.

Church participation as a family creates a home environment conducive to educational achievement. Religious families tend to be more cohesive; parents are more likely to plan for their children's futures, and children are more likely to understand exactly what their parents expect of them. In high-income families, religion fosters stability, which is necessary for income to positively affect educational attainment. In low-income families, religion's effect are even more significant because it is one of the few institutions to which poor families have access. Religious communities offer mentorship and support, which may supplement damaged parent-child relationships in broken homes.

Obviously, hiring good teachers is of paramount importance, and ineffective teachers should be fired. Useless educational programs should be eliminated. And D.C. Public Schools should be held accountable. But more must be done.

Data show a positive, significant correlation between religious practice and improved academic performance, which should not be ignored to maintain a politically correct image. The hallmark of [Mr. Fenty](#)'s career has been bold step toward educational reform: Encouraging religion, for the benefit of the District's kids, should be his next.

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