



# The ACSI Response to the *Cardus Education Survey*

By Philip Scott

**T**he researcher's job is to ask questions and collect data. After enough facts are collected, analyzed, and categorized, certain inferences are drawn from those facts. Once facts and inferences are released, the public dialogue begins. The two main sources of discourse center on either the methodology of data collection (whether the system of data collection was flawed) or on the conclusions drawn. ACSI supports the methodology of the *Cardus Education Survey (CES)*, but we at ACSI do believe the facts gathered lead us to some different sets of conclusions than those of the *CES*. In part, this should be of little surprise since ACSI is fundamentally an association dedicated to strengthening and equipping Christian schools and educators. Conversely, Cardus is primarily a political think tank with a dedication to the renewal of North American culture. With different purposes come different perspectives, and together our differing perspectives enrich the conversation.

When the *CES* was still in its infant stages, Cardus approached a number of vested organizations to see if they would have an interest in collecting data specific to their cohort. ACSI was interested and ultimately

commissioned Cardus to pull ACSI schools out from the general Protestant group to further analyze the impact of ACSI member and ACSI-accredited schools. Those who have read the *CES* will have noticed that the report focuses on what the school itself said it was doing, then the actions of its graduates years after graduation, and how the two align. Unfortunately, the ACSI-specific data deal primarily with the schools and little on the actions of its graduates. So there is less specific information about ACSI graduates, yet the findings of the general population of Protestant school graduates still hold true for ACSI graduates. The ACSI findings were not made public by Cardus, and consequently ACSI needed a vehicle in which to deliver ACSI-specific findings. Thus, it is these two driving forces that precipitated a response by ACSI to the *CES*.

Cardus provided ACSI with nearly 800 pages of ACSI-specific content, which was broken down into a number of categories including cultural, spiritual, and academic. A total of 206 questions were identified by ACSI to directly relate to these three categories. Ultimately, 185 were used as measurements against other

Protestant and Catholic school programs. In those 185, ACSI schools were compared with other Protestant and Catholic school programs. In 98 instances, ACSI schools ranked highest or the most favorable, while Catholic schools did so in 71 cases and other Protestant schools in 28 instances.<sup>1</sup> There should not be too much emphasis put into these numbers since they include various types of data ranging from objective measurements of quality (such as program hours required for a student to graduate) to subjective measurements of school emphasis (such as a school's emphasis on student interpersonal evangelism). For a complete breakdown of these categories, please see the appendixes of the ACSI response, *Upon a Solid Foundation*. Below is a more detailed account of the ACSI response.

## Cultural

There were 59 measurements used for cultural engagement. ACSI programs ranked highest or most favorable in 27, followed closely by Catholic schools with 25 and Protestant schools with 9. In terms of distribution of highest or most favorable responses among all three groups, cultural engagement was the closest.

Cardus had two findings of significance to ACSI schools in relation to cultural engagement. First, Protestant schools are not a breeding ground for antisocial and politically militant graduates; rather, just the opposite seems to be the case. Second, while Protestant schools claim to be world changers, Cardus believes this to be largely rhetoric. Both findings seem to stem from lack of high-level political involvement from Protestant school graduates. The term *high level* has a double meaning here, inferring both a significant frequency of involvement and involvement regardless of frequency with well-connected and influential people.

While we do not have specific data on ACSI graduates, ACSI agrees that the data do indicate a less robust involvement in political activities, even in small ways such as political discussions with coworkers. However, we also believe this is a key area where perspective matters in the interpretation of the data. As way of background, there are two competing ideals of cultural engagement. A top-down system holds that change comes from those with power and influence. As they shape society, the masses tend to follow their lead over time. The second view, a bottom-up view, states that as the masses shift their desires so too will those in power alter their views or be replaced with those who hold similar views to the general public.

ACSI holds to a system of cultural engagement that requires both top-down and bottom-up engagement and sees both as equally valid and necessary. We believe Cardus was primarily focused on a top-down view of governmental engagement and thereby minimized the impact of bottom-up contributions. While there are deficiencies in how our graduates practice top-down engagement, it is very evident that our graduates are practicing bottom-up engagement better than any of their peers, as can be seen by hours volunteered, monies given to charities, and their impact on their communities through the way they live. When top-down and bottom-up are put on equal footing, we believe the evidence is quite clear that Protestant school graduates are very culturally engaged.

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## Spiritual

Out of the ACSI-specific data, 67 questions covered spiritual practices. ACSI schools ranked highest or most favorable in 40, followed by Catholic schools with 15 and Protestant schools with 13. This category had the greatest disparity in scores; this tends to reflect the overall findings

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of the *CES* for Protestant schools, which have a higher overall focus on spiritual development along with much higher student outcomes of spiritual practices and fidelity.

The ACSI-specific data were less helpful here, simply because of the heavy focus of the *CES* on graduate outcomes and practices and, as has already been discussed above, the ACSI-specific data were primarily focused on school actions. Thus the focus here was to reiterate how Protestant schools, which ACSI was a subset of, set the standard in nearly every category measured for spiritual practices and fidelity. What was surprising about the *CES* data was that in most categories Protestant schools outperformed homeschools. The popular perception has been that homeschooling would be the most nurturing environment of spiritual practices and fidelity, yet in the majority of measurements, Protestant schools seem to have the greatest impact. It was also of interest that in

most spiritual categories the only two groups not to have a negative impact on spiritual development were homeschools and Protestant schools. It seems the greatest impact on student spiritual practices is brought about by a partnership of the home and Protestant schooling.

One area of concern for parents, churches, and school administrators alike is the amount of theological shift a school experiences. We were pleased to see that the ACSI-specific data indicated that ACSI-accredited schools had the least amount of theological shift over the past five years of any group. ACSI member schools had much more shifting over the past five years into what seems to be a more theologically conservative stance. It is less clear what the conservative shifting of ACSI member schools indicates. We do recognize that ACSI is, metaphorically speaking, a big tent for many Protestant traditions, and so this shifting may have an impact on some subsets of those traditions more than others.

## Academic

Academic is the only grouping in which ACSI schools did not rank first in the number of highest or most favorable responses to the questions asked. Here, ACSI schools tied with Catholic schools, with other Protestant schools following. Of the 68 questions, ACSI and Catholic schools both ranked highest or most favorable in 31 responses, while other Protestant schools ranked highest in 6.

Of all the areas in which ACSI had a different perspective of the conclusions drawn in the *CES*, the differences were probably most sharply visible in academics. The overall conclusion by the *CES* was that Protestant school education was not rigorous. Yet when compared with public schools, Protestant students were more likely to graduate from college, obtain more years of higher education, attend a more selective university, and attend a religious university. However, this was not where the comparison largely took place; the comparison was largely made with Catholic schools on course offerings, selective university attendance by graduates, higher education attainment by graduates, and school culture of academic achievement.

Course offerings were largely measured by the number of advanced and Advanced Placement (AP) courses offered. Catholic schools offer nearly twice as many AP courses as Protestant programs as a whole, yet that number shrinks to a third more when compared with ACSI-accredited programs. Clearly, we would like to see improvement in this area. Another measurement of rigor is the number of credit hours required for graduation, particularly the number of hours in core subjects. In this area, ACSI-accredited programs had more rigorous requirements than Catholic school programs in nine categories, only requiring less in other religion courses besides theology and Bible courses. Additionally, more





ACSI programs have dual college enrollment programs than Catholic school programs.

No specific data were given about the higher educational attainment of ACSI school graduates, nor were any specific data given on ACSI school graduate matriculation into selective universities. We would hope ACSI school results are stronger in these areas, but without specific data we do not know. The larger Protestant school set of the *CES* indicates that Protestant school graduates attend selective universities less often. That would seem to indicate less rigor; however, 40 years of scholastic testing data and the aims of these school programs offer a different interpretation.

The ACSI study discusses several different measurements over the past 40 years that indicate Protestant and Catholic schools test scores are about equal. The *CES* data and ACSI-specific data further indicate in nearly every measurement, whether administration, parent, or student, Catholic schools are focused on university and selective university attainment, yet that is not the primary goal of ACSI schools and Protestant schools. Thus, it should be no surprise to find Protestant schools, with a higher focus on spiritual development, sending their graduates to religious universities at four times the rate of others. We question whether this is a true academic disparity or a difference in school, parent, and student priorities—a distinction of attainability versus desirability.

ACSI praises Cardus and its generous benefactors for this marvelous study and for giving quantifiable data to what teachers, parents, students, and administrators have anecdotally known for years. Christian education

is worth the effort, and it truly offers a unique impact on students, more than any other form of education.

ACSI has developed several resources for member use in conjunction with the *CES*. They can be found on ACSI ConNEXUS under Resources in the Educational Research and Studies group. See the first group of starred resources.

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- *Upon a Solid Foundation: The ACSI Response to and Expansion on the Cardus Education Survey* is an ACSI analysis of the *CES*.
- *A Sure Foundation* is a PowerPoint presentation on the *CES* and ACSI-specific data. It includes speaker notes. Schools are encouraged to use this presentation for in-services, pastor meetings, and family orientations. On ConNEXUS,

select *Upon a Solid Foundation*—PowerPoint—ACSI Cardus Response.

- *ACSI Schools: The Best Choice for Your Child* is a one-page brochure giving prospective parents and the general public reasons why ACSI schools are the best choice for a community's children.
- *World Class: ACSI Accredited Schools* is an infographic for accredited schools to post to their websites or print and hand out to prospective parents.

#### Note

1. These numbers added together are more than 185. The discrepancy is because of a number of categories in which various programs tied for the highest or most favorable.

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