



ACSI Working Paper No. 2024-02

Sabbath-Keeping in Private Christian Schools

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Abstract

Prior scholarship has conceptualized Sabbath-keeping practices as a formative spiritual discipline in Christian schools (Bass, 2005; Dykstra, 2005) and one study connected Sabbath-keeping to lower levels of teacher burnout among Christian school teachers (Cheng et al., 2023). However, little is known about the relationship between Sabbath-keeping policies in Christian schools and teachers' religious practices, the subject of this study. We analyze a sample of 982 teachers from the Association of Christian Schools International's (ACSI) cross-sectional Flourishing Faith Index (FFI) pilot study data. We find that there is a positive association between Sabbath-keeping policies and teachers' spiritual practices and teachers' perception of administrative support. Specifically, teachers in schools with Sabbath-keeping policies were more likely to report engaging in Scripture memorization, attending religious services with greater frequency, and feeling that administrators in their schools supported their personal spiritual growth. We conclude with a discussion about Sabbath-keeping policies and subsequent research about teachers' religious practices in Christian schools.

Keywords: Sabbath-keeping; spiritual disciplines; private schools; Christian education

Sabbath-Keeping Practices

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Sabbath day serves as a day of rest that calls for resting from one's labors and setting aside the day for worship. The Sabbath was instituted in Mosaic law (Exodus 20:1-21; Deuteronomy 5:1-21) in connection with biblical teachings on creation (Exodus 20:11) and redemption (Deuteronomy 5:15). Old Testament Jewish society was ordered around the Sabbath, with preparations beginning the day before (Nehemiah 13:19-22; Luke 23:54-56; Mark 15:42). In connection with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians began observing the Sabbath on Sundays (Hebrews 4:1-13; Colossians 1:18; Romans 6:5; 1 Corinthians 15). Although Sabbath observance has generally declined (Brueggemann, 2017; Weeks, 1981), the Sabbath continues to bear significance in many faith communities today (see, for example, De Villiers & Marchinkowski, 2021; Witherow & Gibson, 2021; Cocksworth, 2011; Fisher et al., 2015; Heschel, 2005; Boston, 2002; Pieper, 1999).

Many Christian schools incorporate the rhythms of Sabbath observances into their school communities. Some scholars have argued for the spiritual discipline of Sabbath-keeping as an embodying principle, rather than a one-time act, for Christian schools (Steinbergs, 2021; Bass, 2005; Dykstra, 2005). The view that the practice itself is formative has implications for Christian school pedagogies, which should be markedly distinct from the pedagogical practices of other school communities (Smith, 2018; Smith & Smith, 2011). With respect to the Sabbath, some pedagogical practices may involve "thoughtful attention to due dates and by choosing when new materials are made available" (Hughes, 2022, p. 114).

Two empirical studies have examined the relationship between Sabbath-keeping and mental health. One study examined United Methodist clergy and found that decreased Sabbath observance was associated with lower levels of mental well-being as measured by anxiety

symptoms, spiritual well-being in ministry scores, and mental health (Proeschold-Bell et al., 2022). One empirical study examined teachers in private Christian schools and their theological views of the Sabbath, personal Sabbath practices, as well as related pedagogical practices. Teachers who were self-reported Sabbath keepers were significantly more likely to be involved in church-related activities and were more likely to spend time in fellowship with family and church members. Conversely, Sabbath-keeping teachers were less likely to engage in work-related activities. With respect to their classrooms, they were less likely to assign homework or major deadlines over the weekend. Finally, Sabbath-keeping teachers reported lower levels of burnout than their peers (Cheng et al., 2023).

Given the potential benefits of the Sabbath, particularly for teachers in private Christian schools, these schools may have an interest in having policies in place to help teachers honor the Sabbath. What has yet to be examined by empirical research is whether teacher outcomes vary by the presence or absence of a school policy related to the Sabbath, the topic of this paper.

Methodology

Data and Instrumentation

Data come from the Association of Christian Schools International's (ACSI) pilot study of the Flourishing Faith Index (FFI) (Lee et al., 2023). Fielded in 2022, the pilot study included 33 schools (29 in the United States, 4 international schools with English-based instruction) broadly representative of the organization. Nearly 10,000 students, parents, teachers, administrators, staff, alumni, and board members completed pilot surveys.

The FFI included various measures of spiritual health and spiritual formation in the school, as well as a rich set of respondent demographic characteristics. Importantly for our study, the survey included several items salient to our analysis. Teachers indicated on a 5-point Likert

scale (1 = “Strongly disagree”, 5 = “Strongly agree”) how strongly they agreed with the following statements:

- Item 1: Our school has policies in place to help staff honor the Sabbath
- Item 2: Memorizing Scripture is an ongoing part of my life
- Item 3: School administrators genuinely care about my spiritual health
- Item 4: School administrators support my spiritual growth

Respondents also indicated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = “Several times a week”; 7 = “Never”) how frequently they attended religious services.

Sample

For our analysis, we focus on a sample of 982 teacher respondents and present their descriptive statistics in Table 1. The sample is predominantly female (81 percent) and married (84 percent). Teachers in our sample represented the full range of grade levels including early education (10 percent), elementary (44 percent), middle (36 percent), and high school grade levels (41 percent). Furthermore, 24 percent of respondents indicated teaching multiple levels. The sample is highly educated, with the modal respondent indicating a bachelor’s degree (61 percent) as his or her highest level of education, though 35 percent have some graduate education beyond a bachelor’s. Over half of the sample had an education degree at some level. On average, teachers had 14.11 years of teaching experience (including current year) with a range of 1 to 49 years and 6.94 years of teaching experience in current school (including current year) with a range of 1 to 41 years.

[Table 1 about here]

With respect to survey instrumentation, the sample varied with respect to religious service attendance, engagement with Scripture, and perceptions of school administrator support

and school Sabbath policies. We report these descriptive statistics in Table 2. Roughly 18 percent of teachers reported attending religious services “several times a week” and another 71 percent reported attending religious services “weekly.” Teachers agreed most strongly that school administrators “genuinely care about my spiritual health” (29 percent “strongly agree,” with a mean of 4.05) and “support my spiritual growth” (26 percent “strongly agree,” with a mean of 4.05). Teachers agreed less that “memorizing Scripture is an ongoing part of my life” (13 percent “strongly agree” with a mean of 3.50) or that the school “has policies in place to help staff honor the Sabbath” (16 percent “strongly agree,” with a mean of 3.40).

[Table 2 about here]

Importantly for our analysis, teachers within a school tended to agree whether or not the school does or does not have policies in place to help staff honor the Sabbath. The school-level average ranged from 2.3 (“Disagree”) to 4.25 (“Agree”). Figure 1 plots the distribution of teacher respondents to the Sabbath policy item by school. For the purpose of our analysis, we considered teachers with a school mean Sabbath score of 3.5 or greater to teach at a school with Sabbath policies in place. Based on this designation, 41 percent of teachers in our sample work at a school with Sabbath policies in place. Given the theological relationship between the Sabbath and worship, as well as prior empirical research on the relationship between the Sabbath and teachers’ well-being, we hypothesize that teachers in schools with Sabbath policies in place will be more likely to engage with Scripture, attend religious services more frequently, and report that school administrators support their spiritual health and growth.

[Figure 1 about here]

Empirical Strategy

To evaluate the relationship between school Sabbath policies and these outcomes, we regress each outcome of interest using the following model:

$$y_{ts} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 sabbath_s + \delta_t' \beta_1 + \gamma_t' \beta + \alpha_t' \beta + \chi_t' \beta + \epsilon \quad (1)$$

The outcome of interest y_{ts} is a binary indicator variable set to 1 if teacher t in school s indicated attending religious services several times a week or if the respondent strongly agreed with FFI Items 2, 3, or 4, and 0 otherwise. *sabbath* is an indicator variable for whether the respondent teaches at a school with Sabbath policies in place. Thus, β_1 captures the linear association between school Sabbath policies and each outcome of interest. In subsequent regressions, we add in controls for respondent demographics δ (gender and marital status), grade levels taught γ , educational attainment α , and teaching experience χ . We estimate heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors to account for our dichotomous outcome variable.

Results

Main Results

We present our results in Table 3. In Panel A, the outcome is whether the respondent strongly agreed with the statement “Memorizing Scripture is an ongoing part of my life.” In Panel B, the outcome is whether the respondent indicated attending religious services several times a week. In Panel C, the outcome is whether the respondent strongly agreed with the statement “School administrators genuinely care about my spiritual health.” Finally, in Panel D, the outcome is whether the respondent strongly agreed with the statement “School administrators support my spiritual growth.”

We find evidence of a positive association between school Sabbath policies and our outcomes of interest. Sabbath policies are positively associated with teachers’ spiritual practices.

Respondents who teach at a school with Sabbath policies in place are more likely to “strongly agree” that “memorizing Scripture is an ongoing part of my life” (5 points, $p < 0.05$). They are also more likely to report attending religious services several times a week (7 points, $p < 0.01$). Respondents who teach at schools with Sabbath policies also feel more supported by school administrators. They are more likely to strongly agree that administrators “genuinely care about my spiritual health” (15 points, $p < 0.001$) and that administrators “support my spiritual growth” (18 points, $p < 0.001$). These estimates are robust to the inclusion or exclusion of control covariates.

Sensitivity

Are our estimates sensitive to our definition of which schools have “Sabbath policies” in place? To investigate this question, we re-estimate our models with no controls, substituting the indicator *sabbath* using three alternative variables. We present these estimates in Table 4. In Column 1, we reproduce estimates from Table 3, Column 1. In Column 2, we set *sabbath* to 1 if the respondent was in the top tercile of all respondents in terms of mean school Sabbath score (a school mean of 3.6 or greater) and 0 otherwise. In Column 3, we set *sabbath* to 1 if the respondent was in the top quartile of all respondents in terms of mean school Sabbath score (a school mean of 3.69 or greater) and 0 otherwise. Finally, in Column 4, we use the raw respondent-level variable, which captures how strongly each respondent agreed that his or her school had policies in place to help staff honor the Sabbath.

We do not find evidence that our estimates are sensitive to our definition of which schools have “Sabbath policies” in place. Sabbath policies are positively and significantly associated with our outcomes of interest across each specification.

[Table 4 about here]

Discussion

Our analyses have yielded novel findings, providing clear evidence of a positive association between Sabbath policies in Christian schools and teachers' spiritual practices. These results are in line with existing literature on the formative principle of Sabbath-keeping fostering spiritual practices and community within Christian schools (Bass, 2005; Cheng et al., 2023; Dykstra, 2005; Smith, 2018; Smith & Smith, 2011) and offer a unique perspective on the relationship between Sabbath policies and teachers' spiritual practices.

First, since the Sabbath-keeping concept by definition encourages anyone to have a day of rest from work and other worldly concerns, it is highly possible that schools that have clear policies in place about Sabbatical practices can create a school culture that values rest that in turn reduces some level of pressure to overwork and burnout among teachers (Cheng et al., 2023). Teacher burnout is particularly a concern for school leaders since the pandemic as teacher mental health continues to be a pressing issue (Marshall et al., 2024; Pressley et al., 2024; Pressley, 2021). School leaders should seriously consider practices that potentially mitigate teacher burnout.

Second, the formative nature of Sabbath observance (Bass, 2005; Dykstra, 2005) may foster spiritual practices and a sense of community among teachers, and these spiritual practices thrive best in schools that prioritize Sabbath observance. Spiritual formation ranks high among reasons why teachers and administrators believe a parent would choose their school (Johnson & Lee, 2023b, 2023a). Indeed, the quality of spiritual formation can increase the likelihood a parent chooses a particular private Christian school more than academic quality, extracurricular offerings, and tuition (Lee et al., 2024). Bass (2005) and Dykstra (2005) contend that Sabbath observance is not merely a set of rules or some legalistic requirements that require people to rest.

Instead, it is a formative form of spiritual discipline in which individuals can cultivate deeper relationships with God and others through deeper and meaningful rest, reflection, and worship. Schools with a Sabbath policy are suitable environments for believers to integrate these practices into their spiritual habits and lifestyle, reflected in their daily spiritual practices. Given the spiritually formative role of Sabbath observance and the unique pedagogical priorities of private Christian schools, these schools may consider incorporating policies that facilitate such practices.

Third, having a clear policy about the Sabbath might signal schools' commitment to Sabbatical observance and spiritual formation among their school community members (Cheng et al., 2023; Djita & Nie, 2023). This commitment from schools might send a powerful message to all school community members that this is something that the school prizes. In this case, the success of implementing this Sabbath policy in school will require a certain level of trust, support, and continued communication between the administrator at the forefront of the school and the rest of the school community members. The decision to prioritize Sabbath observance among all suggests that administrators on behalf of the school not only value and understand the demands of the teaching profession but are also sensitive to the importance of teachers' well-being and spiritual formation. This situation is evident through our analyses that suggest schools with Sabbath policies are more likely to have teachers who agree that their administrators genuinely care about their spiritual health and growth. Lastly, schools that have Sabbath policies might create a more congruent environment not only for their teachers but also for their students. This congruent environment in schools with Sabbath policies can encourage teachers to cultivate their spiritual practices because the school culture supports their personal beliefs through policies that schools implement.

While our study provides initial evidence regarding the relationship between Sabbath policies and teachers' religious practices, this study does not directly delve into the mechanism behind this relationship. Therefore, future studies should explore this specific mechanism and investigate the particular content of Sabbath policies that effectively influence teachers' religious practices. In addition, while we understand that this study relies on the self-reported responses from teachers that is might susceptible to bias correlational in nature – we cannot draw some causal relationship between Sabbath policies and teachers' religious practices, we hope that this initial evidence might provide a more precise understanding of this uncharted topic of Sabbath observance, Sabbath policies and teachers' religious practices in Christian schools.

Further research is needed to understand Sabbath-keeping in Christian schools more fully. Our study examines teacher perceptions of school policies related to the Sabbath but cannot speak to particular policies a school may have in place. Further research may consider examining specific policies such as scheduling events on the Sabbath or explicitly communicating expectations and their relationship to relevant outcomes. Our study examines the relationship between school policies and various teacher outcomes. Future research may also consider examining the relationship between school policies and institutional-level outcomes and markers of school culture.

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Tables

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics

	n	Mean	SD	Min	Max
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Demographics					
Female	960	0.81	0.40	0	1
Now Married	957	0.84	0.36	0	1
Current Role					
Early Education	982	0.10	0.30	0	1
Elementary School	982	0.44	0.50	0	1
Middle School	982	0.36	0.48	0	1
High School	982	0.41	0.49	0	1
Multiple Levels	982	0.24	0.43	0	1
Educational Attainment					
High School Diploma, Associate's, Trade School	981	0.04	0.19	0	1
Bachelor's	981	0.61	0.49	0	1
Master's, Education Specialist, Doctorate	981	0.35	0.48	0	1
Degree in Education (any)	982	0.57	0.50	0	1
Teaching Experience					
Years in current school	982	6.94	7.33	1	41
Years in any school	982	14.11	10.42	1	49
School with Sabbath policies	982	0.41	0.49	0	1

Table 2. Instrumentation

	n	Mean	SD	Min	Max	% "Strongly Agree"
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Attend religious services several times a week	982	0.18	0.38	0	1	
Memorizing Scripture is an ongoing part of my life	982	3.50	0.95	1	5	13%
School administrators genuinely care about my spiritual health	982	4.05	0.81	1	5	29%
School administrators support my spiritual growth	982	4.05	0.75	1	5	26%
Our school has policies in place to help staff honor the Sabbath	982	3.40	1.05	1	5	16%

Table 3. Main results

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
PANEL A. Memorizing Scripture is an ongoing part of my life.					
Sabbath	0.05*	0.05*	0.05*	0.05*	0.05*
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Constant	0.11***	0.09***	0.12***	0.15***	0.16***
	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)
<i>n</i>	982	946	946	945	945
PANEL B. Attend religious services several times a week.					
Sabbath	0.07**	0.07**	0.07**	0.07**	0.07**
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Constant	0.15***	0.11**	0.11**	0.12*	0.11*
	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
<i>n</i>	982	946	946	945	945
PANEL C. School administrators genuinely care about my spiritual health.					
Sabbath	0.15***	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***	0.16***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Constant	0.23***	0.24***	0.28***	0.27***	0.28***
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
<i>n</i>	982	946	945	945	945
<i>F</i> -statistic	26.33	8.56	3.05	3.05	2.68
PANEL D. School administrators support my spiritual growth.					
Sabbath	0.18***	0.17***	0.17***	0.17***	0.17***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Constant	0.25***	0.25***	0.27***	0.25***	0.24***
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.06)
<i>n</i>	982	946	946	945	945
Controls					
Demographics		X	X	X	X
Current Role			X	X	X
Educational Attainment				X	X
Teaching Experience					X

Notes. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses. Asterisks indicate statistical significance, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Table 4. Sensitivity analysis

Instrument:	School Mean \geq	School Mean Top	School Mean Top	Individual Response
	3.5	Tercile	Quartile	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
PANEL A. Memorizing Scripture is an ongoing part of my life.				
Sabbath	0.05* (0.02)	0.06* (0.02)	0.06* (0.03)	0.07*** (0.01)
Constant	0.11*** (0.01)	0.11*** (0.01)	0.11*** (0.01)	-0.10* (0.04)
PANEL B. Attend religious services several times a week.				
Sabbath	0.07** (0.03)	0.10*** (0.03)	0.08** (0.03)	0.04** (0.01)
Constant	0.15*** (0.01)	0.15*** (0.01)	0.16*** (0.01)	0.03 (0.04)
PANEL C. School administrators genuinely care about my spiritual health.				
Sabbath	0.15*** (0.03)	0.12*** (0.03)	0.08* (0.04)	0.12*** (0.01)
Constant	0.23*** (0.02)	0.25*** (0.02)	0.27*** (0.02)	-0.12* (0.05)
PANEL D. School administrators support my spiritual growth.				
Sabbath	0.18*** (0.03)	0.14*** (0.03)	0.11** (0.04)	0.15*** (0.01)
Constant	0.25*** (0.02)	0.27*** (0.02)	0.30*** (0.02)	-0.18** (0.05)
<i>n</i>	982	982	982	982

Notes. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses. Asterisks indicate statistical significance, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Figures

Figure 1. Joyplot of teachers' perceptions of school Sabbath policies

