

# A GOOD FIT

## How Matching Students and Schools by Religion Improves Academic Outcomes

Catherine Pakaluk and Nicholas Swanson | December 2021

### Key Points

- This study explores whether a “fit” between school and student matters for educational outcomes. It particularly evaluates whether religious schools provide any special advantage for students paired to schools of their same religion (matched students).
- Using US data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), this paper estimates a religious match effect through the difference in standardized test scores for matched students, after controlling for other variables.
- A *match effect* is a finding that a school has a positive effect for particular students only, or that one aspect of its excellence is dependent on being matched with the right students. This is separate from the *general effect* experienced by all students who study at a school.
- There are statistically significant advantages for such matched pairings. Matched students in the NLSY97 outperformed unmatched peers in raw comparisons by 14 to 19 percentile points. After controlling for other sources of variation, such as household income and family structure, matched students in the NLSY97 outperformed their unmatched peers by 5 to 9 percentile points. In both independent Catholic and independent non-Catholic religious schools, matched students outperformed unmatched students by a sizable margin.
- These findings suggest that educational pluralism may be productive: matching religious students to religious schools that are a “good fit” may lead to better outcomes and create particular value for them, their own faith community, and society in general. A public-policy environment that allows for such pairing may be in the public’s best interest and should be further explored.

---

**CARDUS**

CONTACT

Lisa Richmond  
Vice President, Research  
tel: 905-528-8866 x 135  
lrichmond@cardus.ca

CARDUS.CA

For the full publication, see Pakaluk, Catherine and Nicholas Swanson. “Humanizing Criminal Records: Toward a View of the Whole Human Person.” Cardus, 2021. <https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/a-good-fit/>.