The Measure of Thanks

Connecting Schooling, Gratitude, and Life Outcomes

Lynn Swaner, Albert Cheng, and Jonathan Eckert | November 2025

Key Points

- Since 2011, the Cardus Education Survey (CES) examines a range of outcomes for a nationally representative sample of adults aged 24 to 39 who attended traditional public schools, Protestant schools, Catholic schools, nonreligious independent schools, or were homeschooled. To isolate the school-sector effect, the CES controls for graduates' background demographics.
- The 2023 CES iteration reveals that US graduates of independent religious schools and homeschooling report higher levels of gratitude than do their public school counterparts, though this difference is reduced after controlling for respondents' background characteristics.
- Regardless of school sector, graduates who did not grow up in material poverty, who are female, or who grew up in a religious home were more likely to report higher levels of gratitude.
- A significant body of research has suggested that gratitude is linked with other positive outcomes, such as greater life satisfaction, stronger relationships, increased proclivity toward prosocial behaviors, and better mental health. The CES data support these wider findings, with graduates who report higher levels of thankfulness also reporting more positive outcomes in these areas.
- The CES findings reveal that the habits of heart and mind formed during the K–12 years can extend into adulthood, shaping how individuals engage in civic life and respond to the needs of others. These findings underscore gratitude as a lasting virtue that can be meaningfully cultivated through the formal schooling years.

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