

# The Difference a School Makes

## 2026 Cardus Education Survey Findings for Canada

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November 2026

A Cardus Research Report

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## How to Cite

DeJong VanHof, Joanna, Lynn E. Swaner, and Albert Cheng. "The Difference a School Makes: 2026 Cardus Education Survey Findings for Canada." Cardus, 2026. https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/the-difference-a-school-makes.

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## About Cardus Education

Cardus Education exists to cultivate education for the common good and convene education leaders, through original research and policy studies on educational pluralism, excellence in education, and graduate outcomes.

## Key Points

- The Cardus Education Survey (CES), conducted in Canada in 2012, 2016, 2018, and now in 2026, examines a range of outcomes for a nationally representative sample of 3,070 high school graduates aged 24 to 39 across the four largest Canadian educational sectors: language-majority public schools, language-minority public schools, Catholic public schools, and independent schools. The CES controls for a range of respondents' demographic background characteristics in order to allow for estimating school effects —meaning, the difference that attending a specific kind of school makes.
- The CES asks respondents about a holistic range of academic, spiritual, cultural, civic, and relational outcomes, as well as their life patterns, views, and choices, and their contribution to a shared good. This report provides an overview of key findings for each of the sectors.
- Canadian independent schools produce graduates that consistently demonstrate outcomes equal to or greater than their public-education counterparts, including their overall high school experience and preparedness for future education and work. They also evidence elevated rates of volunteering and charitable giving, suggesting that these schools are contributing to the common-good outcomes necessary for life together in a pluralistic society.
- Graduates of language-minority public schools, often smaller in size and community-oriented, demonstrate statistically significant positive outcomes—particularly when it comes the strength of personal relationships and to community orientation. The CES findings for these graduates point to positive outcomes that policymakers should consider within a bilingual country.
- Apart from faith formation, Catholic public school graduates reported below-average outcomes in almost all areas. In prior iterations of the CES, the outcomes for this sector were generally indistinguishable from other public school graduates. Further research is needed to fully understand this phenomenon, though possible explanations are considered in this report.

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# Introduction

The history of education in Canada is deeply related to its founding as a country. Canada's 1867 Constitution has been described as a negotiated settlement between those loyal to the British crown, including American Loyalists fleeing the revolution, and French Catholics in Lower Canada (now Quebec). Distinct not only by language and religion but also in culture, the country was formed with explicit accommodations for language-minority and religious rights in education. As more provinces joined Confederation, these provisions influenced the structure of education of each province in turn, and to varying degrees.

In *Learning to School: Federalism and Public Schooling in Canada*, scholar Jennifer Wallner argues that across Canada, K–12 education is a remarkably similar enterprise. Despite provincial autonomy over education and the lack of any federal department of education, much of education policy and the overall structure of public education systems, such as taxation policy and funding mechanisms, ministerial responsibility and civic trusteeship, and teacher education programs, looks similar to one another regardless of province.[1]

These general similarities in policy and structure are counterbalanced by the question of Canada's diversity, and the pluralistic landscape of education that has emerged. Provincial autonomy over education has meant that the accommodation of language-minority and religion in education has played out differently across the country.[2] Language-minority school systems, and in some provinces the inclusion of Catholic (separate) school systems within public (district) education, is one result. As well, in all provinces except for Ontario and the Atlantic provinces, this accommodation includes the provision of public funds for independent schools, both religious and non-religious. Education in Canadian provinces, therefore, exhibits a high degree of educational pluralism.[3]

Does educational pluralism produce positive or negative outcomes? Does it contribute to increased social cohesion, or detract from it? These questions continue to plague public debate among educators, policymakers, and public and independent school advocates across the country. The data in this report suggest that educational pluralism is a national benefit in both public and

### School Types

**Language-majority public schools**
English public schools in all provinces except Quebec; French public schools in Quebec.

**Language-minority public schools**
French public schools in all provinces except Quebec; English public schools in Quebec.

**Catholic (separate) public schools**
This name reflects the fact that separate schools are usually Catholic, but there are some provinces in which Protestant (separate) public schools may exist (Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario).

**Independent schools**
Distinct from public schools in ownership and operation, financing, and governance. Most independent schools offer an education targeted to specific types of students or based on a specific curriculum or pedagogy. Independent schools may be Catholic, Protestant, other religious, or non-religious.

**Other Type of School**
Schools that do not fit any of the four categories above, such as homeschooling, public alternative school, and public charter school.

1 Wallner, *Learning To School*, ch. 4. Complete citations are provided for all sources at the end of this report.

2 Farney and Banack, *Faith, Rights, and Choice*.

3 DeJong VanHof, "Three Pillars"; DeJong VanHof and Ko, "School's Out."

independent education sectors and has a positive impact on graduate outcomes. In particular, independent schools across the country demonstrate an increased likelihood of contributing positively to the common good. While different school sectors may have distinctive goals for their educational programs, all contribute to preparing students for shared life in a democracy.[4]

Research has consistently demonstrated differing patterns in outcomes by educational sector.[5] The Cardus Education Survey (CES) was previously conducted in Canada in 2012, 2014, and 2018. Now in 2026, the updated survey examines a range of outcomes for a nationally representative sample of high school graduates aged 24 to 39 across the four largest Canadian educational sectors: language-majority public schools, language-minority public schools, Catholic public schools, and independent schools.[6]

The CES seeks to understand the effect that different school sectors have on a range of academic, spiritual, cultural, civic, and relational outcomes for graduates, as well as assess graduates' life patterns, views, choices and their contribution to a shared good. In addition to including questions about respondents' personal values, the 2026 iteration of the CES Canada incorporated the Flourishing Measure, a validated instrument developed by the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University.[7] In analyzing responses in all of these areas, the CES controls for a range of respondents' demographic background characteristics in order to allow for estimating school effects—meaning, the difference that attending a specific kind of school makes.

Notably, the 2026 CES Canada is the first administration of the CES after the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic certainly affected the lives of respondents, but due to their age at the time of the survey (ages 24 to 39), most were not in high school during the pandemic. Thus, while future administrations of the CES will be able to speak to the experiences of students in different sectors during the pandemic, this 2026 iteration does not.

This report, which provides a summary of CES findings across the school sectors and outcomes measured, is structured as follows. First, an overview of survey methods is provided. Next, results related to graduates' perceptions of their high school experiences are shared. This is followed by a presentation of results for five groupings of outcomes: educational attainment and employment, civic formation, flourishing (including mental health and well-being), faith formation, and family formation. A final discussion section reviews sector-specific highlights and overall insights from this administration of the CES.

4 Casagrande, Pennings, and Sikkink, "Rethinking Public Education," 3.

5 See Hamlin and Cheng, "Parental Empowerment"; Chen et al., "School Types in Adolescence"; Shakeel et al., "The Public Purposes of Private Education"; Foreman, "Educational Attainment Effects."

6 A separate report, "Faith and the Common Good: Outcomes of Canadian Independent Schooling," examines the differences in graduate outcomes for religious and non-religious independent schools.

7 VanderWeele, "On the Promotion of Human Flourishing."

# Survey Methods

This administration of the CES was conducted from January 16 to February 5, 2026, by the Angus Reid Group. Respondents could take the survey in English or in French. The target population is adults aged 24 through 39 who have completed their education through high school. Random sampling techniques were used to recruit survey respondents and create a nationally representative sample. Respondents from British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec were oversampled to conduct provincial-level analysis (these reports are forthcoming). Without such oversampling, there would be an insufficient sample size to do such analysis. Because of this oversampling, data are weighted accordingly so that the sample remains nationally representative. Survey weights were based on Canadian Census data about the gender distribution and population sizes of high school graduates for each province. These survey weights are incorporated in all computations so that the data can be interpreted as being nationally representative, unless otherwise stated.

## Sample

The sample size for this iteration of the CES was 3,070 respondents. Respondents indicated the sector and province in which they attended each year of their primary and secondary schooling. For each year, respondents indicated whether they attended an English public school, a French public school, a Catholic public school, an independent Catholic school, an independent Protestant school, another type of religious independent school, a non-religious independent school, an alternative school, a public charter school, or another type of school.[8] Respondents also indicated whether they were homeschooled for any of their primary and secondary schooling years.

The first column of table 1 lists the number of respondents who spent at least one year of their primary and secondary schooling in each sector. For instance, 1,870 respondents spent at least one school year in an English public school, representing about 60 percent of the population. Individuals who spent at least one year in an English public school spent almost all of their primary and secondary schooling in that sector—11.2 out of thirteen years, on average (including kindergarten). Meanwhile, about 5 percent of respondents spent at least one year in an independent Catholic or Protestant school, and those respondents spent nearly eight years

8 Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario have French Catholic public schools, which were not isolated for the purposes of this survey. Respondents were asked to select their attendance based on the school's language or religion, not both. Therefore, it is possible that the language-minority responses include respondents who attended French Catholic schools.

in that respective sector. Statistics for the respondents who spent at least one year in the other educational sectors are displayed in the rest of table 1.[9]

**Table 1. K–12 Schooling Experience, CES Results**

| Sector | Number of respondents who spent at least one year in the sector (unweighted) | Percentage of respondents who spent at least one year in the sector (weighted to reflect Canadian population) | Average number of years spent in the sector (conditional on spending at least one year in the sector) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Language-majority public school** | **1,870** | **59.7%** | **11.2** |
| **Language-minority public school** | **526** | **19.2%** | **10.8** |
| **Catholic public school** | **602** | **19.0%** | **10.2** |
| **Independent school** | **598** | **20.0%** | **7.7** |
| Catholic school | 164 | 5.7% | 7.8 |
| Protestant school | 164 | 5.2% | 7.9 |
| Other religious school | 54 | [1] | 7.9 |
| Non-religious school | 216 | 7.3% | 7.3 |
| **Other type of school**[2] | **270** | **9.6%** | **8.6** |
| Homeschool | 88 | [1] | 6.3 |

*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) Microdata.

*Note*: N=3,070; sum exceeds the number of respondents because many respondents attended more than one sector type during primary and secondary school.

[1] For n<100, we have refrained from making any population claims, because small sample sizes can produce unreliable results.

[2] "Other type of school" includes respondents who selected Catholic public alternative school, Protestant public alternative school, Non-religious public alternative school, Public charter school, or Other type of school.

9 Canadian provinces differ slightly in the years included in secondary schooling. To resolve this issue, the survey asked respondents to indicate the sector in which they attended grades nine through twelve. If respondents attended the same sector for three or four years (which would indicate a clear majority of that time) they are categorized as being attendees of that sector. However, there were cases in which there was no clear majority. First, if respondents attended the same sector for two years and two different sectors for the remaining two years (one year each), they were categorized as having attended the sector they attended for two years. Second, if respondents attended two different sectors for the same amount of time, they were categorized in such a way as to maximize the sample size—and hence, statistical power—of school sectors that were smaller. In those cases, we prioritized increasing the sample size of the sectors in the following order: independent Protestant schools, independent Catholic schools, non-religious independent schools, French-speaking public schools, and Catholic (separate) public schools. Respondents who attended four different sectors for a single year are categorized as having attended an "other type of school."

Information about how each of the sectors is composed from survey responses is shown in table 2. Unsurprisingly, the majority of 24- to 39-year-olds attended a language-majority public school (60.4 percent). Trailing behind, by order of greatest to least, are Catholic public schools, independent schools, language-minority schools, and other types of schools. Notably, respondents who attended Catholic public schools primarily attended in Alberta, Saskatchewan, or Ontario, which are the provinces that publicly fund a separate Catholic school sector.

Changes to Quebec education policy in 1997 and 2008 removed Catholic schools from public education systems. Now Catholic education is still funded but in a different way, as independent religious schools. This shift in policy may explain the twelve Quebec respondents, whose age was on the upper end of the survey parameters. The two respondents in British Columbia and three in the Atlantic provinces are likely due to response error, if respondents identified their current province rather than the province in which they attended high school.

**Table 2. Provincial Composition of School Sectors (Grades 9–12), Based on Our Sample**

| | Language-majority public school | Language-minority public school | Catholic public school | Independent school | Other sector |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Overall** | | | | | |
| Respondents | 1873 | 193 | 446 | 359 | 199 |
| Weighted percent of population | 60.4 | 7.2 | 14.1 | 11.9 | 6.5 |
| **Sample size and percent of sample (unweighted)** | | | | | |
| Alberta | | | | | |
| N | 327 | 16 | 100 | 14 | 27 |
| % | 67.6 | 3.3 | 20.7 | 2.9 | 5.6 |
| British Columbia | | | | | |
| N | 330 | 15 | 2 | 54 | 13 |
| % | 79.7 | 3.6 | 0.5 | 13.0 | 3.1 |
| Manitoba | | | | | |
| N | 71 | 8 | 0 | 20 | 5 |
| % | 68.3 | 7.7 | 0.0 | 19.2 | 4.8 |
| Ontario | | | | | |
| N | 592 | 33 | 284 | 71 | 41 |
| % | 58.0 | 3.2 | 27.8 | 7.0 | 4.0 |
| Quebec | | | | | |
| N | 252 | 67 | 11 | 93 | 9 |
| % | 58.3 | 15.5 | 2.5 | 21.5 | 2.1 |

(*continued*)

**Table 2. (*continued*)**

| | Language-majority public school | Language-minority public school | Catholic public school | Independent school | Other sector |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Sample size and percent of sample (unweighted)** | | | | | |
| Saskatchewan | | | | | |
| N | 88 | 5 | 24 | 14 | 4 |
| % | 65.2 | 3.7 | 17.8 | 10.4 | 3.0 |
| Atlantic provinces | | | | | |
| N | 108 | 20 | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| % | 78.8 | 14.6 | 2.9 | 2.2 | 1.5 |

*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) Microdata.

*Notes*: 1. "Atlantic provinces" consists of New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. 2. The number of observations by province for a specific school sector does not add up to the number of observations overall because some respondents moved across provinces during grades 9–12. Respondents who moved across provinces are not counted as belonging to a single province.

## Presentation of Results

Two sets of results are presented. First, raw scores reflect outcomes across the school sectors without adjusting for demographic background characteristics. It is important to note, however, that these scores do not isolate the effect that each sector had on its graduates because they also reflect the effects of other variables that add statistical noise. Second, using linear regression techniques, school effect scores are presented. These aim to isolate the effect that each school sector had on its graduates by controlling for other variables, such as respondent's age, sex, religion, and childhood socioeconomic status.[10]

In other words, the regression models essentially adjust raw scores for the influence that the home and other formative life experiences potentially had on respondents, so that any observed differences between respondents across the school sectors are more reflective of the school's contribution to those outcomes. Our "school effect" results assume that influences outside of school sector have been adequately accounted for in the demographic variables included in the

10 Overall, the controls were: age, sex, religion, an indicator for the respondent growing up in poverty, an indicator for the respondent growing up in a two-parent home, an indicator for the respondent having a mom with a BA degree, and an indicator for the province(s) in which the respondent lived throughout high school. For religion, respondents were asked, "What was the primary religious identity that you were raised in, if any?" Those who selected the response option "atheist" or "no religion" were considered raised in a non-religious household.To gauge socioeconomic status, respondents were asked, "Growing up, what was the money situation at your home like?" Respondents who selected the response options "We didn't have enough money for bills and food," "We could pay some of our bills and food," or "We could pay most of our bills and food" were considered as living in poverty. Respondents who selected "We paid all of our bills, but didn't have enough for much more" or "We had plenty of money for our bills and other things we needed" were not considered as living in poverty.

models. While this cannot be guaranteed, the CES follows industry standards in accounting for these variables as much as is methodologically possible.

While this report notes all differences between sectors, not all findings are statistically significant. If a finding *is* statistically significant, it means that the observed result is not likely to have occurred by chance alone. The statistical significance of findings is noted throughout the report and in the figures.

For all figures presented, the language-majority public school average response is the baseline (at zero). This decision does not just reflect the reality that language-majority public schools are the largest educational sector in Canada. It also reflects the fact that language-majority public schools are the default schooling option for Canadian families, as these schools are fully funded by the government and, in most cases, students are automatically assigned to a specific school based on their place of residence. It follows that the remaining sectors are compared against the language-majority public school baseline.[11] Results for respondents in the "other sector" group are not presented; the small numbers of such respondents make it difficult to confidently draw conclusions about them.

Finally, many of the outcomes are measures obtained from Likert-scale responses, with some items having up to seven response options. Presenting the percentage of respondents from each school sector who selected each response option would result in an excessive amount of information and obscure the general picture that the data are revealing. To maximize clarity in the communication of results, Likert-scale response options are combined where possible.[12] The way that response options are grouped for a particular outcome is noted in each figure.

## Perceptions of High School

The CES measures graduates' perceptions of their high school experiences across a range of dimensions: the overall quality of the education they received, how well their schools prepared them for life after graduation, the quality of school relationships, and how their schools handled challenging topics.

When it comes to key findings in these areas, independent school graduates were comparatively more positive about their school experiences than graduates from other sectors. Graduates from language-minority public schools had comparable perceptions to those from language-majority

11 For the questions that specifically asked respondents about their experiences in high school, the following instructions were provided: "If you attended more than one high school, please consider the high school that you attended longest."

12 Three guiding principles were used in grouping responses. First, where response options flip meaning (for example, in the case of Likert items that have the response options "strongly disagree," "disagree," "slightly disagree," "slightly agree," "agree," and "strongly agree," the responses that expressed some level of agreement were grouped and separated from the ones that expressed some level of disagreement). Second, where items were adopted from other research studies, results are presented in the same way as in those studies (unless otherwise noted). And third (and more technically), in some cases, very few respondents selected particular response options, so a grouping decision was made in order to limit the amount of measurement error in the results and maximize the validity and precision of the results.

public schools. Graduates of Catholic public schools fall below all other sectors, in most of their ratings of their high school experiences. This section of the report unpacks the CES findings relative to graduates' perceptions of high school experiences by sector.[13]

## Overall Experience and Quality

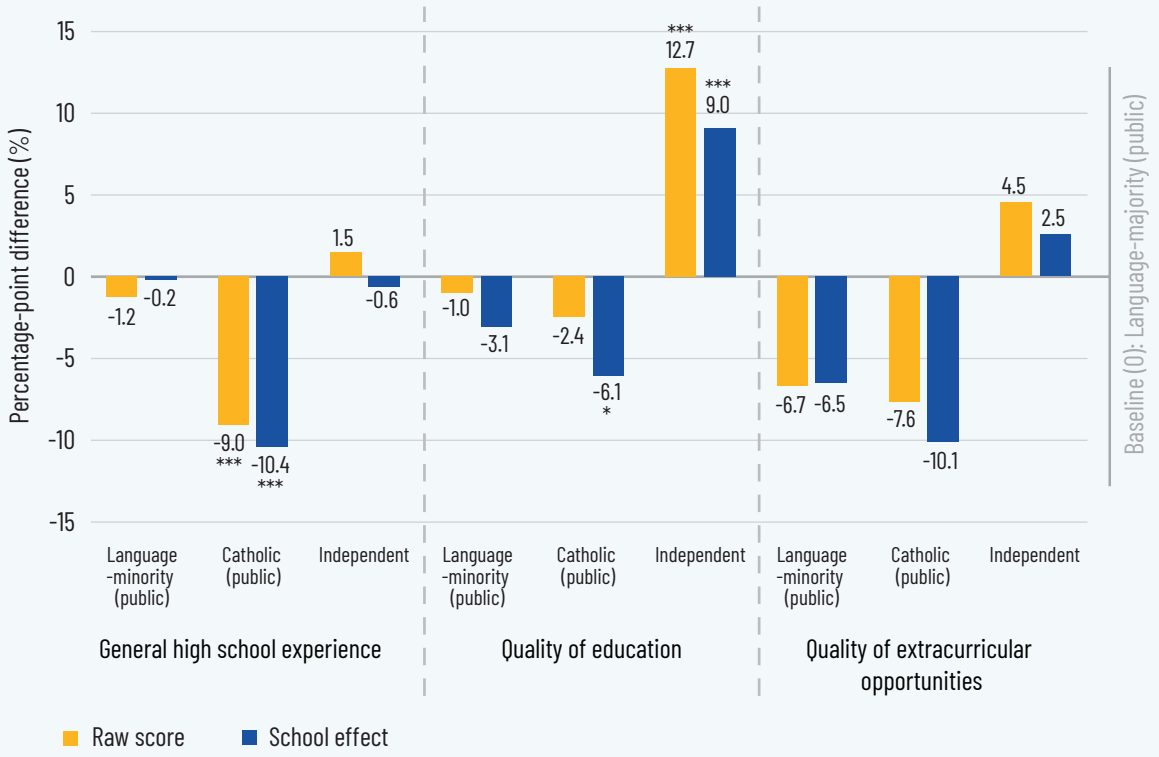
Three items assessed respondents' perceptions of the overall experience and quality of their high school education. The first item asked them to indicate how favourable they felt about their general high school experience. Just over 50 percent of graduates of language-majority schools, language-minority schools, and independent schools rated their overall high school experience "very favourably" or "favourably," even after adjusting for demographic background characteristics (figure 1). However, Catholic public school graduates were significantly less likely to describe their high school experience favourably. This finding is somewhat unexpected, since Catholic public schools are frequently considered high-quality schools by families choosing between different public sectors. The CES measures perception, and it is possible that those who exercised this choice within public systems had higher educational expectations to begin with, which were then unmet. We explore possible reasons for the outcomes for Catholic public school graduates further in the discussion section of this report.

The second item asked respondents to rate the overall quality of their high school education. Even when accounting for demographic background factors, the majority of graduates viewed the quality of education that they received as favourable or very favourable (ranging from 50.4 percent for Catholic public schools to 65.5 percent for independent schools). That being said, both language-minority public school graduates and Catholic public school graduates were somewhat less likely to select "very favourably" or "favourably" than language-majority public school graduates, and graduates of independent schools were significantly more likely to rate positively the quality of education received at their schools than graduates of all other sectors (figure 1). A possible reason for this is that "quality" is multifaceted, such that one could perceive quality in this context as an education that aligns with one's values and goals, which can include but is not limited to academic, religious, or pedagogical values and goals. As independent schools tend to provide a more targeted education experience, it follows that if an individual attends a specific independent school due to its focus on a value or goal, and the school is successful at achieving its mission, then a high quality of education can be perceived.

Third, the CES asked respondents to rate the quality of the extracurricular opportunities at their school. While 49.9 percent of language-majority public school graduates rated their extracurricular opportunities very favourably or favourably, language-minority public school graduates and Catholic public school graduates were less likely to do so. Only independent school graduates were slightly higher in their rating of their schools' extracurricular activities, as seen in figure 1.

13 As noted earlier, for all figures presented in this report, the language-majority public school average response is the baseline, at zero.

**Figure 1. Overall High School Experience and Quality, Respondents Selecting "Very Favourably" or "Favourably"**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Very favourably" or "Favourably" is in parentheses: "How favourably or unfavourably did you feel about your high school experience in general?" (52.1%); "How favourably or unfavourably did you feel about the quality of education received?" (56.5%); "How favourably or unfavourably did you feel about the extracurricular offerings at the school?" (49.9%). 2. Possible responses were "Very favourably," "Favourably," "Slightly favourably," "Slightly unfavourably," "Unfavourably," or "Very unfavourably."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

## Preparation for Life

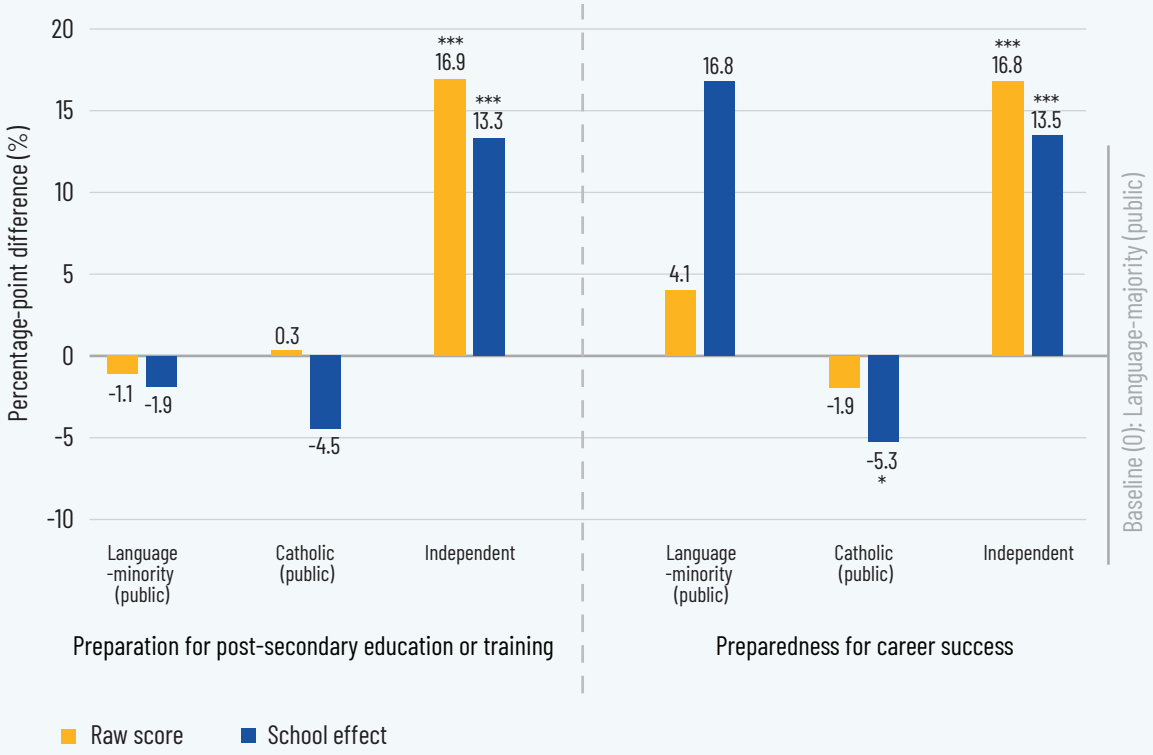
The CES asked respondents to rate how well their high schools prepared them for life. Beyond preparing students for post-secondary education or success in a career, the CES also asked respondents to rate how their high schools prepared them relationally and spiritually.

After accounting for demographic background differences, when it came to preparation for academic success in post-secondary education or training, graduates of language-minority public schools and Catholic public school graduates were somewhat less likely to select “exceptionally well” or “very well,” compared with language-majority public school graduates. Graduates of independent schools, however, were significantly more likely than respondents from all other sectors to say their schools prepared them for academic success in post-secondary education or

training—even after controlling for demographic characteristics such as family socioeconomic status (figure 2).[14]

When assessing preparedness for success in a job or career, only independent school graduates were significantly more likely to say their schools prepared them exceptionally or very well. Language-minority public school graduates expressed similar sentiments, although their results were not statistically significant. In contrast, Catholic public school graduates were significantly less likely to feel well prepared, with just 21.7 percent reporting that their schools prepared them exceptionally or very well, after accounting for demographic background characteristics (figure 2).

**Figure 2. Post-Secondary and Career Preparedness, Respondents Selecting "Exceptionally Well" or "Very Well"**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Exceptionally well" or "Very well" is in parentheses: "How well would you say that your high school prepared you for academic success in post-secondary education or training?" (40.5%); "How well would you say that your high school prepared you for success in a job or career?" (27.0%). 2. Possible responses were "It prepared me exceptionally well," "It prepared me very well," "It prepared me somewhat well," "It did not prepare me very well," and "It did not prepare me well at all."

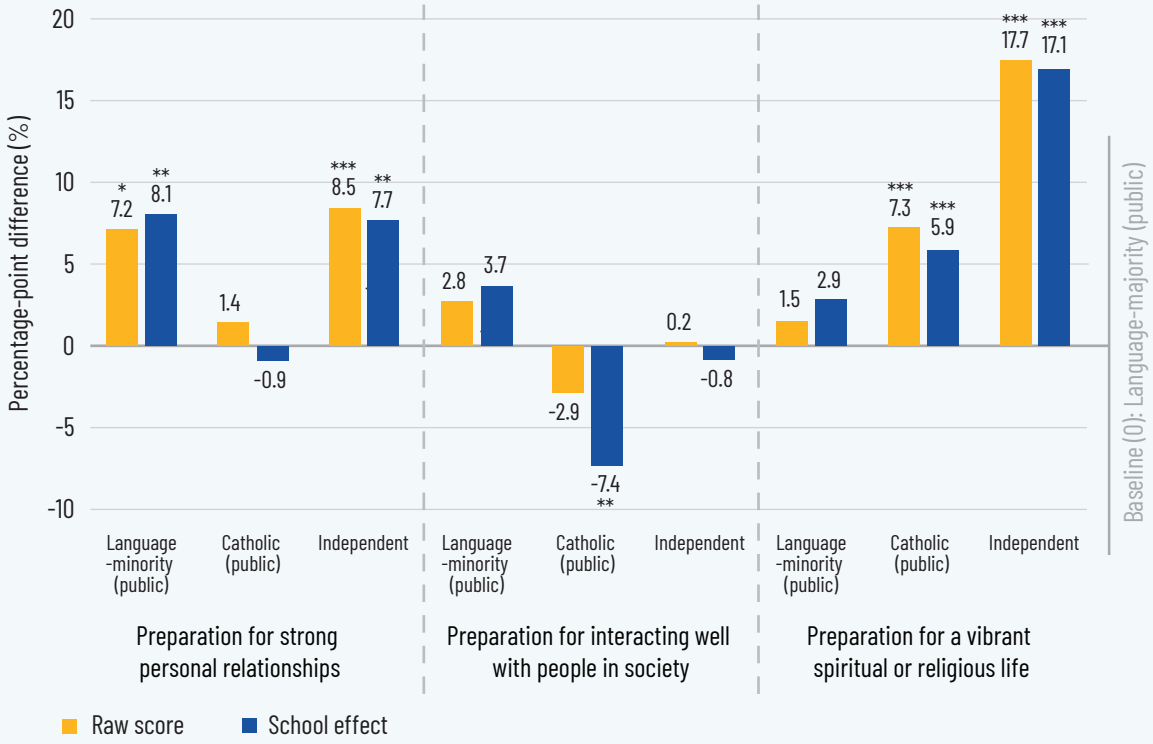
*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

14 See Pakaluk and Swanson, "A Good Fit," for a discussion of the boost to academic scores found for students whose religious background matches that of the school they attend.

Graduates of both language-minority and independent schools were significantly more likely to say their schools prepared them well for strong personal relationships (figure 3). This outcome may reflect the nature of smaller schools and community-oriented schooling, which are shared features of the language-minority and independent schooling contexts.

As for how well schools prepared their students for interacting with the range of people in society, graduates of language-minority public schools and independent schools were statistically no different from their language-majority public school peers. Graduates of Catholic public schools, however, were significantly less likely to say their schools prepared them exceptionally or very well in that respect, with just 28.1 percent reporting that, after accounting for demographic background characteristics (figure 3).

**Figure 3. Relational and Spiritual Preparedness, Respondents Selecting "Exceptionally Well" or "Very Well"**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Exceptionally well" or "Very well" is in parentheses: "How well would you say that your high school prepared you for strong personal relationships?" (31.0%); "How well would you say that your high school prepared you for interacting well with the range of people in the society around you?" (35.5%); "How well would you say that your high school prepared you for vibrant spiritual or religious life?" (8.7%). 2. Possible responses were "It prepared me exceptionally well," "It prepared me very well," "It prepared me somewhat well," "It did not prepare me very well," and "It did not prepare me well at all.""

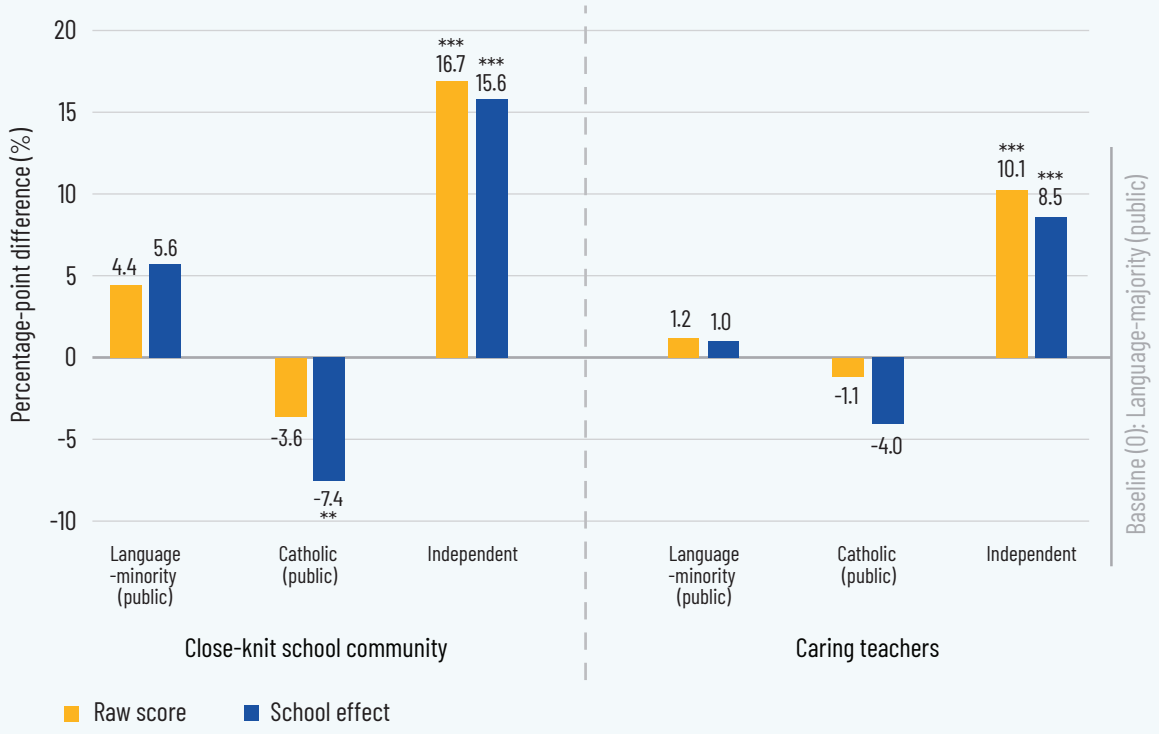
*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

When it comes to preparation for a vibrant spiritual or religious life, only 8.7 percent of language-majority public school graduates reported that their schools prepared them exceptionally or very well (figure 3). Graduates of all other sectors were more likely than their language-majority school peers to report that their schools prepared them exceptionally or very well. However, the findings were only statistically significant for graduates of Catholic public schools and independent schools, with the latter the strongest by far. This is perhaps unsurprising given the focus on spiritual formation in religious independent schools.[15]

## School Relationships

The CES asked respondents to characterize the level of social connectedness in their high school. After adjusting for demographic background characteristics, sizeable differences were noted between language-majority public school graduates and Catholic public school graduates, with

**Figure 4. School Community and Caring Teachers, Respondents Selecting "Strongly Agree" or "Agree"**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Strongly agree" or "Agree" is in parentheses: "My school was a close-knit community" (43.9%); "The teachers really cared about the students" (67.7%). 2. Possible responses were "Strongly agree," "Agree," "Neither agree nor disagree," "Disagree," and "Strongly disagree."

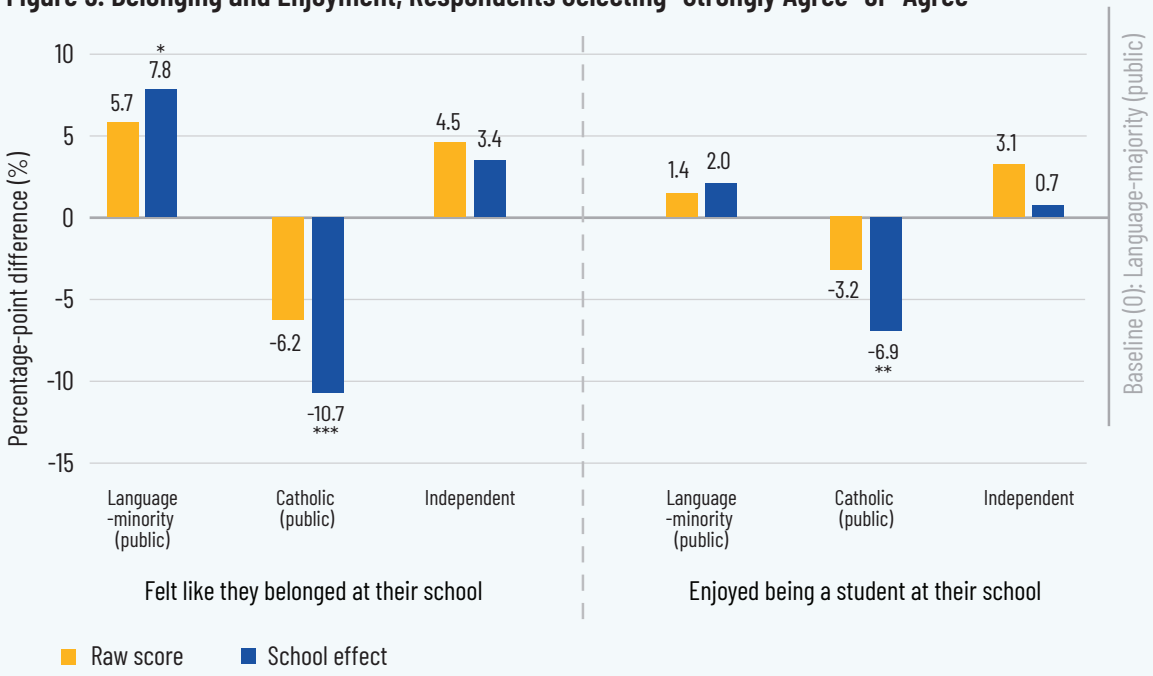
*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

15 A separate report, "Faith and the Common Good: Outcomes of Canadian Independent Schooling," examines the differences between graduate outcomes for religious and non-religious independent schools.

the latter significantly less likely to say they felt their school was a close-knit community and less likely (though not at a significant level) to say that their teachers cared about students. The inverse was true for independent school graduates, who were significantly more likely to be positive about both of these dynamics. Meanwhile, language-minority school graduates were about the same as their language-majority public school peers on both measures (figure 4).

After adjusting for demographic background characteristics, graduates of language-minority public schools and independent schools were significantly more likely to strongly agree or agree with the statement "I feel like I belonged at my school," and slightly more likely to strongly agree or agree with the statement "I enjoyed being a student at my school," than graduates all other sectors, though at a statistically significant level only for the first (belonging). Graduates of Catholic public schools were significantly less likely to strongly agree or agree with those statements (figure 5).

**Figure 5. Belonging and Enjoyment, Respondents Selecting "Strongly Agree" or "Agree"**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

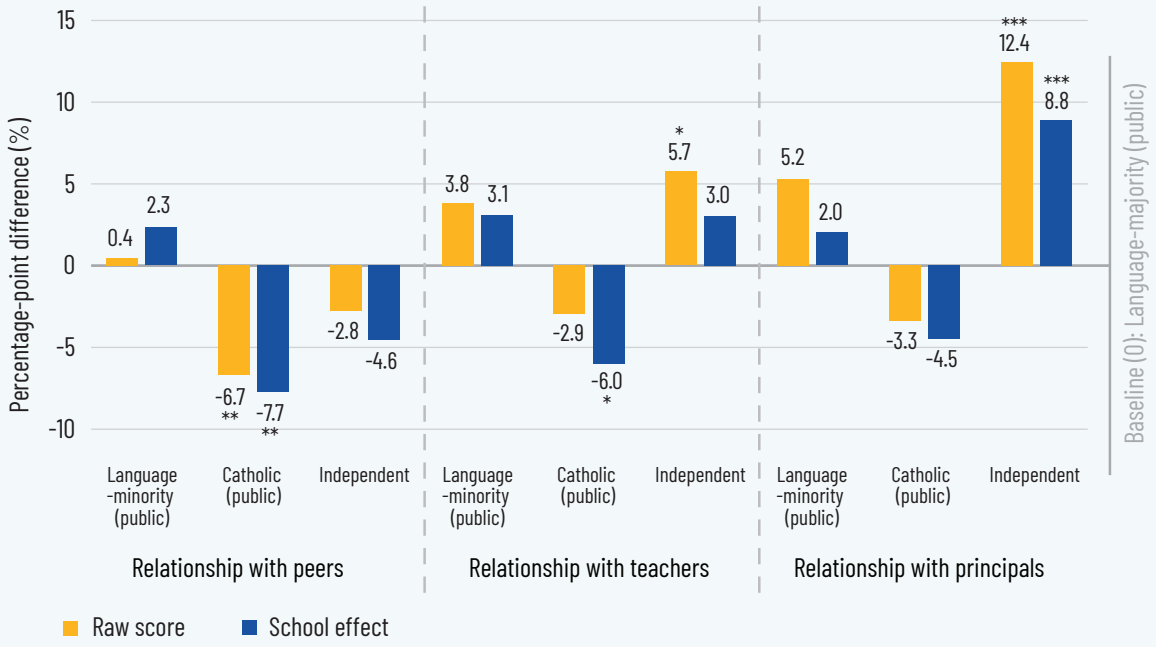
*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Strongly agree" or "Agree" is in parentheses: "I felt like I belonged at my school" (53.9%); "I enjoyed being a student at my school" (62.7%). 2. Possible responses were "Strongly agree," "Agree," "Neither agree nor disagree," "Disagree," and "Strongly disagree."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

The same was the case for graduates' ratings of their relationships with teachers and with school principals. Ratings were more likely to be favourable for graduates of language-minority public schools and independent school graduates (figure 6). As with the outcomes discussed above, these results may reflect smaller school size and community-oriented schooling.

The pattern was different, however, when it came to graduates' ratings of their relationships with their peers. Statistically speaking, there was little difference between graduates of language-minority public schools and those of language-majority public schools. Independent school graduates were less likely to feel favourably about their peer relationships, though not to a statistically significant degree. Catholic public school graduates were the only ones who were statistically different from their counterparts from language-majority public schools, in being less likely to give a favourable rating of relationships with peers (figure 6).

**Figure 6. Relationships with Peers and Staff at School, Respondents Selecting "Very Favourably" or "Favourably"**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

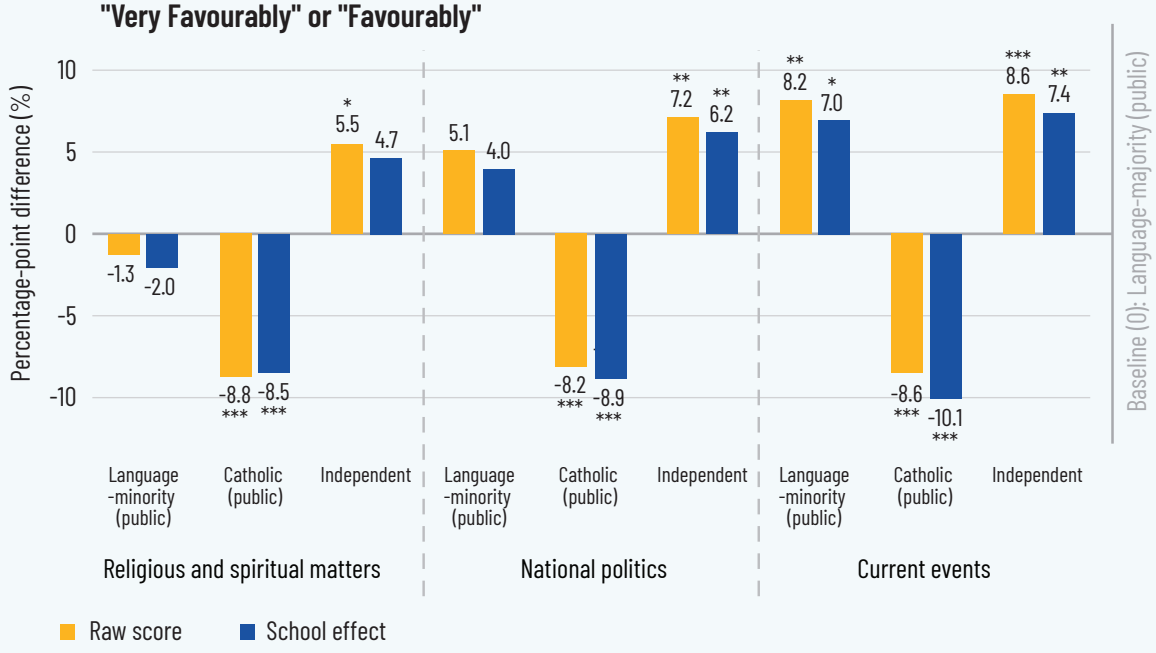
*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Very favourably" or "Favourably" is in parentheses: "How favourably or unfavourably did you feel about your relationship with other students at the school?" (51.1%); "How favourably or unfavourably did you feel about your relationship with teachers?" (58.0%); "How favourably or unfavourably did you feel about your relationship with your school principals?" (32.2%). 2. Possible responses were "Very favourably," "Favourably," "Slightly favourably," "Slightly unfavourably," "Unfavourably," and "Very unfavourably."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

## Challenging Topics

Respondents also rated how well they thought their school handled challenging topics such as religious and spiritual matters, national politics, and current events. Graduates from the independent school sector were more likely than all their public school counterparts to provide a favourable rating on the way their school handled religious and spiritual matters, which reflects the religious commitments of a high proportion of these schools. In rating how well their school handled national politics and current events, independent school graduates were the most likely to respond favourably or very favourably, with language-minority public schools surpassing language-majority public schools as well. Catholic public school graduates were statistically less likely to rate their school favourably in all three of these topics (figure 7).

**Figure 7. Schools Handling Challenging Topics, Respondents Selecting "Very Favourably" or "Favourably"**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Very favourably" or "Favourably" is in parentheses: "How favourably or unfavourably did you feel about the way your school handled religious and spiritual matters?" (34.9%); "How favourably or unfavourably did you feel about the way your school handled issues in national politics?" (31.2%); "How favourably or unfavourably did you feel about the way your school handled current events?" (36.2%). 2. Possible responses were "Very favourably," "Favourably," "Slightly favourably," "Slightly unfavourably," "Unfavourably," and "Very unfavourably."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

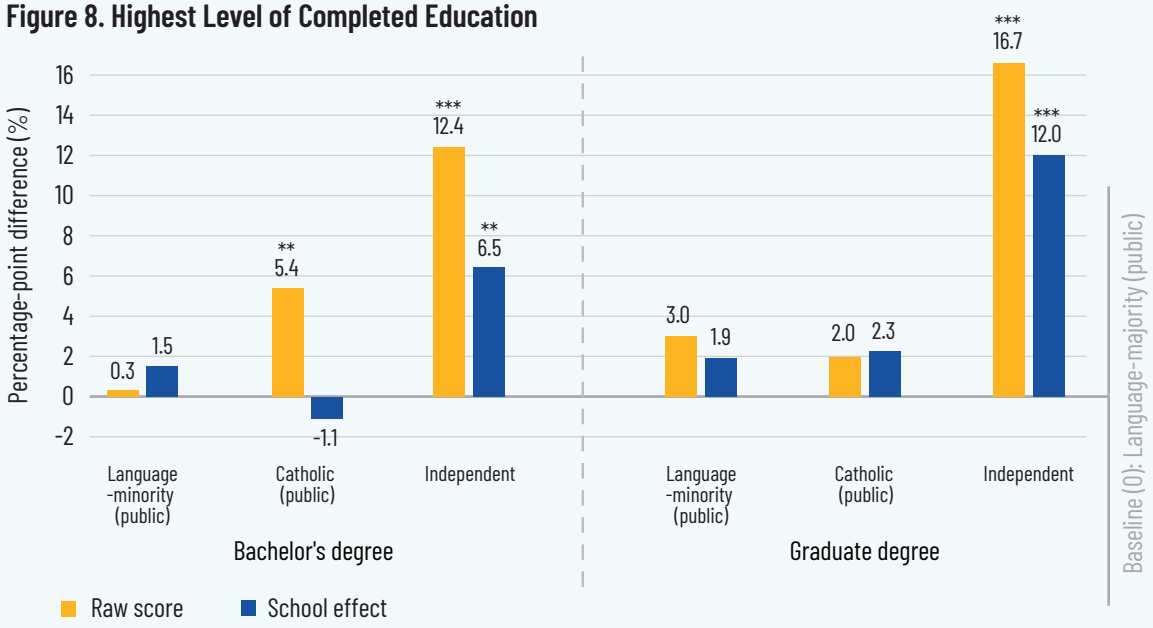
# Educational Attainment and Employment Outcomes

Postsecondary degree attainment and improved economic outcomes are typical expectations of K–12 education. The CES measures educational attainment, income, and employment outcomes of graduates. In terms of key findings in this domain, attending an independent school is correlated with a greater likelihood of attaining a bachelor's and graduate degree. That these differences are likely influenced by factors other than the school—such as family socioeconomic status and/or educational attainment of graduates' parents—is true for all respondents. Controlling for demographic background characteristics reduces those differences for respondents in all schools—notably eliminating statistical significance for Catholic public school respondents who have completed a Bachelor's degree.

## Educational Attainment

Independent school graduates have the highest levels of degree attainment compared to other sectors, at statistically significant levels. This is true both for attaining a bachelor's degree and for attaining a graduate degree. Respondents from Catholic public schools are more likely than those from other public schools to have at least a bachelor's degree. Yet those differences are likely due to the influence of factors other than the school—such as family socioeconomic status and/or educational attainment of graduates' parents—since controlling for demographic background characteristics reduces those differences to only a few percentage points and thus the school-effect scores are not statistically significant (figure 8).

**Figure 8. Highest Level of Completed Education**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Note*: Respondents were asked "What is your highest level of completed education?" The corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students is in parentheses: Respondents with a bachelor's degree (64.2%); Respondents with a graduate degree (19.7%).

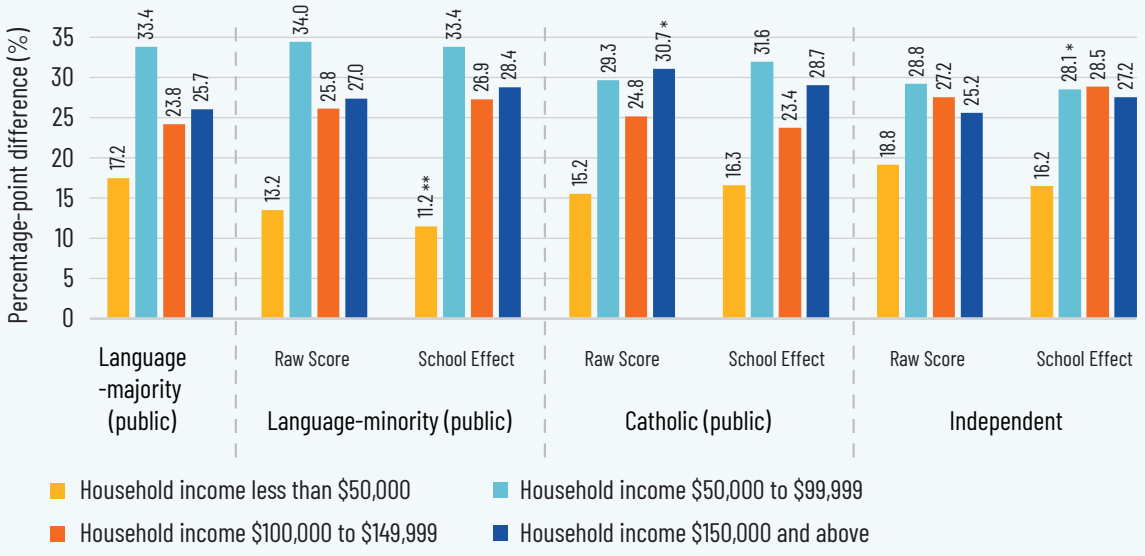
*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

## Income

The connection between educational attainment and income has been repeatedly demonstrated in economic research, with earnings generally higher for workers with more education. Given the higher rates of educational attainment among respondents from independent schools compared to the other sectors, one might expect higher incomes as well. However, the results displayed in figure 9 do not provide such evidence. Figure 9 shows the income distribution divided into four categories: less than $50,000; $50,000 to $99,999; $100,000 to $149,999; and $150,000 and above. While the proportion of respondents across each school sector in each of those income categories is overall very similar, it is notable that independent school graduates were somewhat less likely to report incomes between $50,000 and $100,000, and slightly more likely to report incomes between $100,000 and $150,000, though not at a statistically significant level. When accounting for demographic background differences, 56.6 percent of independent school graduates reported an income level between $50,000 and $150,000, which is almost identical to the average language-majority public school graduate, 57.2 percent of whom reported incomes in this bracket. For all sectors, income level remains roughly the same regardless of adjustment or non-adjustment of demographic characteristics.

In addition to income levels, the CES incorporated questions from the Flourishing Measure. After controlling for demographic background characteristics, graduates of all sectors were more likely to report being rarely worried or not ever worried about meeting monthly living expenses, as compared with their language-majority public school peers (figure 10). The same was true when respondents were asked how often they worry about safety, food, and housing. These findings were not statistically significant, however, which suggests that the results may be due more to chance or factors other than school type.

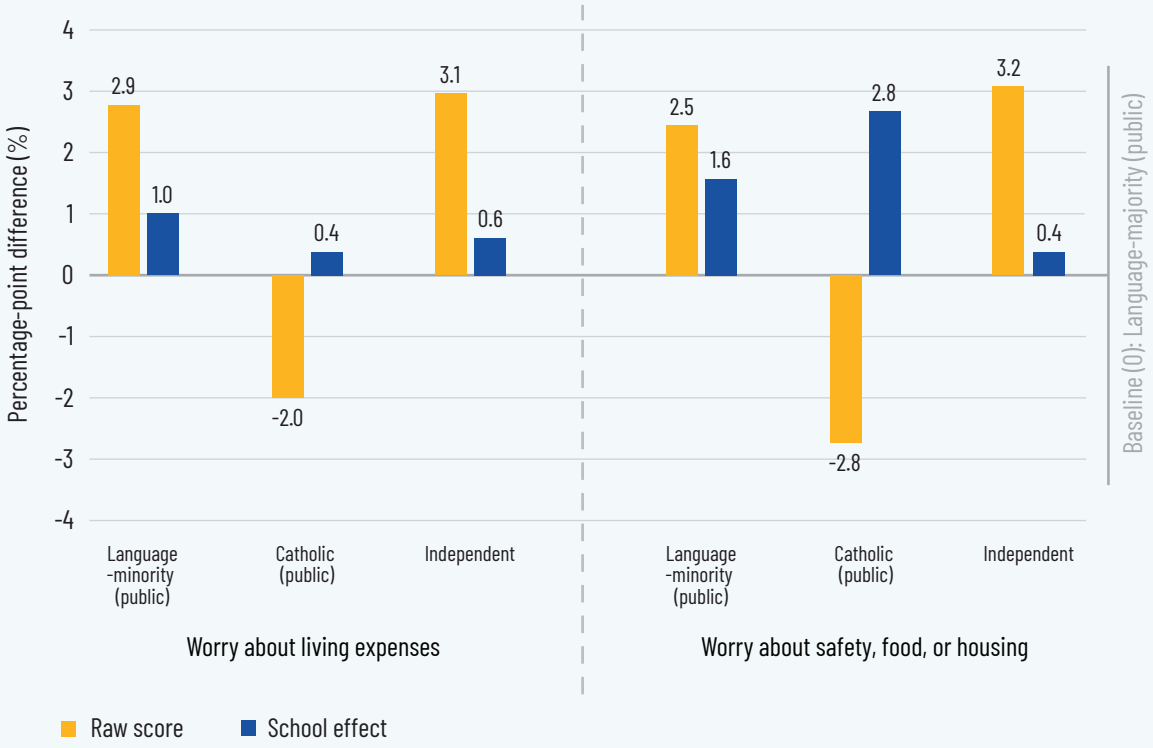
**Figure 9: Distribution of Income Levels, by School Type**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

**Figure 10. Concerns About Living Expenses and Basic Needs**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata, questions from the Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Do not ever worry" or "Rarely worry" is in parentheses: "How often do you worry about being able to meet normal monthly living expenses?" (42.8%); "How often do you worry about safety, food, or housing?" (57.0%). 2. Possible responses were "Worry all the time," "Worry most of the time," "Worry some of the time," "Rarely worry," and "Do not ever worry."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01. However, none of the results for this section were statistically significant.

## Vocational Values

The CES presented respondents with various aspects of their work and asked them to rate how important each aspect was to them, on a six-point Likert scale. These questions followed the approach of a Wall Street Journal/NORC poll conducted in 2023 and included the importance of having a job that paid well, gave them the opportunity to be helpful to others, and fulfilled their calling.[16]

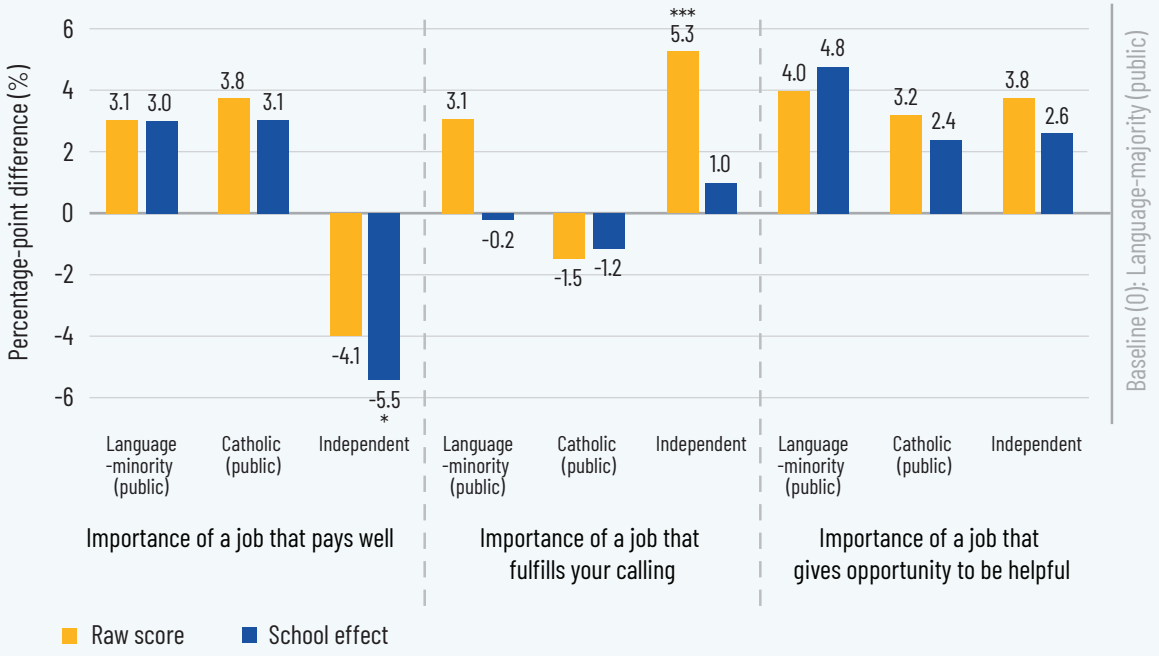
When accounting for demographic background differences, although 83.8 percent of independent school graduates reported an income level above $50,000 (figure 9), independent school graduates were the least likely to say having a job that pays well is very important (figure 11). They were also significantly more likely to say it is important to have a job that fulfills one's calling, though statistical significance disappears after controlling for graduates' demographic

16 Wall Street Journal/NORC at the University of Chicago, "WSJ/NORC Poll March 2023."

background characteristics. When compared with the language-majority public school baseline, graduates of all other sectors were more likely to say that having a job that provides the opportunity to be helpful to others is very important, although these differences were not statistically significant.

The CES also asked respondents to rate how important hard work was as a personal value. No statistically significant difference was observed between graduates by school sector type. The CES also queried respondents about how important they felt it is to have a job that provides a chance to be creative, allows for establishing roots in a community instead of moving from place to place, or allows one to be near family. Regarding these aspects of a job, there is no evidence of any statistically significant differences by educational sector.

**Figure 11. Vocational Values, Respondents Selecting "Very Important"**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Very important" is in parentheses: "How important is it to have a job that pays well?" (53.2%); "How important is it to have a job that fulfills your calling?" (33.2%); "How important is it to have a job that gives you an opportunity to be helpful?" (24.9%). 2. Possible responses were "Very unimportant," "Moderately unimportant," "Slightly unimportant," "Slightly important," "Moderately important," and "Very important."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

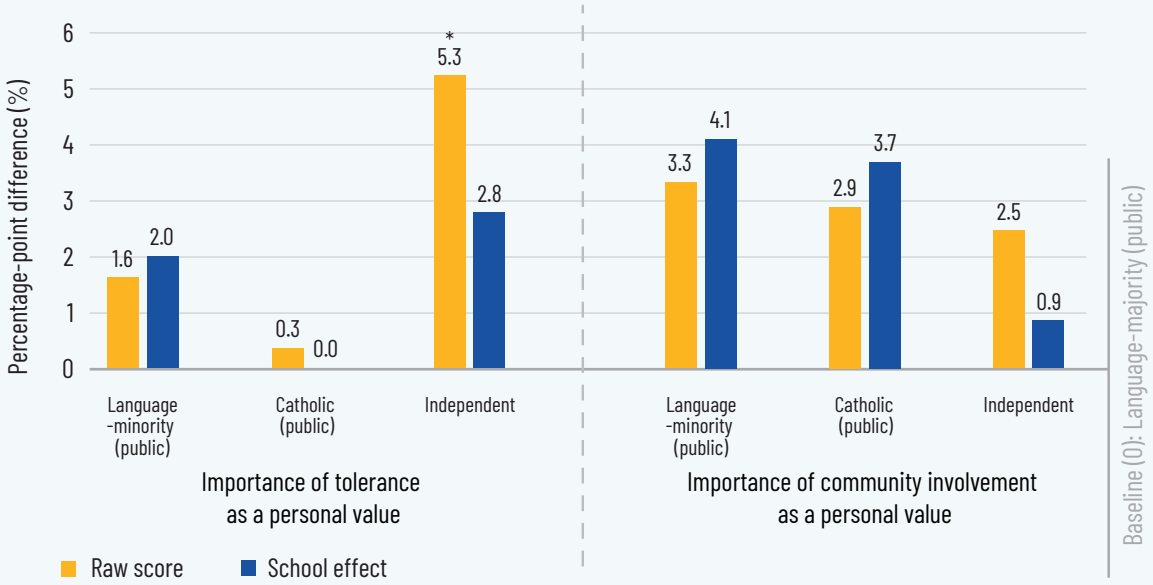
# Civic Formation

A key role of schooling in a democracy is to instill, nurture, or otherwise inculcate the dispositions and skills needed for living well together in a pluralistic society. In terms of outcomes, this is often referred to as civic formation. The CES measures civic values as well as two civic behaviours—charitable giving and volunteerism—as indicators of civic formation.

## Civic Values

The CES first considers civic formation by asking about self-reported civic values. Following the Wall Street Journal/NORC survey items, respondents indicated the importance of tolerance and community involvement. These two values are conventionally thought of as important civic values that schools should instill. In terms of raw scores, graduates from all sectors were more likely to rate both values as "very important" as compared to their counterparts from language-majority public schools, although none of these differences were statistically significant after controlling for respondents' demographic background characteristics (figure 12). Notably, just 15.5 percent of language-majority graduates rated community involvement as a personal value that is very important, and this is only slightly higher for graduates in other educational sectors. This may reflect a decline in community involvement and volunteerism more generally.

**Figure 12. Civic Values, Respondents Selecting "Very Important"**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Very important" is in parentheses: "How Important is tolerance as a personal value?" (40.9%); "How Important is community involvement as a personal value?" (15.5%). 2. Possible responses were "Very unimportant," "Moderately unimportant," "Slightly unimportant," "Slightly important," "Moderately important," and "Very important."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

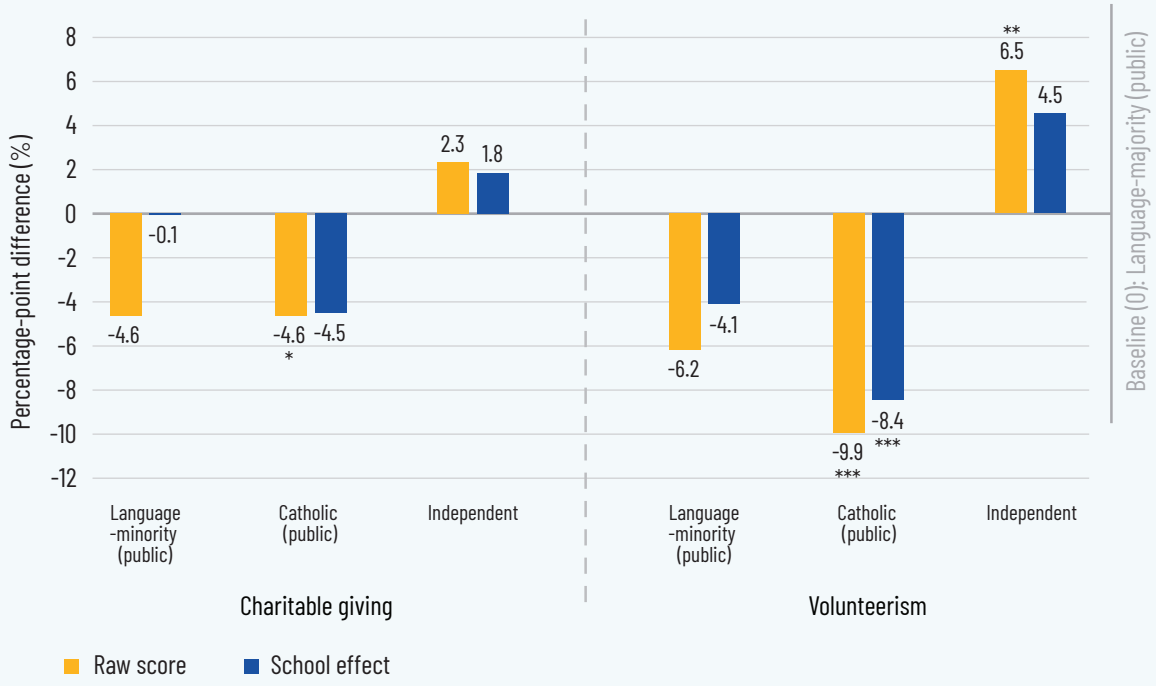
However, self-reports about one's beliefs may not always fully align with one's actions. To address this, the CES inquired about civic behaviour—specifically, respondents' engagement with two important civic practices: charitable giving and volunteering.

## Civic Participation

Graduates of independent school sectors were more likely to report giving charitably than respondents from all types of public schools, while graduates of language-minority schools and Catholic public schools were less likely to report giving charitably than other sectors (figure 13). It is not clear that the higher rates of charitable giving by independent school respondents is merely attributable to higher income levels. As noted earlier, there is no conclusive evidence that respondents from independent schools have significantly higher household incomes compared to respondents from other sectors.

A similar pattern emerged for volunteerism; graduates of independent schools were more likely than respondents from all types of public schools to report having volunteered within the past twelve months, while graduates of language-minority schools and Catholic public schools were less likely to report volunteering than graduates of all other sectors (figure 13).

**Figure 13: Civic Participation, Engaged Within the Last 12 Months**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Yes" is in parentheses: "Within the last 12 months, have you donated your own money to a non-profit charity?" (61.9%); "Within the last 12 months, have you done any unpaid, volunteer work?" (47.8%). 2. Possible responses were "Yes" and "No."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

Lastly, the CES included a list of types of service organizations and asked respondents if they had volunteered with them in the past twelve months. No statistical differences were observed for any of the sectors when it came to volunteering with political or environmental organizations. However, independent school graduates were statistically more likely than graduates of all other sector to report volunteering with religious, social service, and neighborhood organizations.

## Measures of Flourishing

Growing attention is being paid to the role of schooling in student mental health and well-being, given the rise of youth mental-health issues both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2026 CES included items designed to measure aspects of graduates' flourishing, including mental health and well-being, drawn from the Flourishing Measure. These items asked for respondents' self-reported levels of happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships.[17]

### Happiness and Life Satisfaction

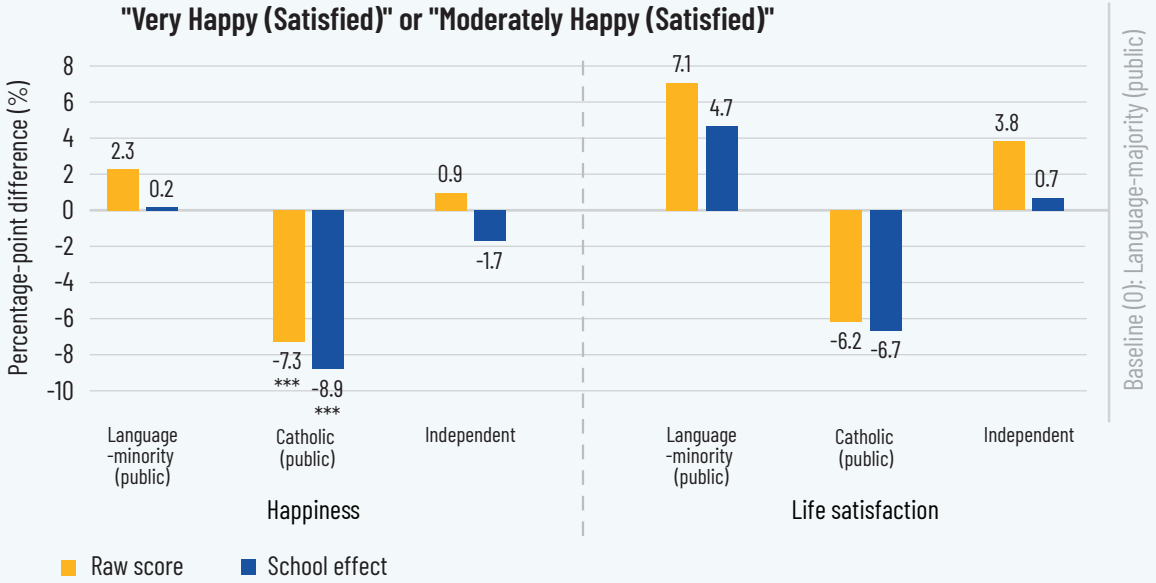
The Happiness and Life Satisfaction domain comprised two items: "Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days?" and "In general, how happy or unhappy do you usually feel?" For both of these items, graduates of language-minority public schools and independent schools did not differ significantly from their counterparts from language-majority public schools. Graduates of Catholic public schools were more likely to report lower ratings on both items, however, and at statistically significant levels (figure 14).

### Mental and Physical Health

The Mental and Physical Health domain comprised two items: "In general, how would you rate your mental health?" and "In general, how would you rate your physical health?" For both items, graduates of language-minority public schools and independent schools were more likely to provide higher ratings than those of other sectors. This difference was more pronounced for physical health than for mental health, and, given the benefits of physical activity and physical health to overall mental health outcomes, the positive outcomes for both are perhaps unsurprising. It is possible that language-minority schools and independent schools have a higher proportion of schools located in rural areas, contributing to higher exposure to green space, which may contribute positively to mental and physical health. Meanwhile, graduates of Catholic public schools did not differ significantly from their language-majority public school counterparts in either mental or physical health ratings (figure 15).

17 The wording of the items adopted from the Flourishing Measure are presented verbatim in the CES. However, the Measure asks respondents to provide a numerical rating on a scale of 1 through 10, while the CES followed the recommendation of psychometricians and added response anchors. Psychometricians have pointed out that the implicit meaning of numbers is less clear than verbal statements, resulting in lower levels of reliability in measures based on the former rather than the latter approach.

## Figure 14. Happiness and Life Satisfaction, Respondents Selecting "Very Happy (Satisfied)" or "Moderately Happy (Satisfied)"

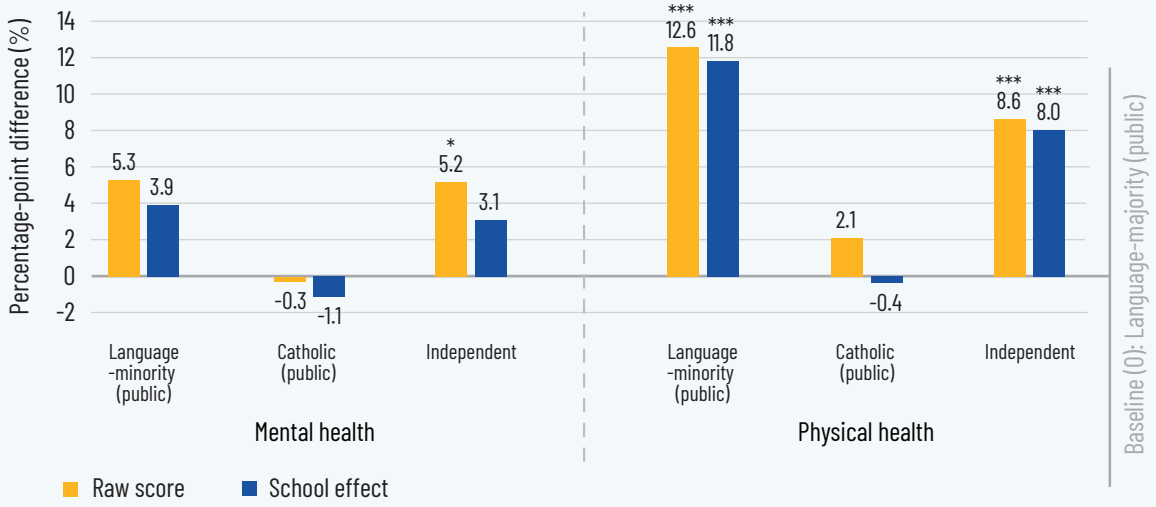



*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata, Questions from the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Very happy (satisfied)" or "Moderately happy (satisfied)" is in parentheses: "In general, how happy or unhappy do you usually feel?" (54.2%); "Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days?" (53.1%). 2. Possible responses were "Very happy," "Happy," "Slightly happy," "Slightly unhappy," "Unhappy," and "Very Unhappy" for the question related to happiness, and "Very satisfied," "Satisfied," "Slightly satisfied," "Slightly unsatisfied," "Unsatisfied," and "Very unsatisfied" for the question related to satisfaction.

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

## Figure 15: Mental and Physical Health, Respondents Selecting "Excellent" or "Very Good"




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata, Questions from the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University.

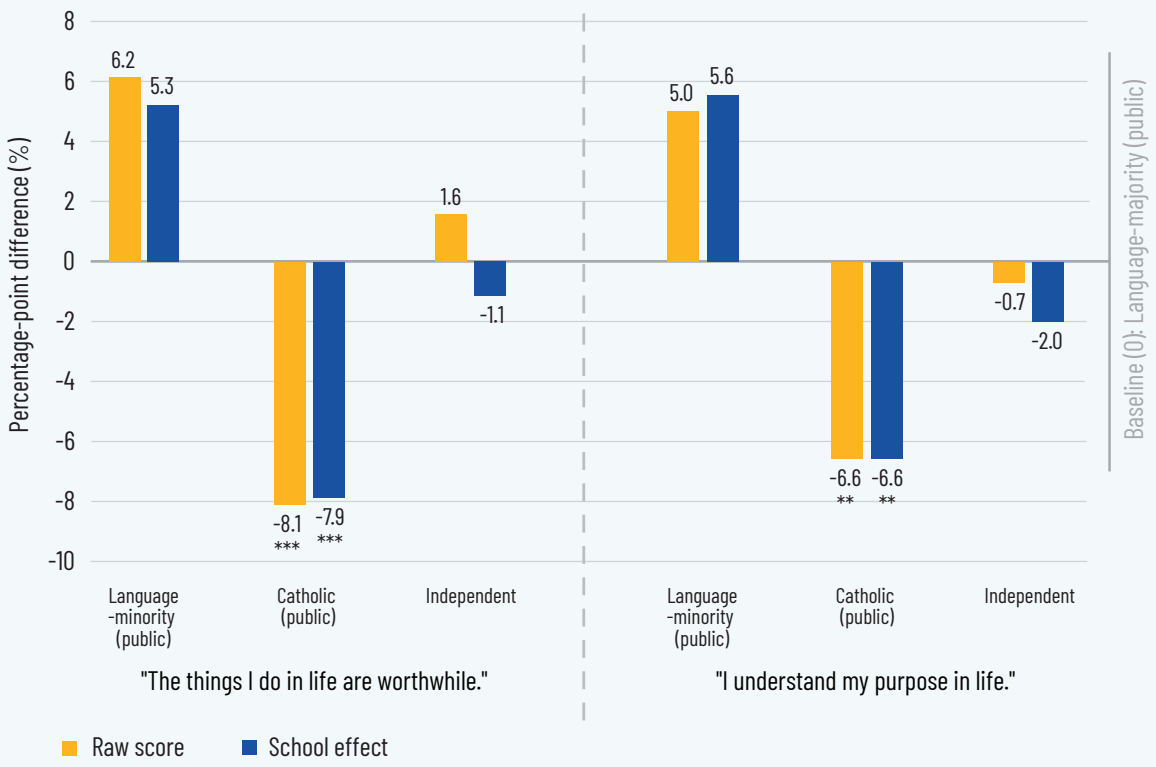
*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Excellent" or "Very good" is in parentheses: "In general, how would you rate your mental health?" (27.4%); "In general, how would you rate your physical health?" (25.8%). 2. Possible responses were "Excellent," "Very good," "Good," "Fair," "Poor," and "Very poor."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

## Meaning and Purpose

The Meaning and Purpose domain comprised one question and one statement: "Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?" and "I understand my purpose in life." For both items, graduates of language-minority public schools were more likely to provide higher ratings than other sectors, though not to a statistically significant degree, and graduates of independent schools were close to public school graduates, though the school effect suggests a negative impact on a sense of purpose for independent school graduates. Graduates of Catholic public schools were more likely to report lower ratings on both items, however, and at statistically significant levels (figure 16).

**Figure 16: Meaning and Purpose, Respondents Selecting "Completely Worthwhile" ("Strongly Agree") or "Mostly Worthwhile" ("Agree")**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata, Questions from the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University.

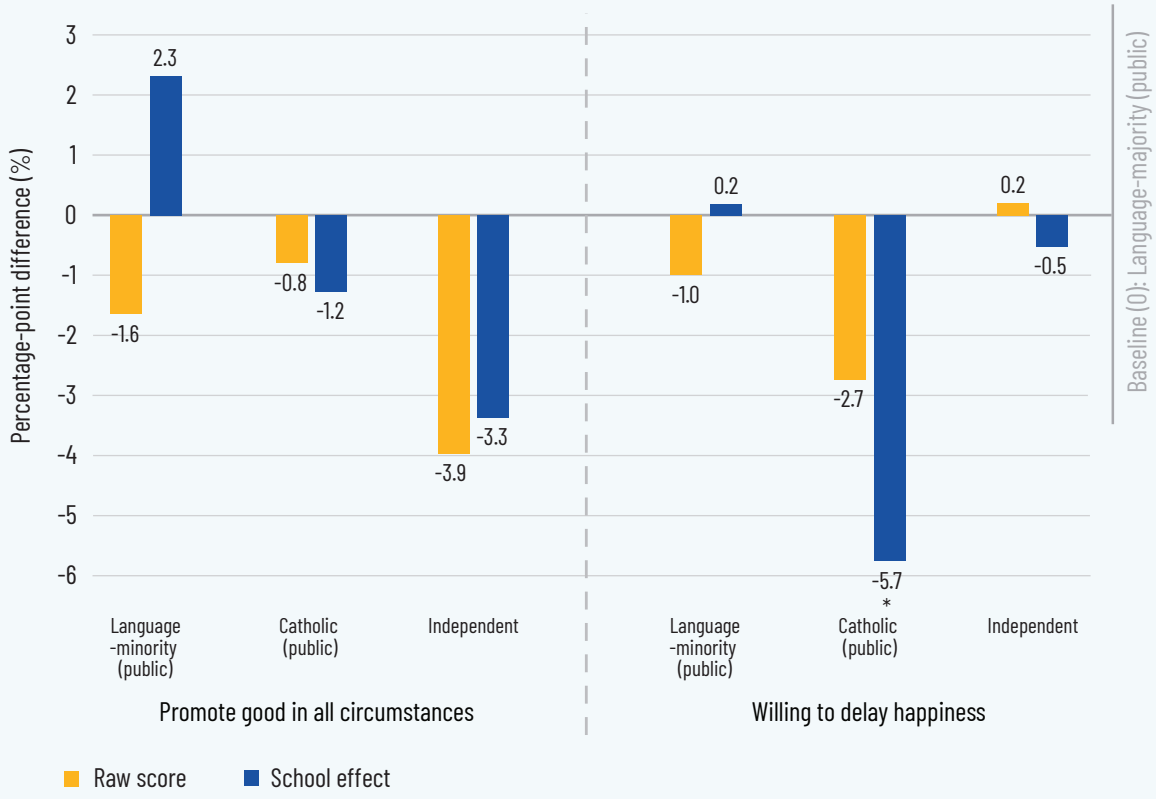
*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Completely worthwhile" ("Strongly agree") or "Mostly worthwhile" ("Agree") is in parentheses: "Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?" (60.3%); "I understand my purpose in life" (40.7%). 2. Possible responses were "Completely worthwhile," "Mostly worthwhile," "Moderately worthwhile," "Slightly worthwhile," and "Not at all worthwhile" for the question related to meaning, and "Strongly agree," "Agree," "Slightly agree," "Slightly disagree," "Disagree," and "Strongly disagree" for the question related to purpose."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

## Character and Virtue

The Character and Virtue domain comprised two statements: "I always act to promote good in all circumstances, even in difficult and challenging situations" and "I am always able to give up some happiness now for greater happiness later." After controlling for graduates' demographic background characteristics, language-minority public school graduates were slightly more likely than graduates from all other sectors to say that these statements are true for them; however, these results are not statistically significant. Graduates of Catholic public schools and independent schools were less likely to say that these statements are true for them, but not at statistically significant levels for independent schools (figure 17). Results are only statistically significant for Catholic public school graduates when looking at their willingness to delay happiness.

**Figure 17: Character and Virtue, Respondents Selecting "Absolutely True of Me" or "Mostly True of Me"**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata, Questions from the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University.

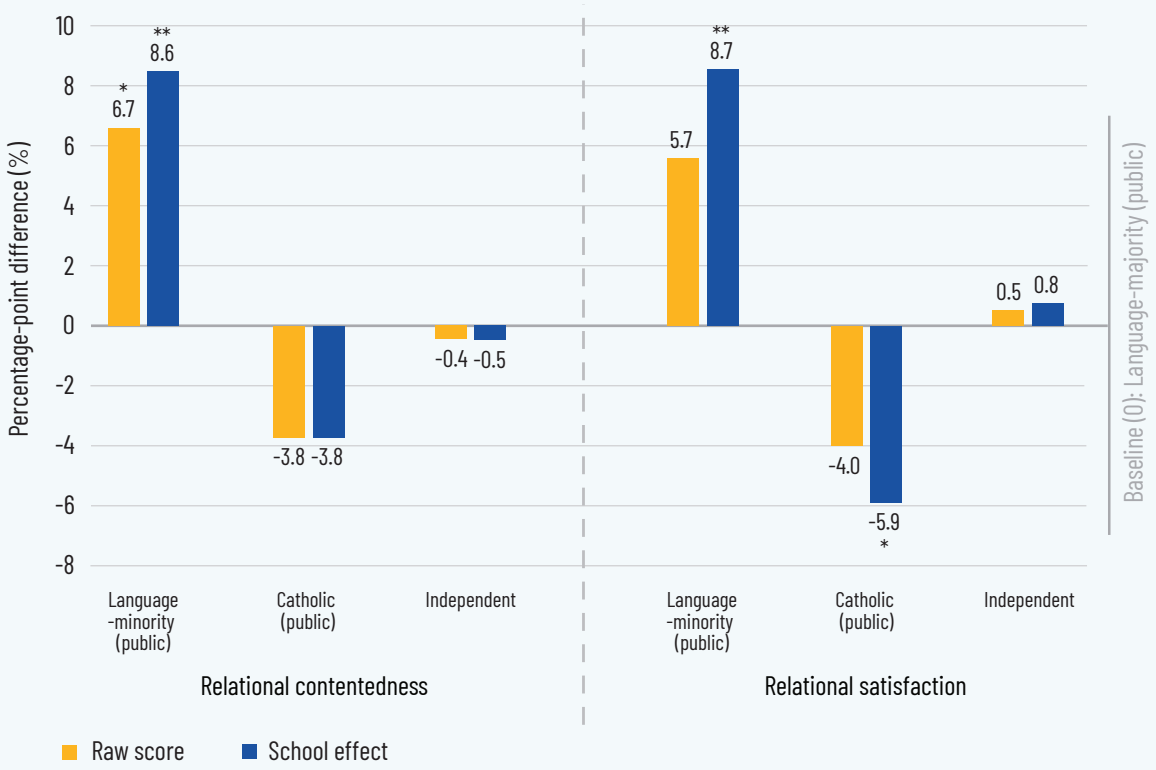
*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Absolutely true of me" or "Mostly true of me" is in parentheses: "I always act to promote good in all circumstances, even in difficult and challenging situations" (67.6%); "I am always able to give up some happiness now for greater happiness later" (54.4%). 2. Possible responses were "Absolutely true of me," "Mostly true of me," "Somewhat true of me," Only slightly true of me," and "Not true of me at all."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

## Close Social Relationships

The Close Social Relationships domain comprised two statements: "I am content with my friendships and relationships" and "My relationships are as satisfying as I would want them to be." After controlling for graduates' demographic background characteristics, language-minority public school graduates were statistically more likely than graduates from all other sectors to agree or strongly agree with these statements, perhaps a reflection of close community ties within these schools. Independent school graduates were about as likely to agree as their counterparts from language-majority public schools, and Catholic public school graduates were less likely to agree than all other sector graduates (figure 18).

**Figure 18: Close Social Relationships, Respondents Selecting "Strongly Agree" or "Agree"**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata, Questions from the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Strongly agree" or "Agree" is in parentheses: "I am content with my friendships and relationships." (50.7%); "My relationships are as satisfying as I would want them to be" (42.9%). 2. Possible responses were "Strongly agree," "Agree," "Slightly agree," "Slightly disagree," "Disagree," and "Strongly disagree."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

# Faith Formation

The CES measures religious belief, practice, and values as indicators of faith formation. Questions for this domain were adapted from the Spectrum of Spirituality Index developed by Cardus and the Angus Reid Institute. Consistent with previous administrations of the CES, faith formation is the domain in which the strongest evidence for sector-level effects can be observed, with a clear benefit to respondents who graduated from religious independent schools.[18] While this report does not disaggregate religious independent schools from the independent school sector, 64 percent of independent school respondents spent the majority of their high school years in a religious school, and 36 percent of respondents primarily attended a non-religious independent school. Therefore, it can be expected that their presence in the sector data contributes to the higher levels of faith formation observed for the sector overall. Religious independent schools make up a substantive portion of the independent school sector in all provinces. By way of example, the proportion of religious independent schools in Alberta is 56 percent,[19] and the proportion of religious independent schools in Ontario is 38 percent.[20] The remainder of this section explores the CES findings relative to faith formation by sector.

## Religious Belief

When asked whether they believe "that God or a higher power exists," graduates of all other school sectors were more likely to say "Yes, I think so" or "Yes, I definitely believe" than the baseline of language-majority public school graduates. The difference was highest and statistically significant for independent school graduates, but lower for Catholic public schools. A similar pattern was observed when respondents were asked about whether they believe in life after death (figure 19).

## Religious Practice

Sector differences regarding religious practice are also quite apparent. After accounting for demographic background differences, when asked how often they pray to God or a higher power, graduates of all school sectors were more likely to say they pray at least weekly than the baseline of language-majority public school graduates. The difference was again highest and statistically significant for independent school graduates, followed by Catholic public school graduates (figure 20).

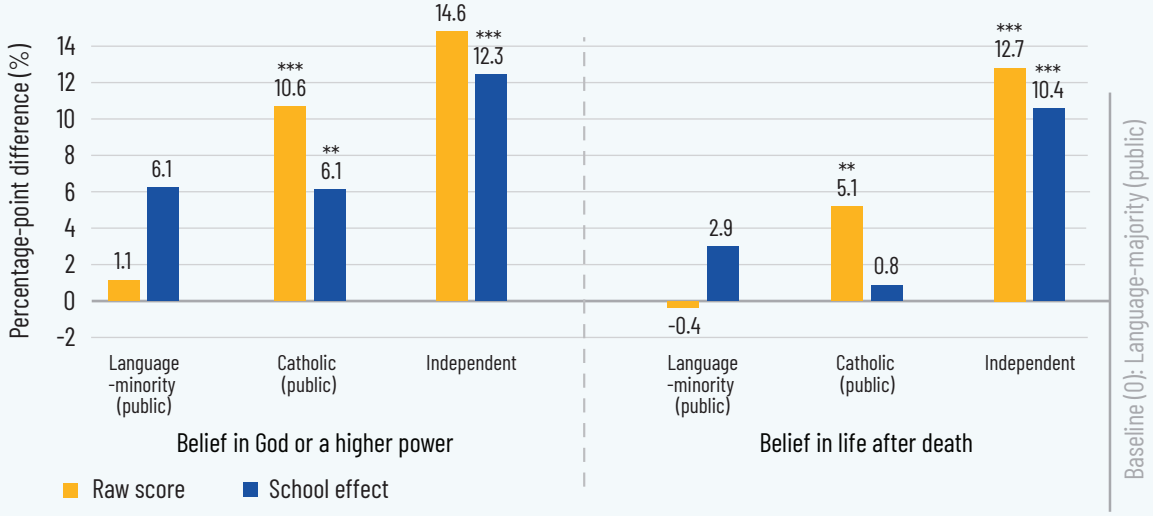
When asked how often they "read the Bible or other sacred text," however, only graduates of independent schools were significantly more likely than all of their counterparts to report doing so at least weekly. The same pronounced pattern was observed when it came to religious service attendance (figure 20).

18 Swaner, Cheng, and Eckert, "School-Sector Influence."

19 Hunt and DeJong VanHof, "Exploring Alberta's Independent School Landscape," 19.

20 Hunt, DeJong VanHof, and Los, "Naturally Diverse," 26.

## Figure 19: Religious Belief, Respondents Selecting "Yes, I Definitely Believe" or "Yes, I Think So"

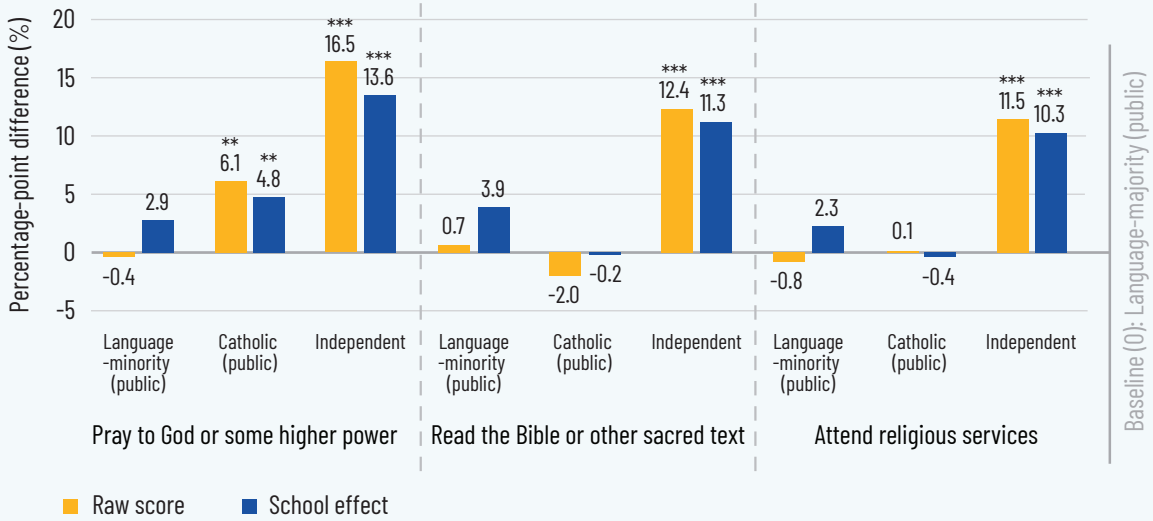



*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Yes, I definitely believe" or "Yes, I think so" is in parentheses: "Do you believe that God or a higher power exists?" (43.5%); "Do you believe in life after death?" (44.7%). 2. Possible responses were "Yes, I think so," "Yes, I definitely believe," "No, I don't think so," and "No I definitely do not believe."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

## Figure 20: Religious Practices, Respondents Who Practice At Least Weekly




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who practice at least weekly is in parentheses: "How often, if at all, do you pray to God or some higher power?" (20.5%); "How often, if at all, do you read the Bible or other sacred text?" (12.0%); "How often, if at all, do you attend religious services (other than weddings or funerals)?" (12.0%).
2. Possible response options were "Never," "Only rarely," "A few times a year," "Once or twice a month," "Once a week or so," "A few times a week," and "Every day."

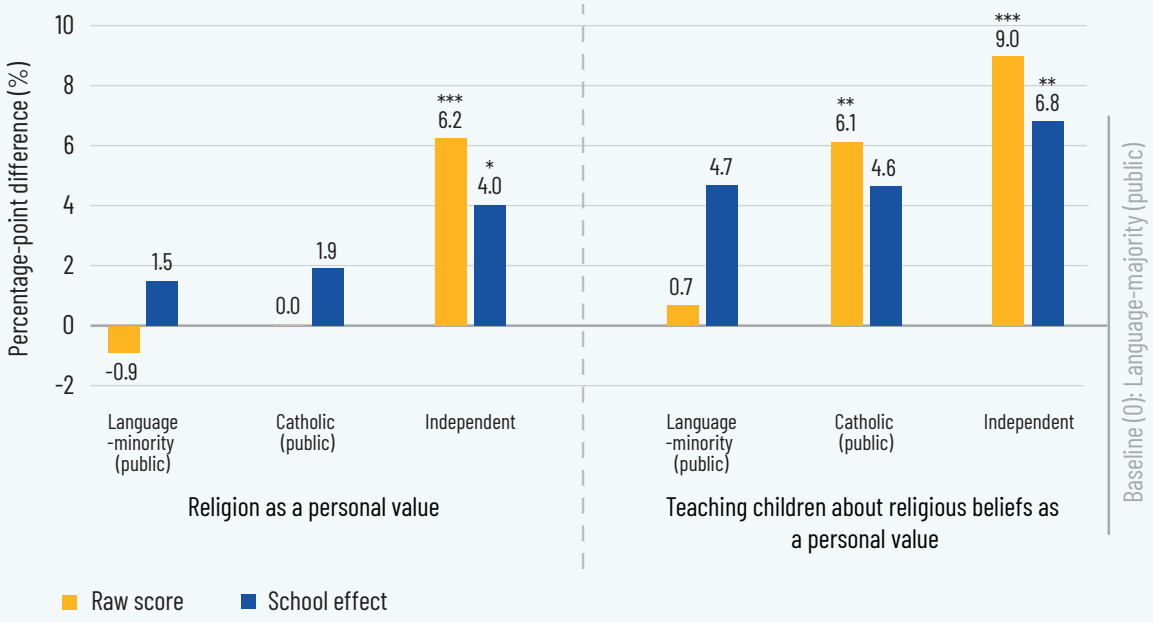
*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

## Religious Values

These results regarding faith formation are consistent with respondents' self-reports about how important religion is to them. Again following the approach of the Wall Street Journal/NORC poll, respondents were asked to rate how important religion was as a personal value. Graduates of independent schools were significantly more likely than all of their counterparts to rate this value as very important.

Finally, respondents were asked, using a six-point Likert scale, how strongly they agreed or disagreed that it was important for parents to teach their children about religious beliefs. Graduates of all school sectors were more likely to agree or strongly agree than the baseline of language-majority public school graduates. The difference was highest and most statistically significant for independent school graduates, followed by Catholic public school graduates.

**Figure 21: Religious Values, Respondents Selecting "Very Important"**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students who selected "Very important" is in parentheses: "How Important is religion as a personal value?" (11.6%); "It's important for parents to teach their children about religious beliefs" (27.3%). 2. Possible responses were "Very unimportant," "Moderately unimportant," "Slightly unimportant," "Slightly important," "Moderately important," and "Very important."

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

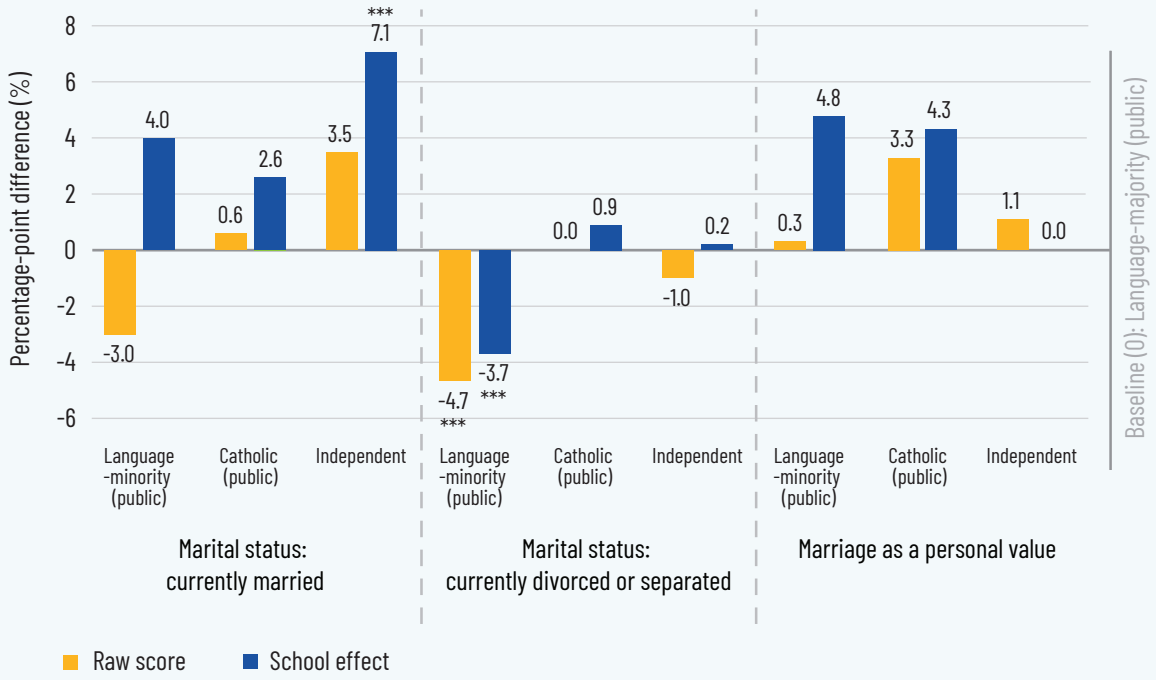
# Family Formation

The family continues to be a foundational institution that supports the stability and flourishing of society. The CES measures respondents' values regarding marriage and having children, as well as the number of children respondents have.

## Marriage

After adjusting for demographic background characteristics, the data show a school-level effect only for independent school graduates in terms of marriage rates, which are higher in this sector compared with all others. When it comes to divorce rates, the data show a school-level effect only for language-minority public schools, for whom divorce rates are lower than all other sectors and statistically significant (figure 22).

**Figure 22: Marital Status and Marriage as a Personal Value**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students is in parentheses: "What is your marital status?" Response: "Currently married" (32.6%); "What is your marital status?" Response: "Currently divorced or separated" (5.6%); "How Important is marriage as a personal value?" Response: "Very important" (24.5%). 2. Possible responses were "Very unimportant," "Moderately unimportant," "Slightly unimportant," "Slightly important," "Moderately important," and "Very important" for the question relating to marriage as a personal value.

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

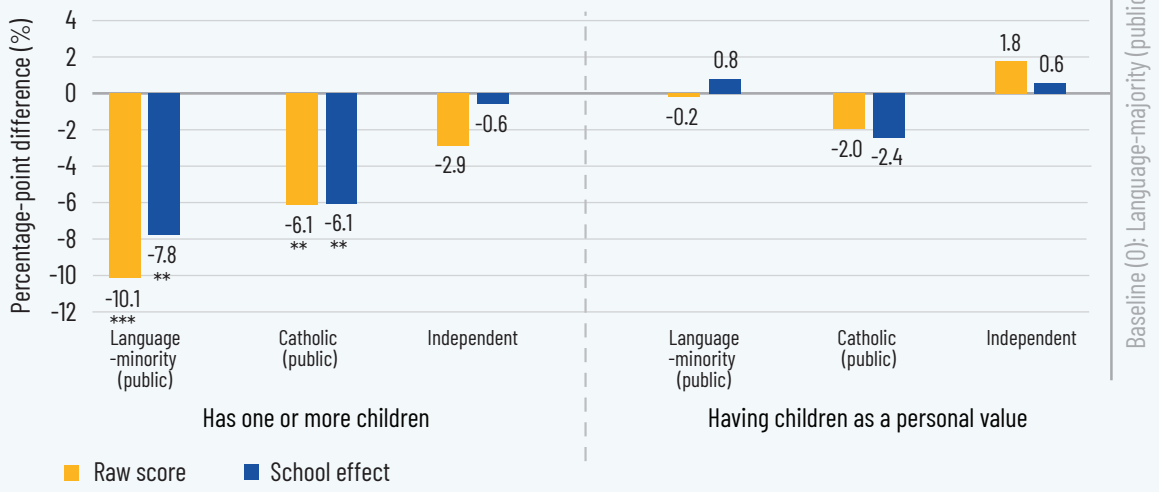
When asked how important marriage was as a personal value to respondents, after controlling for demographic background characteristics, graduates of language-minority public schools and Catholic public schools were more likely to say "very important" as compared with their peers from other sectors (figure 22). These findings were not statistically significant, however, which suggests that these results may be due more to chance or other factors than to school type.

## Children

The CES asked whether respondents had children and whether having children was an important personal value. Graduates from language-minority public schools and Catholic public schools were significantly less likely than their counterparts from language-majority public schools to report having children. Graduates of independent schools, however, were not statistically different from their peers from language-majority public schools, though their scores were lower (figure 23).

An interesting contrast emerged in the data between actually having children and placing a value on having children. After controlling for demographic characteristics, graduates of language-minority public schools and independent schools were about as likely as their counterparts from language-majority schools to rate having children as very important. Meanwhile, graduates of Catholic public schools were slightly less likely than all other sectors to rate this value as very important, although the difference was not statistically significant (figure 23). This suggests that there may be a gap between respondents' value of having children and the way their lives have played out.[21]

**Figure 23: Parenthood and Having Children as a Personal Value**




*Source*: Authors' analysis of the 2026 Cardus Education Survey (CES) microdata.

*Notes*: 1. Respondents were asked the following questions, and the corresponding percentage of language-majority public school students is in parentheses: "Do you have children?" Response: "Yes" (33.7%); "How important is having children as a personal value?" Response: "Very important" (25.2%). 2. Possible responses were "Very unimportant," "Moderately unimportant," "Slightly unimportant," "Slightly important," "Moderately important," and "Very important" for the question relating to having children as a personal value.

*p<0.1, **p< 0.05, ***p<0.01

21 See Stone, "Home Alone."

# Discussion

The Cardus Education Survey in Canada examines a range of holistic outcomes for a nationally representative sample of high school graduates, aged 24 to 39, from four major school sectors (language-majority public schools, language-minority public schools, Catholic public schools, and independent schools). This report shared the responses of graduates from these sectors regarding their perception of their high school quality and experiences, as well as how they are faring in adulthood on a range of holistic outcomes, including educational attainment and employment outcomes, civic formation, mental health and well-being, faith formation, and family formation. By controlling for a range of respondents' demographic background characteristics, the CES enables estimating school-level effects—meaning, the difference that attending a specific kind of school makes.

Looking broadly across the CES results, school-level differences are observable in many areas of attainment, perceptions, beliefs, values, and behaviours reported by graduates. Key observations are presented below by sector.

## Independent Schools

Canadian independent schools, both religious and non-religious, produce graduates that consistently demonstrate outcomes equal to or greater than their public school counterparts. For each of the survey domains, independent school graduates responded favourably to multiple survey questions, and these outcomes remain favourable after controlling for demographic (including socioeconomic) variables. While the overall experience of high school was rated similarly by all, independent school respondents were more likely to rate favourably the quality of education they received. Independent school graduates also feel well-prepared for academic success and report that their school was a close-knit community. When graduates were asked about academic and economic outcomes, independent school graduates were more likely to say they have achieved a bachelor's degree or higher; their income levels are also similar to all other school sectors. When asked about personal values, independent school graduates prefer a job that fulfills their calling and that offers them the opportunity to be helpful. They value tolerance and community involvement, and when asked about civic engagement, demonstrate a commitment to volunteering that goes beyond that of their public-school counterparts.

Interestingly, independent school graduates responded differently when asked about various measures of flourishing. Overall life satisfaction outcomes were not statistically different from those for their public school peers, though these graduates rated their physical and mental health more highly than language-majority and Catholic public school graduates. The finding that independent school graduates were less likely to respond that they "act to promote good in all circumstances, even in difficult and challenging situations" is similar to responses in prior iterations of the CES in which respondents were asked the same question, and may be explained by the similar response of Protestant independent school graduates, who make up a portion

of this group, in previous years.[22] In terms of close social relationships, independent school graduates responded similarly to their language-majority public school counterparts. Since the CES measures perception, these outcomes may reflect an increasing sense of social isolation more generally. While not an exact proxy, data collected by Statistics Canada suggest that only about 52 percent of Canadian adults report that they "rarely or never feel lonely," which is comparable to results in this paper—that around 51 percent of language-majority public school graduates agreed or strongly agreed that they are content with their friendships and relationships.[23]

When asked about faith formation, outcomes for independent school graduates are particularly strong and likely reflect the fact that 64 percent of independent school graduates overall primarily attended a religious independent school.[24] Family formation outcomes are also comparable overall to respondents who spent the majority of high school in public schools. Interestingly, while graduates of independent schools are more likely to be married (and to a significant degree), they are not necessarily more likely to have children, though they do consider having children important. This finding may reflect the reality that Canadians generally tend to have fewer children than they desire. In a 2025 survey on fertility expectations that polled Canadian women and men aged 18 to 44, more than half of men and women aged 40 to 44 reported that they had not achieved their desired fertility goals. Additionally, the inability to achieve fertility goals was associated with decreased life satisfaction.[25] CES results are consistent with findings from this study on fertility expectations, in that fertility goals, while desired by independent school graduates, may not be achieved.

Overall, the CES findings suggest that the positive contribution that independent schools make in the Canadian education landscape should not be underestimated. Across the country, independent schools in all provinces reflect the positive benefits of pluralistic education systems.

## Language-Minority Public Schools

Taken together, the findings of this iteration of the CES suggest that language-minority schooling contexts play a unique role in the Canadian education landscape. Across predominantly anglophone provinces, these schools are found in francophone communities, which are frequently more rural or northern, as is the case in Ontario. Within Quebec, these schools are anglophone and more likely to be concentrated in urban centres.

Particularly when it comes the strength of personal relationships and to community-orientation, these schools demonstrate significantly positive outcomes. Language-minority public school graduates were the most likely to identify a positive sense of belonging, when controlling for demographic background differences. Interestingly, together with independent school graduates, these graduates assessed their schools favourably in the way that they handled challenging topics

22 Green et al., "Cardus Education Survey 2016"; this consideration is discussed further in Swaner et al., "Faith and the Common Good."

23 See Vachon and Allat, "Social Isolation," 11, 12.

24 See Swaner et al., "Faith and the Common Good," for disaggregated results for independent schools that are religious versus those that are non-religious.

25 See Stone, "Home Alone," 11, 19.

such as current events and politics, which may reflect high-trust environments characterized by these positive relationships.

Community involvement is an important personal value for these graduates, though they tend to volunteer at lower rates than their peers who graduated from independent schools and language-minority schools. When asked about measures of flourishing, language-minority graduates report positive outcomes overall. Similar to independent school graduates, they were more likely to rate their mental and physical health highly. They were the most likely of any sector to feel that the things they do in life are worthwhile and to say they understand their purpose in life. When controlling for demographic background differences, these graduates are also significantly more likely to be content with their current friendships and relationships, and to find them satisfying.

Finally, these graduates were more likely to consider self-fulfillment an important personal value, less likely (to a significant degree) to be divorced or separated, and to rate marriage highly as a personal value. Along with Catholic public school graduates, they were, however, significantly less likely to have children than their language-majority public school counterparts. Similar to their independent school graduates, as discussed above, it may be that these graduates too experience delayed or unmet fertility goals.

Overall, language-minority public schools, often smaller in size and community-oriented, demonstrate positive outcomes for policymakers to consider within a bilingual country. The CES findings suggest that the preservation of language-minority learning contexts is important to consider for the health of the Canadian educational landscape.

## Catholic Public Schools

When controlling for demographic background differences, Catholic public school graduates were significantly less likely to rate some aspects of their overall high school experience favourably, such as how well they felt their high school prepared them for interacting well with the range of people in society, whether their school was a close-knit community, they felt a sense of belonging at school, and they enjoyed being a student at their school. They were also less likely to rate their relationships with teachers and principals favourably.

Catholic public school graduates were also less likely to demonstrate strong civic outcomes, with levels of volunteering significantly lower than other school sectors. While current income levels are comparable across sectors, Catholic public school respondents were significantly more likely to report incomes of over $150,000 than were their peers, before controlling for demographic background variables and when looking at raw values; when these controls were applied, income levels were similar. Also, after controlling for demographic background variables, they were more likely to worry about meeting normal monthly living expenses and about safety, food, and housing, though not to a significant degree. It may be that levels of volunteering and civic engagement are impacted by these concerns.

When asked about measures of flourishing, Catholic public school graduates responded similarly or lower than their language-majority public education peers. They were less likely to be satisfied with life and feel happy, but they rated their physical and mental health at similar levels to language-majority public school graduates. They were significantly less likely to feel that the things they do in their lives are worthwhile, to feel they understand their purpose in life, and to

feel they are able to give up happiness now for greater happiness later. They were significantly less likely to be satisfied with their current relationships, after controlling for demographic variables.

The below-average outcomes for Catholic public schools in almost all areas apart from faith formation offer some challenges for interpretation, as this is the first version of the Canadian CES in which Catholic public school graduates pointed to lower outcomes than did their counterparts; in prior iterations, their outcomes were generally indistinguishable from other public school graduates.[26] While further research is needed to fully understand this phenomenon, possible explanations are considered here.

First, it is possible that those who exercise the choice to attend a Catholic school within public systems had higher educational expectations of their schools to begin with, which were then unmet. Second, it may be the case that families choose Catholic schools for perceived academic and economic outcomes rather than for religious values or formative community, resulting in a disconnect between the stated mission of Catholic public schools and the educational reality. Third, it may be the case for some graduates that this disconnect was felt in the opposite direction, and that results reflect the perception that Catholic public schools are not religious enough in their nature. This possible explanation aligns, for example, with the increasing growth of independent Catholic schools in Ontario.[27] Finally, these negative perceptions of Catholic public education may reflect a more general rejection of Catholicism itself, paralleling broader trends in Canadian public life in which religious association with Catholicism has declined by 5.5 percent between 2011 and 2021.[28]

Importantly, Catholic public graduates were significantly less likely to feel favourable about the way their school handled religious and spiritual matters, issues in national politics, and current events. Since respondents of this survey are graduates aged 24 to 39, who would have graduated in or before 2020, responses to these questions may reflect public controversies and declining trust in the Roman Catholic Church in Canada more broadly. Between the late 1990s and 2010s, both Catholic education and Catholicism faced sustained criticism on a number of fronts.[29]

On some important metrics, such as overall belief in God and prayer to God or a higher power, the faith formation of Catholic public school graduates falls between that of independent school graduates and other public-school counterparts, a more expected finding. However, this does not result in increases in attendance at religious services or the reading of sacred texts, two practices common to religious communities. It is possible that these graduates hold on to private belief but do not necessarily give expression to those beliefs within a religious community.

26 See, for example, Green et al., "Cardus Education Survey 2016"; Pennings and Sikkink, "Cardus Education Survey."

27 DeJong VanHof and Ko, "School's Out."

28 See figure 4 in DeJong VanHof and Ko, "School's Out," 20-21.

29 These include controversies at both the national and provincial levels. At a national level, for example, public perception of Catholicism may have been affected by the Church's response to allegations of abuse; to increased concern for the experience of LGBTQ students, which manifested in various policy changes across different provinces; or to increased awareness of the involvement of the Church in the operation of Indian Residential Schools due to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Taken together, further research and follow-up is needed among Catholic public school graduates to better understand the underlying reasons for these outcomes. Whether these outcomes are primarily a result of sector differences, such as whether the school is public or independent, or whether they are a result of religious changes, such as overall decline in trust and affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church, is unclear; both may be true.

## Conclusion

Two important conclusions can be drawn from the CES results in Canada in 2026. First, and most obviously, attending a specific type of school can contribute differentially to graduate outcomes. Families should consider these differences as they make decisions about schooling for their children. Additionally, regardless of economic background, families should be provided the maximum opportunity to choose educational options they deem most suited for their children. In a pluralistic society—where families hold diverse values, beliefs, and priorities—education cannot be one-size-fits-all.

Finally, the Canadian CES provides evidence that the common-good outcomes essential to maintaining democratic vibrancy are being produced by schools of varying types.[30] School sector, whether public or independent, has no discernible impact on measures of social cohesion, such as how well graduates are prepared for interacting with a range of people in society and what importance they place on community involvement and civic engagement. Public schools, attended by majority of students, remain important and essential to the common good. But CES results consistently show that for many common-good outcomes, other school sectors match—and in some cases, outperform—public schools. This verifies that a public school monopoly is not necessary and in fact may be detrimental. Educational pluralism holds promise not only for the flourishing of individuals but also for society as a whole.

30 Note that while this report focuses on national data from the CES, a forthcoming report will examine provincial-level outcomes for different school sectors.

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