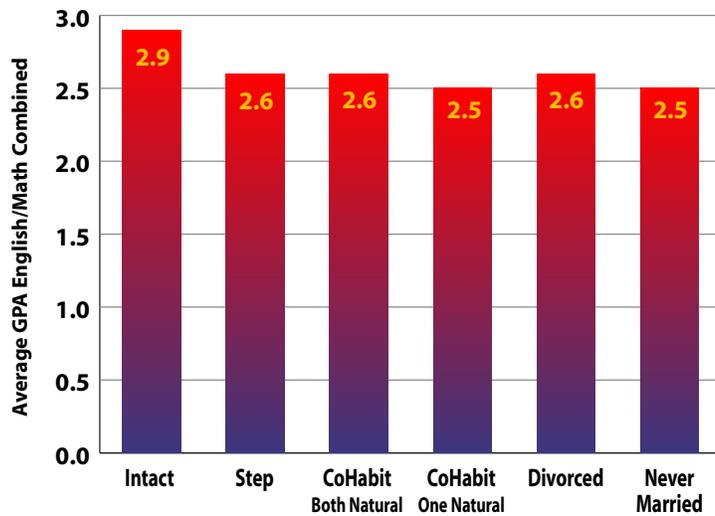




Marriage, Religion, and the Common Good – Number 2

## Family Structure and School Performance of U.S. High School Students

Combined Average in English and Math by Family Structure



Source: Patrick Fagan, Kirk A. Johnson and Jonathan Butcher, *A Portrait of Family and Religion in America: Key Outcomes for the Common Good*, The Heritage Foundation, 2006, chart 10, based on data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

This chart illustrates the educational performance of American high school students when viewed from the perspective of family structure.

Students who live with their married biological parents carry the highest average combined GPA, or grade point average, for English and math (2.9). Those whose parents never married or who live with cohabiting adults, only one of whom is a natural parent, have the lowest (2.5). Slightly above that group are students living with stepparents, divorced parents, or both unmarried biological parents (2.6).

Drawing on a large national (16,000) sample from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Waves I and II), the chart clearly shows that students living in an intact married family score far better than students living within any other family structure. This work was done by the author in cooperation with former colleagues at The Heritage Foundation.

“Human capital” is made up of many skills and attitudes but better education is key among them, as the work of University of Chicago Nobel Laureates Gary Becker (1992) and Robert Fogel (1993) makes clear. The chart confirms that an intact married family plays this role best in forming the attitudes and skills needed to acquire such an education.

Analyzing recent survey data from the National Education Longitudinal Study, Yongmin Sun of Ohio State University concluded that “[c]ompared to individuals from intact families, those from

single-parent families or stepfamilies without any changes in their family situation during late adolescence (between the ages of 14 and 18) had, on average, lower levels of educational attainment, lower annual earnings, and less prestigious occupations at age 26.”<sup>1</sup>

Timothy Biblarz of the University of Southern California and Adrian Raftery of the University of Washington also found that “each additional year of school improved children’s future socioeconomic status, but the gains varied according to family structure. For each additional year of school, children from two-parent families scored a gain of four points on a socioeconomic index scale; their peers from stepfamilies scored three points, peers from single-mother families scored three points, and peers from single-father families scored 3.5 points.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the stability and support of an intact married family clearly make a difference in the academic performance of American high school students and in the financial and occupational success of those students as they reach adulthood.

As the data indicates, when it comes to educational performance (and future career success), children from the intact married family do best.

Patrick F. Fagan

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<sup>1</sup> Yongmin Sun, “Stable Postdivorce Family Structures During Late Adolescence and Socioeconomic Consequences in Adulthood,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70 (2008): 129-143.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy J. Biblarz and Adrian E. Raftery, “Family Structure, Educational Attainment, and Socioeconomic Success: Rethinking the ‘Pathology of Matriarchy,’” *American Journal of Sociology* 105 (1999): 321-365.



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