



## **Search Institute Statement Regarding Asset 19: Religious Community**

Asset 19, Religious Community, is one of four assets included in the External Asset Category Constructive Use of Time. The definition for Religious Community is "Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution." From time to time, this asset raises questions about why it is included and whether it is appropriate to discuss the role of faith communities, particularly in public education and other public settings. This FAQ offers Search Institute's perspective, highlighting two key reasons the asset is included in the framework of 40 Developmental Assets for two reasons:

### **1. The potential positive benefit of engagement in activities offered by religious institutions**

As stated in Search Institute's publication *Developmental Assets: A Synthesis of the Scientific Research on Adolescent Development* (Scales & Leffert, 2004), research shows that youth involvement in congregational activities is associated with positive adaptation, increased sense of well-being, increased self-esteem, and increased life satisfaction. Search Institute analyses of data from the *Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* survey (which is used to measure Developmental Assets) also shows that religious involvement is correlated with higher levels of assets. Extensive examinations of this research are also available in *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Sage Publications, 2006).

The positive impact of such involvement may be due to a variety of factors. For example, when involved in religious community activities youth are likely to be supervised by responsible adults. They also are prone to experiencing support from caring and responsible peers and adults. In addition, they may experience engagement in constructive activities (such as music, leadership development, and service to others), the opportunity to deepen prosocial values, and to learn new things about themselves that enhance their identity. Strengthening of family bonds and communication also may occur if young people and their families share such experiences.

The survey question that measures Asset #19 asks, "During an average week, how many hours do you spend going to programs, groups, or services at a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious or spiritual place." Neither the question nor the definition of this asset is intended to address a specific religious belief, prayer practice, or specific attendance at religious services. Instead, the question only attempts to measure the extent to which a youth is involved in activities.

Involvement in religious community is probably important to young people for many different reasons. Certain youth may spend time participating in community service projects

like feeding the homeless and/or sports activities, but rarely, if ever, attend services. For other youth it may be attendance at services or active participation in other aspects of a particular faith that is significant. A recent study examined the faith community as a source of social capital for young people. The researcher, Pamela King, noted that “the faith community’s emphasis on social interaction, trustworthy relationships, and transmission of beliefs and values make it a potentially rich moral milieu that can contribute to the development of character in youth.” She found that religiousness appears to influence moral outcomes indirectly through these social capital resources.

## **2. The recognition of the importance of individuals as well as multiple institutions and socializing systems within a community in contributing to the well-being of children and adolescents**

The framework of Developmental Assets was designed as a framework for community mobilization. Thus, an asset-building approach emphasizes the community context for child and adolescent development, recognizing that many different people, institutions and socializing systems have roles to play in fostering developmental strengths. Indeed, all sectors in community have a responsibility to contribute to young people’s healthy development.

The framework explicitly identifies the contribution of family, neighborhood, school, peers, community youth programs, as well as congregations. No single entity, such as families, schools or congregations, is responsible for building all 40 Developmental Assets. Rather, the framework invites all individuals and institutions within the community, including religious institutions, to be active builders of positive child and youth development.

Thus, the framework specifically addresses family, neighborhood, school, youth programs, and congregations. This point is an important one for schools. Asset building isn’t just something else that schools need to do; it invites all aspects of the community to work together on behalf of children and youth.

### **The challenge and opportunity for public schools**

The challenge for public schools, of course, is that they, by law, are not allowed to promote religion (though they may discuss religion). So it certainly requires care to ensure that the school’s role in promoting asset building isn’t telling students that they’ll get extra points if they attend a church, synagogue, or mosque (though that’s better than giving points for “attending church”).

The U.S. Department of Education's Religion and Public Schools web site offers current “guidelines, publications and resources on the topics of religious expression in public schools and faith community support of children's learning.” [www.ed.gov/inits/religionandschools/](http://www.ed.gov/inits/religionandschools/)

The asset framework is intended for mobilization of all sectors of society. It is not the school’s job to build every asset, and there are clear reasons for schools to be particularly careful about how they address asset #19. Whatever is done should recognize and include the plurality of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices, including secular, humanistic, and atheist beliefs and perspectives.