

# CITY JOURNAL

FROM THE MAGAZINE

## A New Kind of Catholic School

The Cristo Rey network applies lessons from the best charter schools to provide opportunities for low-income students.

Charles Upton Sahn

**W**hen the first Cristo Rey high school opened in Chicago's low-income, Latino neighborhood of Pilsen, in 1996, it included a work-study program designed to help students cover part of their tuition. Soon, however, the school discovered that providing work experience brought benefits beyond money: test scores rose, as did the percentage of students applying to college. More than 20 years later, with 32 schools nationwide enrolling 11,000 students, Cristo Rey is America's largest school network exclusively serving the economically disadvantaged. (Students can attend only if their families earn less than 75 percent of the national median income, roughly \$38,000, though schools in expensive cities like New York and San Francisco apply local median income as the criterion.) The majority of the Catholic institution's enrollees graduate, and 90 percent of those go on to college.

Cristo Rey is part of a new breed of Catholic school organizations working to emulate the successes of strong charter school networks, including sharing best practices and using data to hold schools accountable for results. I was given a 147-page document that detailed everything from student retention to college placement to work-study revenue for each of the network's schools. The network conducts a "Mission Effectiveness Review" of each school every year, and school leaders meet to discuss the results and ways to improve. Lately, the network has focused on building a common curriculum and improving teacher development.

As the United States debates how to improve education and economic mobility, Cristo Rey's success offers a promising and instructive model.

**M**ost Cristo Rey schools are located in minority communities, and about 90 percent of the network's 11,000 students are black or Latino. Students don't have to be Catholic, and more than 40 percent are not. Cristo Rey requires no admission tests, but students provide academic transcripts and at least one standardized test score.

Admissions officers are more interested in prospective students' potential and attitude. Cristo Rey Brooklyn's principal Joe Dugan told me of an eighth-grader he recently admitted. When the student arrived for his interview, he slumped into a chair, his eyes wandering. Dugan gently instructed him on the importance of first impressions and how to exhibit good posture and eye contact. He instructed the young man to walk outside and start the interview over. "By the end of the interview, he had mastered it," Dugan says. "That's the kind of kid we want here. The kid who can take constructive advice . . . who is willing to work hard and get better."

Lately, educational scholars have emphasized the importance of character development and "grit" in student success. Cristo Rey schools emphasize a variant: *ganas*, a Spanish term that comes from the verb "to win" but that Cristo Rey defines as fulfilling one's God-given potential. Students work to "achieve *ganas*"—doing their best academically and otherwise. While many schools emphasize achievements like graduating high school and getting into college, Cristo Rey puts more value on internal goals that encourage students to think about "the why" behind their hard work.

This focus still delivers real-world results. At Cristo Rey New York, located on 106th Street in East Harlem, 92 of the 93 students who graduated in 2016 went on to college (one joined the army); three are attending Georgetown University. Other 2016 graduates are matriculating at Williams, Vassar, the University of Virginia, Middlebury College, Bates College, the University of Rochester, the College of the Holy Cross, NYU, Colgate, Fordham, and Lehigh, among others. Like all the schools in the network, Cristo Rey New York combines a rigorous college-prep curriculum, a culture of high expectations, the support of a nurturing school community, and a unique work-study experience, in which students spend one day a week laboring in corporate settings.

Not only do most Cristo Rey graduates enroll in college; they also graduate college at more than double the expected rate for low-income students. Thirty-four percent of Cristo Rey's class of 2010 received a bachelor's degree within six years, according to National Student Clearinghouse records. (Another 10 percent received but associate's degrees.) That figure may seem low, but according to data from the Pell Institute for the

Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, only 16 percent of 2010 high school graduates from the lowest-income quartile received bachelor's degrees within six years. Some of Cristo Rey's highest-performing schools are relatively new and just starting to see alumni complete college, so the network expects these graduation figures to rise. In addition, Cristo Rey is building a college-support and mentoring system that it hopes will boost its graduates' college-completion rate in the next few years. Cristo Rey's success reflects findings by economists Raj Chetty and Caroline Hoxby that many low-income students, if given the right guidance and backing, can succeed at the nation's most selective colleges—where, currently, less than 1 percent of students come from the lowest income quintile.

**T**he schools' religious curriculum helps students think about the greater purpose of their lives. While only 54 percent of Cristo Rey students are Catholic, all students take four years of religious education, getting exposed to the philosophical underpinnings of the major faiths. "Religion is taught both in the Catholic and catholic sense," notes Cristo Rey New York's president, Father Joseph Parkes. Between religion classes and the work-study program, not much time is left for electives. Course offerings are fairly standard: four years of English, math, and science. Students also take Spanish and history. The network has developed a curriculum closely aligned with the Common Core and the ACT's College and Career Readiness Standards. Schools offer theater programs, sports, and other extracurricular activities.

All juniors must take the ACT, and students have to take at least one advanced-placement course and the related exam. Juniors start their school year with a "Marking the Midpoint" interview, an opportunity to reflect on their personal, academic, and professional goals. Cristo Rey Newark's principal, Father Gregory Gebbia, notes that these conversations help students think about the big picture. "It's not just, 'What score do I need on the ACT to get into Princeton?' It's 'Who do I want to be as a person? What kind of life do I want to lead?' After all, isn't that the whole point of school, to put kids on the right path for living a happy, fulfilling life?"

In their junior and senior years, students write at least two college-level research papers. All seniors apply to at least five colleges, with guidance counselors helping them through the process from start to finish. Even after a student gets accepted at a college, counselors call admissions officers to advocate for every available dime of financial aid. Explaining that the network doesn't want students coming out of school deep in debt, Gebbia explains: "Our goal is to end intergenerational poverty. . . . We're the only schools in the nation that don't want their alumni to send their kids to our schools."

The heart of Cristo Rey's uniqueness is its work-study program—which operates, in essence, like a small employment agency. Firms pay the school a flat fee (about \$30,000, depending on the locale) and contract with Cristo Rey to staff entry-level jobs. Each job gets split between four student workers. A freshman works on one day, a sophomore the next, and so on, with the four students taking turns to cover the fifth day, so that students work five full days in a month. No classes are held on designated work days for a particular class. Longer school days make up for lost classroom time.

The academics-and-work regimen seems to build students' self-confidence and expand their horizons. "It's the perfect tool kit for college," notes New York senior Elba Obregon, a young woman so poised that I mistook her for a teacher. The daughter of a Nicaraguan immigrant, she'll be attending Williams College in the fall. Her supervisor at Morgan Stanley, Kari Califano, a vice president in the institutional equity division, tells me: "Elba's outstanding. She's been a real help." The company has offered Obregon a paid internship this summer.

At work, students perform entry-level assignments, such as filing and data entry. Freshmen participate in a three-week summer training program, learning the basics of computer software like Word and Excel, as well as "soft skills," such as how to take a phone message, make small talk, and give a strong handshake.

Aissatu Bah, whose parents emigrated from Senegal and Guinea, felt uncomfortable at first in her corporate work assignments, which were typically dominated by white men. But she came to see how the program works to "break down barriers" of all kinds. "As much as we don't think about it, we have our own stereotype," she observed. "[Cristo Rey's work-study program] kind of breaks both our stereotypes. I'm definitely more open. I used to be more closed-in and more shy. I talk to people now, not just about the weather. I'm not afraid to bring my own perspective to the table. And I'm willing to take in other people's perspectives, too." In her current work assignment, she "travels the world on the Internet" for a high-end travel agency.

The work-study program is integral to future plans at Cristo Rey Brooklyn, which launched in 2008, just as the financial crisis hit, leading to a rocky beginning. Bill Henson, a former managing director at Citicorp Securities, took over as the school's president in 2011 and has led it to firmer ground. The school currently enrolls 325

students and has room for more in its spacious old school building in East Flatbush. “We can grow as fast as we can bring in [work-study] sponsors,” notes principal Dugan.

Henson hopes that this will be the third year in a row that all Cristo Rey Brooklyn graduates will “have at least one acceptance to a four-year college with full financial need met.” The three seniors I talked with were still deciding which offer to accept. Kenneth Fernandez, who works at the wealth-management firm BBR Partners, was deciding between Fairfield University and SUNY Binghamton. Briana Laurenceau works at an animal hospital and plans to pursue a veterinary degree, possibly at Cornell, where she has been accepted. And Bah rattled off a half-dozen colleges she had been accepted to, including Duke, Cornell, Swarthmore, Boston College, Spelman, and Howard.

The work-study program clearly gives students a jump start. “Sometimes students will apply for a summer job at Kings Plaza mall, and I’ll get a call from a skeptical store manager who doesn’t believe that a teenager in Brooklyn has experience working at JPMorgan Chase,” notes Dugan. “It’s a great feeling when I tell them that the student is not lying: ‘Yes, he worked in Morgan’s asset-management department last semester.’ ”

Revenue from the work-study program goes to the school and helps defray student tuition costs. Cristo Rey hopes that work-study will eventually cover 50 percent of its operating expenses, with fund-raising and tuition making up the remaining half. (The school tries to keep tuition below \$1,500 per semester for families, and it handles all taxes, workers’ compensation, and liability coverage.) For students in states with school-choice programs, other options exist: vouchers and tax credits. In Cristo Rey’s three Ohio schools, for example, many students qualify for vouchers worth up to \$6,000.

**C**risto Rey can be a daunting challenge for many freshmen, who, often arriving academically behind, are suddenly expected to do college-preparatory-level work while working one day a week. At Cristo Rey Newark, I met five freshmen who admitted that the school was a big adjustment, yet they didn’t seem intimidated, thanks to the support they receive from their teachers and school officials. Jovan Roberts told me, with unabashed pride, about his work at TD Ameritrade. Nicole Arreola, who files forms and delivers mail in Newark City Hall, mentioned that Mayor Ras Baraka has become something of a mentor. Jayla Campbell told me about her interesting work for PVH Apparel and her dreams of pursuing a career in the fashion industry. Jaslie Garcia

works for the nonprofit 4-H, where she is helping upgrade its social-media presence—the perfect job for a teenager.

## The network builds students' confidence and self-worth and places them on the path to productive futures.

Grace Owusu, a freshman at Cristo Rey Newark, noted the sense of community that “pushes you up.” Sometimes, when the combination of academics and work seems too much, she tells herself, “Don’t back out now. You’re going to do this. . . . Look at all these people who are helping you. You have the support. So don’t let them down. Don’t let yourself down.” Owusu’s work placement is with the New Jersey Motion Picture and Television Commission. Though she enjoys rubbing shoulders with celebrities on shoots for *How to Get Away with Murder* and other shows, she hopes next year to work in a hospital, as her dream is to become an orthopedic surgeon.

When assigning internships, the school takes students’ long-term career goals into account, especially in their junior and senior years. Unlike traditional career and technical education programs, Cristo Rey’s is more about opening students’ eyes to the world of work than providing training in specific fields: the goal is not to produce, say, a technician or skilled tradesperson but to inspire poor kids to expand their horizons.

The schools’ board members make the work-study partnerships possible. Robert Catell is chairman of the board of Cristo Rey Brooklyn. He is a Brooklyn native raised by a single mother and attended public schools, including the City College of New York. Catell took a job at Brooklyn Union Gas in the meter-repair shop and rose to become CEO of National Grid. He sees parallels between his story and those of today’s students, and he cherishes the annual graduation ceremony. “You want to cry,” he says. “You see the families and their joy over their children going to the best schools in the country. . . . It’s a labor of love for me.”

Though the network currently enjoys an 87 percent renewal rate with its corporate partners, finding internships is becoming more of a challenge as technology and outsourcing reduce entry-level, clerical-work positions. But the school is committed to

keeping its work-placement program going. When I asked if he would give up Cristo Rey New York's work component if, say, Michael Bloomberg offered a \$1 billion donation, Father Parkes answered, "No. I'd take the money and use it to pay our teachers more. . . . But the work component is too valuable."

**C**risto Rey isn't for everyone. While the school is justifiably proud of the college-enrollment (and completion) rate of its graduates, it has more work to do on its own completion rates: across the network, schools retained only 60 percent of students from ninth grade through graduation. Of the students who left, about half exited for family reasons or relocation, 27 percent were dismissed for academic reasons, and 19 percent were expelled for disciplinary problems or because they were twice dismissed by employers from the work-study program. The network wants to increase its student retention rate to 70 percent in the coming years.

But for thousands of low-income strivers, Cristo Rey is proving the right fit. By providing students with a solid college-preparatory education and invaluable work experience, the network helps students build impressive credentials and contacts. Just as important, the network builds students' confidence and self-worth and places them on the path to productive futures. Policymakers and philanthropists concerned about America's lack of economic and social mobility would do well to look to Cristo Rey as a model for providing low-income students with a helping hand into the middle class.

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Photo: Cristo Rey administrators place high value on students who display character and grit. (MICHAEL BRYANT/ THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER/AP PHOTO)

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