



Op-Ed | January 22, 2016

## **Working their way through ... high school?**

*In an unusual arrangement, low-income students work to help pay tuition. But it's not just about the money*

By: Bob Catell and Bill Henson

---

Although just 16 years old, high school senior Veronica Carrasco works at one of the world's top wealth-management groups every Wednesday. At 17, Darrel Suarez-White has been employed by law firms the last three years and now assists the facilities management team and concierge desk at the corporate headquarters of American Express. Charms Savery is in her third year of work at Brooklyn Law School, helping to book events and initiate invoices.

At a time when minority youth unemployment far exceeds that of white counterparts, when companies increasingly believe college graduates are ill equipped for the workplace and universities are convinced incoming students are not prepared for college, one innovative program has been quietly bucking this trend. Thanks to a unique partnership among New York area employers, Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School and its sister schools in Harlem and Newark, 1,000 economically vulnerable students such as Veronica, Darrel and Charms are earning their way through high school while gaining invaluable, real-world work experience.

The Cristo Rey model offers a private, values-based college preparatory education to students who otherwise could not afford one. Although 85% of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, all families are invested in their children's education and pay some tuition, on average less than \$1,500 per year.

The actual cost of educating each student, however, can be 10 times what they pay. At Cristo Rey and its sister schools, students narrow the gap by working. One day per week, they commute to local retailers in Flatbush, multi-nationals on Park Avenue, corporate back offices in Jersey City and another 250 organizations where they put in a full day as data entry clerks, research assistants and more. Their earnings pay up to half the cost of their education.

Though the first school was founded barely 20 years ago, 30 Cristo Rey schools now serve 10,000 students from coast to coast. It's the largest network of schools in the country exclusively serving low-income youth. Most graduates fare quite well. Every Cristo Rey Brooklyn senior last year received at least one acceptance to a four-year college with full financial needs met, in many cases earning grants greater than total family income. Graduates are matriculating at the likes of Fordham, Holy Cross, NYU, Franklin & Marshall, Providence, Pomona, Georgetown, Mt. Holyoke and Villanova.

This unique work-study program not only benefits Veronica, Darrel and fellow students, but sponsoring organizations as well: It enhances corporate culture and employee morale, serves as a recruiting and public-relations tool, frees up junior staff for additional responsibilities, and fulfills community investment and diversity objectives, not to mention getting some eager young workers.

Skeptics may assert that with nearly 400,000 high school students in New York City, Cristo Rey, no matter how effective, is destined to be a niche player at best. But we are much more hopeful. In a city as dynamic and generous as New York, with some 200,000 employers and over 4 million employees, there is plenty of room to grow in Brooklyn and beyond.

*Bob Catell is the chairman of Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School and former CEO and chairman of KeySpan Corp., now National Grid USA. Bill Henson is the president of Cristo Rey Brooklyn and former managing director at Citicorp Securities.*