

Cristo Rey: The School that Works

by Margaret Cashill



A Cristo Rey high school—and there are eleven in the Cristo Rey Network (CRN) from Arizona to Massachusetts—offers economically disadvantaged students an extraordinary opportunity. They are able to pursue a private, Catholic, college preparatory curriculum while earning up to 70% of their tuition through a unique work-study partnership with the local business community. This well-tested program instills confidence and hope in kids through work, while availing them the opportunities of a Catholic education.

Chicago Jesuits founded the original Cristo Rey high school in 1996. They served a primarily Latino community in Chicago's South Side, where high drop-out rates and low incomes were norms. Realizing that most of his students couldn't afford the \$9,000 tuition, founder Father John Foley sought out local businesses as partners in education. Four years later, B.J. Cassin, chairman and president of the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation (CEIF), sponsored the Cristo Rey Network.

Beginning in 2003, a locally headed committee conducted a feasibility study to determine Cristo Rey's practicality in Kansas City. It was "a time of vast information gathering," according to Cristo Rey Development Director Andy Stith. By early 2004, the study determined that Kansas City would be a favorable school site. Mary Lou Jaramillo of the Mattie Rhodes Center was appointed board chair.

When the committee approached the Sisters of Charity-Leavenworth at the end of 2004, they agreed readily to sponsor the project. Their enthusiasm and support has since allowed the project to reach fruition. Several Sisters of Charity-Leavenworth were appointed to a variety of roles, from admissions director to assistant director of technology. Sister Vickie Perkins, SCL, became president. "The Sisters of Charity bring their own flair," remarks Stith.

Additionally, Cristo Rey Kansas City will be the only Cristo Rey school to serve two states. Planners chose the Midtown location at Redemptorist Parish at Linwood and Broadway for its centrality and accessibility to applicants from a variety of backgrounds and both sides of the state line. "We will serve the entire Kansas City metro area," Stith says, "and have jobs in both Kansas and Missouri."

Abundant local business interest has piqued enthusiasm for the coming school year. "I've been going to those companies to see if it is feasible for them," says Sister Barbara Schrader, Director of the Corporate Work-study Program. "They all think this is a great thing, this is what we need for the future work force, looking at it as a way to break the cycle of poverty for now and for the future." Letters of interest have poured in from more than 30 firms in Kansas and Missouri.

Cristo Rey's pioneering Corporate Work Study Program, or CWSP, is its distinguishing characteristic. Each student or their family is asked to pay \$2,000 for their portion of the 2006-2007 school year. Students will earn the remainder of their tuition through the Corporate Work Study Program. Assistance will be available, and no family will be turned away for financial reasons.

"For families that want this type of education, we want cost not to be a factor in their decision to send their son or daughter to Cristo Rey," Stith explains. "We are primarily geared for those who cannot afford any other Catholic or private high school but want this educational alternative."

Before the school year begins, pupils will undergo a three-week training session, consisting of computer, copier, fax and printer basics. However, trainees will also learn the more intricate concepts of financial

literacy, time management, teamwork, communication and ethics. Working five days a month, the teenagers will finance the remainder of their educational fees while putting their training to use.

A series of open houses is being offered this winter for interested families. Usually located in the school cafeteria at 211 W. Linwood, information sessions are planned from 4:30 to 6:30 PM on January 5, 2006 and from 1 to 3 PM on February 12, 2006. The application deadline is March 1, 2006, and the placement test for the coming school year begins at 8:30 AM on January 7, 2006. Starting school and work in the fall of 2006, 125 Freshmen are expected to comprise the first Cristo Rey class.

“If you’re a company out there, please give us a call and sign on,” says Schrader. “It’s for the students’ future and your future as a company.” For more info, call 816-457-6044.
