

Cristo Rey Schools: A Model of 21st-Century Catholic Education

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Executive Summary

Since the mid-1960s Catholic high schools in the United States have been separating along different paths based upon their prospects for survival. The pressures of rising labor costs, shifting demographics and a failing business model have created a distinct alignment consisting of schools serving top and bottom tiers and those catering to a shrinking middle class.

Catholic high schools for upper income students, with tuitions often exceeding \$20,000 per year, enrollments above 1,000 students and supportive alumni, are holding steady. A middle class of smaller high schools, with enrollments in the low to mid hundreds, serving blue-collar families on tuition-sensitive budgets, is being squeezed.

Ironically, Catholic high schools serving families at the bottom of the income scale are thriving. Specifically those schools in the Chicago-based Cristo Rey Network, which serve low-income families in urban areas, are doing what many thought impossible. Rather than losing students they are adding them. Instead of closing schools they are opening new ones. And while they aren't flush with cash, their untraditional business model is better than break-even and provides a pathway to college for families who never envisioned it.

Cristo Rey schools aren't solving the crisis for middle-class Catholic schools. But their ability to serve poor families and still pay the bills is inspiring hope that other viable business models can be found.

"Cristo Rey is a model that many schools admire and look at," says Heather Gossart, director of executive mentoring/coaching and senior consultant with the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA). "It serves those students who would not otherwise be able to access Catholic education. It really does a phenomenal job for what it does."¹

A major factor in the overall enrollment decline in elementary and secondary Catholic schools during the past 50 years has been the migration of families from urban parish schools to suburban public education. A national student population that exceeded 5.2 million in 1965 was down to about 1.9 million students by 2016.² Nearly 13,000 Catholic schools operated in the early 1960s. By 2016 that number was down to roughly 6,400.³

The enrollment decline coincided with rising expenses at Catholic schools. Nuns and priests, who essentially acted as free labor, began leaving religious orders and were replaced

by salaried lay teachers. Expenses related to the clergy abuse crisis forced many schools to close. The Archdiocese of Boston ended millions of dollars in annual subsidies to its Catholic schools.

Cristo Rey schools are returning Catholic education to urban areas. In its unique model, students receive a college-preparatory education and participate in a work-study program in which they learn employable skills and earn money to help pay for their tuition. Since the first Cristo Rey school was founded in Chicago in 1996, 31 others have opened in 21 states and the District of Columbia, including in Boston and Lawrence, MA, with plans to add eight more by 2020. Total enrollment is over 11,500 students and more than 13,000 have graduated.⁴

This paper will examine Cristo Rey schools, why they work, how they work and what parts of their education/business design can be successfully transferred to other Catholic high schools. It will look at the Cristo Rey Network, a cooperative

organization formed to standardize the Cristo Rey approach, offer resources to the individual schools and help promote the spread of Cristo Rey schools to cities that can support them.

Through interviews with founders and early backers it will review the origins of the Cristo Rey method and how it has been replicated in places such as Cristo Rey Boston High School and Notre Dame Cristo Rey High School in Lawrence. And it

will look to see what lessons can be drawn by other Catholic high schools wrestling with sliding enrollment and shrinking income.

Across the country Catholic high schools have had uneven results in attracting new students and bolstering their finances. They've tried tithing by parishioners, hiring professional fundraising firms, diving deep into alumni bases, raising tuitions and recruiting students from China.⁵ Still the overall numbers are disappointing. During the past 10 years 100 Catholic secondary schools were closed and just 62 opened. Of those opened, 18 were Cristo Rey schools.^{6, 7}

Background

The roots of the first Cristo Rey school and the Cristo Rey movement stretch back to 1993, when members of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) "walked the streets of Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood asking residents how they can best respond to the considerable underserved needs of the Mexican and

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Latino immigrants pouring into the community,” according to Fr. John P. Foley, S.J., founder of the first Cristo Rey high school.⁸ That survey, along with an additional feasibility study, determined that parents wanted a Catholic college preparatory high school. Cristo Rey Jesuit High School opened in August of 1996.

According to Fr. Foley, the name “Cristo Rey, which is Spanish for “Christ the King,” was selected for two reasons: it was appropriate for a high school that would be bi-lingual and the image of Christ the King was meaningful for St. Ignatius Loyola, who founded the Jesuit order.⁹

The new school addressed a serious need, providing education for students of low-income families and those below the poverty line. But how would it be financed? Families were unable to afford the tuition of nearly \$9,000 per year, the amount the Jesuits estimated would be the new school’s per-pupil cost. So, Fr. Foley and his fellow Jesuits turned to the Chicago business community, only they asked for a job, not a handout. They proposed that local employers hire Cristo Rey students to work in clerical capacities, with the fee for their service going directly to the school.

“We went out and knocked on doors and said ‘Would you give us a job? Would you hire our students?’” said Fr. Foley. “It started off literally and simply to pay the bills.”¹⁰

But the corporate work study program took on a more meaningful, transformative role. It became a self-esteem builder as teenagers saw they were earning money to help pay for their own education. They learned office skills in environments in which many had never envisioned themselves working. And they developed interpersonal skills with people outside their peer networks including supervisors, company presidents and coworkers. Each student worked five eight-hour days per

month (one day per week, except for one week in which they worked two days). Teams of four students shared one 40-hour per week, entry-level job. They combined that with 15 days of academic classes per month. The Jesuits designed a school with a longer school day and year to ensure students had enough time for a college preparatory academic program.

“When you go to any of our schools and say to the kids ‘What do you like about our school?’ inevitably it’s the job,” says Fr. Foley. “The kids feel like an adult. They’re treated like an adult. They feel like they’re part of something and they’re taken into account.”

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Across the Cristo Rey Network the more than 2,500 corporate partners participating in the work-study program appear to be largely satisfied. The program has an 88 percent annual retention rate and in surveys conducted by the schools 94 percent of employers said their student employees “meet or exceed” expectations.¹¹

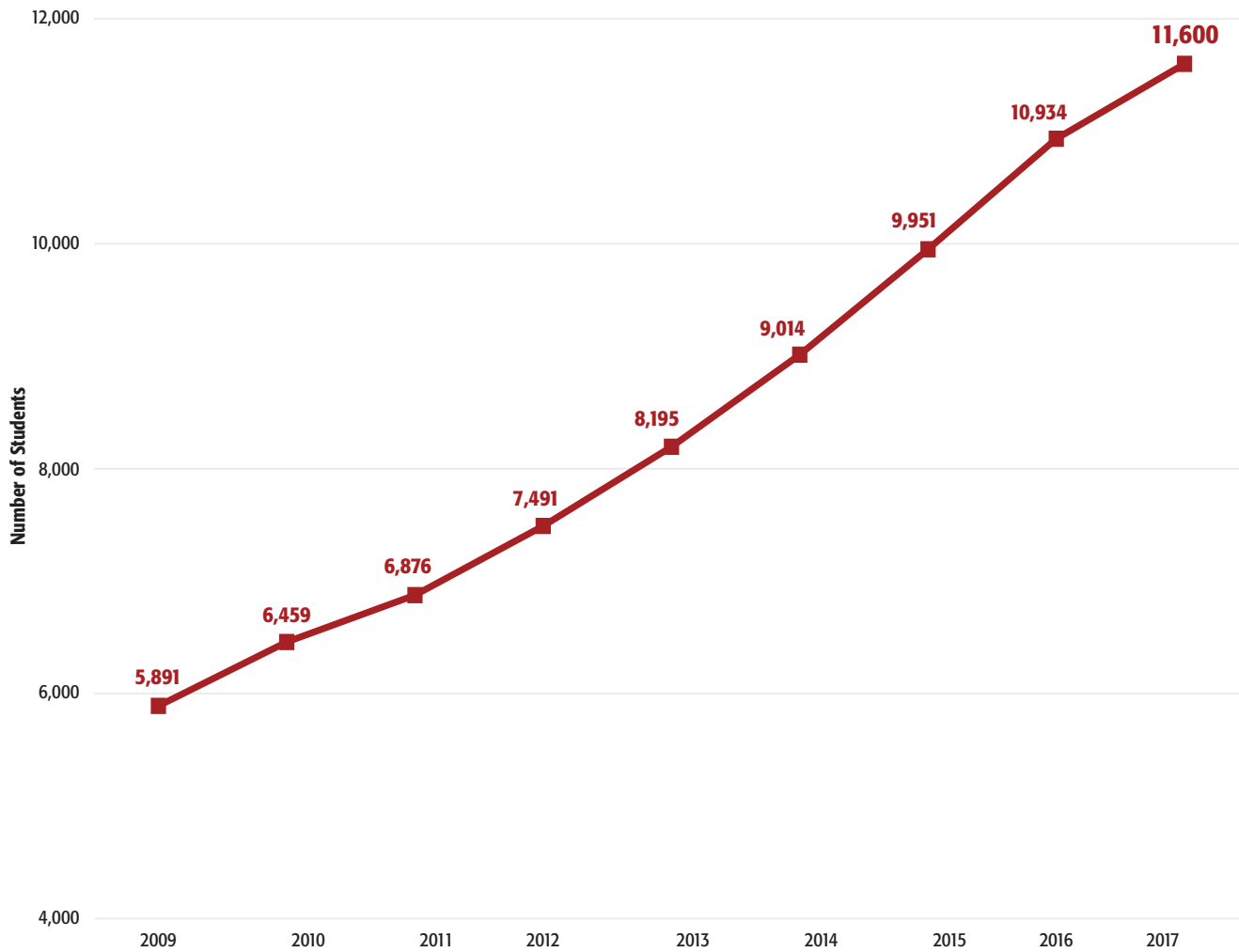
This revenue model breaks away from the traditional Catholic school approach that relies on tuition and fundraising. When a Cristo Rey school reaches full enrollment of anywhere from 400 to 600 students, the income pie is as follows: generally 60 percent of revenue is earned through the work-study program; 30 percent through fundraising; and 10 percent is raised from an annual family contribution which averages about \$1,000 per family.¹²

The work study program helps boost attendance and graduation statistics at Cristo Rey schools, which exceed national averages for students from similar economic or ethnic backgrounds. On average about 97 percent of students enrolled at Cristo Rey schools attend each day. The national average for public high schools was 91.7 percent in the 2011–2012 school year, the most recent period available, according to the federal National Center for Education Statistics. (NCES)¹³

Chart 1: Cristo Rey School Work Study Schedule

	M	T	W	TH	F
Week 1	Student A	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D
Week 2	Student B	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D
Week 3	Student C	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D
Week 4	Student D	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D

Graph 1 : Cristo Rey Network Student Enrollment Profile



Additionally, 92 percent of Cristo Rey graduates from the class of 2015 enrolled in college within a year, compared to a national average of 46 percent for low-income students. Cristo Rey students also complete a college education faster than other low-income students. About 44 percent of the Cristo Rey class of 2010 earned a four-year bachelor's degree or two-year associates degree. That compares with only 12 percent of low-income students nationally.¹⁴

Cristo Rey schools highlight the high college acceptance and entrance levels of their graduates. But a surprisingly high rate of students leave after enrolling. About 39 percent of students who start ninth grade transfer to a different school during their four years. Transience among high poverty families is one reason, but there are students who switch without their families moving from the area. The rigor of the program can be too much for some students. In the early 2000s the Cristo Rey Network negotiated with the Child Labor Enforcement Division of the U.S. Department of Labor to publish a federal rule that would allow 14 and 15-year-old Cristo Rey students to work during school hours. Existing law prohibited students

of that age from working when public schools were in session. Enforcement of that law would have ended the entire Cristo Rey program. Cristo Rey agreed that its students would attend at least the same number of academic hours as public school students.¹⁵ That expectation combined with more than 330 work study hours per year makes Cristo Rey schools challenging for some, even though acceptance to college is almost assured when they graduate.

“My thinking is they leave because they haven’t been successful academically or in the workplace,” says Elizabeth Goetl, president and CEO of the Cristo Rey Network. “When students aren’t successful in the workplace they get retraining, one-to-one support and an opportunity to correct whatever the issue is. But just like in the real world a student can lose his job and be fired.”¹⁶

If a student is fired from two different jobs, the student is usually asked to leave the school. But Goetl says that is not common. More often when a student loses one job they go through intensive retraining, which usually leads to success in their second placement.

Another reason students leave is because many of them enter ninth grade “significantly behind” in grade level assessments and are unprepared for the academic demands. Yet Goettl says accepting those students is part of the Cristo Rey mission to serve underprivileged students.

“We get some students who start at about the sixth grade level in reading, writing and math,” says Goettl. “Our job is to provide a rigorous college preparatory education, while at the same time closing that gap in underachievement.”

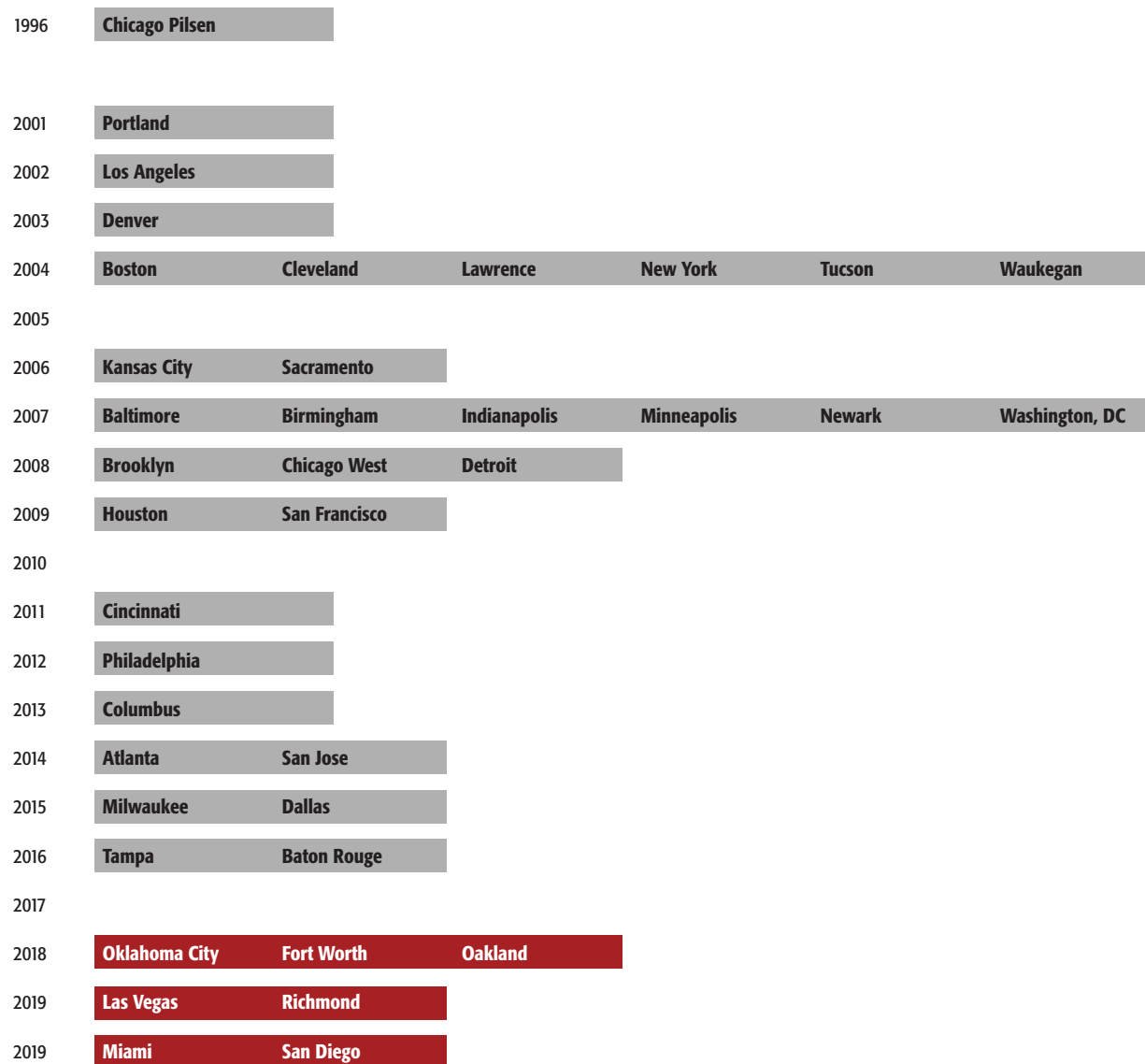
The low level of educational attainment for most entering Cristo Rey students is consistent with that of young people from low-income families across the country. Nevertheless, Cristo Rey schools proudly and exclusively recruit students from families who cannot afford private education. There is a ceiling on family income that is calculated using a formula based on median income of the communities they serve.

If family income exceeds the cap, the student is ineligible for admission. The average annual income for a Cristo Rey family of four is \$35,000.

“We don’t have those famous problems of parents being irrationally demanding of the school,” says Fr. Foley. “Our kids come from families who are more grateful and humble than you normally see at a private school.”

The Cristo Rey student population is overwhelmingly minority, with 97 percent coming from families of color. Latinos and African Americans are the two largest demographic groups.¹⁷ The majority of Latinos are already Catholic, but African Americans usually are not, leading to another surprising statistic: about 45 percent of students throughout the network are not Catholic. Though all students study Catholic theology and religion, Fr. Foley says the schools are “not about proselytizing.”

Chart 2: Cristo Rey Network Schools and Growth



A Cold Reception

Few people predicted the type of success Cristo Rey schools have had when Fr. Foley was getting started, nor did everyone welcome him. Though the new school was located in one of Chicago's poorer sections and committed to accepting only students from low-income families, other Catholic schools felt threatened.

"The other Catholic schools got very angry with us when we announced what we were going to do," says Fr. Foley. "They said 'If you have students to come to school, send them to us. We have empty desks.' We said 'It would never occur to these kids to go to your schools.'"¹⁸

To calm their concerns, Fr. Foley agreed that for the first year Cristo Rey would not accept freshmen or transfer students from other Catholic schools, a concession he terms "shooting ourselves in the foot" because it left Cristo Rey Jesuit High School with "dropouts and malcontents."

Additionally, Fr. Foley was introducing a new concept of a school.

"Kids would be working and how would that be?" he says. "We had an awful time selling the idea at the very beginning because of conditions that we ourselves had set up to make peace with the other Catholic schools."

Yet the new school not only established itself, it gained national attention. In 2000 venture capitalist BJ Cassin visited and agreed to invest \$12 million to create other Cristo Rey schools around the country. Cassin, who was finishing his term as chairman of the board of trustees of St. Mary's College of California, had been looking for a new approach to Catholic education in urban area.

"My wife and I had been supporting students through scholarships and I was looking for leverage where a dollar could be \$10 worth of education for city kids," he says. "I told (Fr. Foley) that from the research I had done there was demand for this and we were willing to put a foundation together to replicate the model."¹⁹

Cassin was sure the Cristo Rey design could be put into a business plan format and fleshed out through a feasibility study in other cities. If the study determined there was demand in an urban area, the business plan would show how to open and run a Cristo Rey school.

"It's not unlike Walmart getting a map, getting some research done and circling an area where they see there's demand," says Cassin. "See where the best place is to put the store and then once you have that hire the employees."

Between 2001 and 2009, 23 Cristo Rey schools were started. The first 16 received grants of \$400,000 to \$600,000 from the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation. In 2003 the Bill &

Melinda Gates Foundation committed \$9.9 million, and added \$6 million more in 2006. With two foundations involved, the combined grants to open new schools rose to about \$1 million per school.²⁰

As new schools were added the Cristo Rey Network was formed to standardize procedures and develop resources for support and development. Ten Mission Effectiveness Standards were created that have evolved through the years, except for the first standard which has been constant.

Mission Effectiveness Standards²¹

As a member of the Cristo Rey Network, a school:

1. Is explicitly Catholic in mission and enjoys Church approval.
2. Serves only students with limited economic resources and is open to students of various faiths and cultures.
3. Is family centered and plays an active role in the local community.
4. Prepares all students to enter and graduate from college.
5. Requires participation by all students in the Corporate Work Study Program.
6. Integrates the learning present in its work program, classroom, and extracurricular experiences for the fullest benefit of its students.
7. Has effective administrative and board structures, and complies with applicable state and federal laws.
8. Is financially sound.
9. Supports its graduates' efforts to obtain a college degree and enter post-college life as productive, faith-filled individuals.
10. Is an active participant of the Cristo Rey Network.

The Cristo Rey Network is expected to reach 40 schools and 14,000 students by 2020. Schools in East Bay (Oakland), Oklahoma City, and Fort Worth are scheduled to open in September of 2018, and several other feasibility studies are underway.

Background on Cristo Rey in Massachusetts

Since 2004 two Cristo Rey schools have operated in Massachusetts. Cristo Rey Boston High School, which began as North Cambridge Catholic High School, has 350 students and is located in the Savin Hill section of the city. The Archdiocese of Boston sponsors the school and appoints a Board of Directors to oversee its management and operations. Notre Dame Cristo Rey (NDCR) High School began as a new school in

Lawrence, starting with 80 students and totaling 270 students in 2016. It is run by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

Statistics for both schools bear out their growth and impact during the past 13 years. In the 2015–2016 school year students at Cristo Rey Boston earned more than \$2.6 million at 125 businesses and non-profit organizations.²² Employers pay about \$34,800 per year for a team of four students, which equates to \$23 per hour, according to John O’Keeffe, director of the work study program, though the program is sold both as a way for companies to get work done and an opportunity to help urban young people pay for a college preparatory education. About 60 percent of the school’s revenue comes from the work-study program.²³

Academically Cristo Rey Boston does a better job preparing low-income students to succeed in college than other schools. In 2016, as in most years, 100 percent of the graduating class was accepted to a four-year college. About 60 percent of the class of 2010 earned an undergraduate degree within six years. That compares with a network average of 44% and a national average across all economic strata of 55%.²⁴

The annual cost to educate a student at Cristo Rey Boston is about \$13,000. Tuition ranges from \$600 to \$3,000 per family, with an average of \$900. None of the families pay the full tuition. The average household income of families at Cristo Rey Boston was about \$24,800 in 2015.²⁵

In Lawrence, where the pool of companies in the city is smaller than in Boston, the work study program produced 37 percent or \$1.6 million of the school’s \$4.31 million in revenues for 2016.²⁶ Donations and other support accounted for 41 percent of the total. Not all of the 75 employers participating in the work study program pay the \$31,000 fee for a four-student team. Some non-profits are not charged, but valued for the employment skills the students learn. Yet with such a small pool, NDCR students need to provide value to their employers and they have. For the past eight years NDCR has ranked first among all Cristo Rey schools in workplace performance surveys.²⁷

More than 90 percent of the students who attend NDCR are Hispanic, coming from families with an average annual income of \$35,700. Tuition is \$3,200, but only two percent of students pay that amount. More than 60 percent of families pay less than \$1,200 per year, though it costs about \$12,000 annually to educate a student.

Every 2016 graduate was accepted to at least one four-year college, receiving more than \$9 million in merit aide, “remarkable” for a graduating class of 68 students, according to Sr. Maryalyce Gilfeather, SNDdeN, president of NDCR.²⁸

What can be learned?

Given the success of Massachusetts’ Cristo Rey schools and the fact that many Catholic high schools are struggling to survive, the obvious question is: Could the Cristo Rey model work for them?

“We understand that to insure (Catholic schools) long-term sustainability and viability, we have got to think outside the box in terms of new models in terms of what works and what engages people,” says Gossart of the NCEA.²⁹

“Everyone has laudatory remarks for Cristo Rey,” she adds. “But one size does not fit all in education. At some of our schools that have enrollment challenges, what are ways we can

make tuition affordable through financial aid, grants, and creative financing that can get them in the door and help keep them in the door?”

In other words, the Cristo Rey approach probably could not be embraced in total. Cristo Rey was designed for low-income urban students, not more stable families in the suburbs.

“My suspicion is that young people who simply have more opportunities in life would find it difficult to hold an entry-level job where more needy kids embrace it,” says Fr. Foley. “It would also

have to be in an urban setting because that’s where the clerical jobs are.”

Yet there are still elements of what goes on with Cristo Rey schools that can be applied elsewhere. The academic emphasis on nearly all Catholic schools is college preparation. But Cristo Rey offers examples of business practices that might be adopted.

Market focus is critical.

Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Boston need to be very targeted in terms of whom they serve, especially those schools focused on middle class families. Carrie Wagner, vice principal of academics at Cristo Rey Boston, says the fierce competition in Boston among educational possibilities, including charter schools and alternative programs offered by some public schools, has put pressure on middle class Catholic high schools.

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“The choice (available to parents) makes the middle ground difficult because you have to really be sure of who you serve and what you’re offering to that population,” she says. “You have to be a pretty targeted program in order to make the financial sacrifice worth it for (families) who are more in the middle range.”³⁰

The Cristo Rey network will not open in a new city until the employer base is proven, a partner such as the Archdiocese of Boston or the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur is found, and a feasibility study establishing a need for a new school is completed. In this way Cristo Rey schools are very much like a proven franchise operation, finding the best location, identifying customers and applying a successful format.

In 2002 a feasibility study determined there was a “critical need” for Cristo Rey schools in Boston and Lawrence. At the time only 10 percent of Boston’s high school age population attended Catholic high schools. Most did not attend an “inner city” Catholic high school with a predominantly low-income population. Only 14 percent of high school age students attended a Catholic school in Lawrence. In the 30 years prior to the study the Boston archdiocese, which includes Lawrence, lost 54 percent of its Catholic secondary schools and 50 percent of its high school students.

The study also showed that in Boston and, to a lesser degree in Lawrence, the employer base could provide enough jobs for the schools to be financially viable.

Cristo Rey schools further define the families they serve through an income formula. To qualify for admission, a student’s adjusted family income must fall below 75 percent of the local or national median income, whichever is higher, according to Cristo Rey Network policy. High cost of living cities such as San Francisco or Boston have higher income limits for their school enrollees than a school in a more depressed city such as Detroit. These figures are updated annually according to U.S. Census Bureau data.

“The ‘adjustment’ to family income is run through a third party income verification service,” says Seanna Mullen Sumrak, advancement officer for the Cristo Rey Network in Chicago. “The formula allows for such things as high medical or educational debt or families supporting other adults in the home. A family’s gross income is adjusted according to the formula and compared to the Census Bureau-determined income limit specific to that school to determine eligibility. As such, incomes can vary widely depending on a family’s specific situation.”³¹

Since all the schools in the Cristo Rey Network operate under the same business model, educating students from similar types of families, the collective experience is a valuable resource to administrators and faculty members. Leaders and teachers of other Catholic schools attend workshops and

forums for professional development, but teachers and staff at Cristo Rey schools act as their own support group, further sharpening their market focus.

“Because all of our schools are dealing with the same population, when different groups get together such as the presidents of the 32 schools or the corporate work-study directors or the principals, we all have similar issues that we’re struggling with,” says Sr. Gilfeather of NDCR. “So we can do strategic thinking with more than just our school. We meet with other schools struggling with the same things.”³²

Cristo Rey schools think creatively.

“With the birth of the Cristo Rey network, I really believe it was the creative way of getting Catholic schools back in the inner cities working with the poor, where we need to be,” says Sr. Gilfeather. “I believe that’s really the calling of the Church.”

The corporate work study program was proposed simply as a way to pay the bills, according to Fr. Foley. But that simple premise has been the financial foundation to provide education to a needy population. Subsequently the Cristo Rey management model was developed to support schools that also function as job-placement agencies.

The management structure at each school includes a president, who is the school’s primary representative to external audiences and is responsible for the school’s finances. The principal oversees the academic and student life program and is co-equal to the director of the school’s work-study program. The development director and chief financial officer are also co-equals on the organizational chart. The president appoints and supervises all four of these roles.

The Cristo Rey Network has created a guide to running a work-study program, as would other employment agency chains, to ensure that their service meets standards. But the schools are also flexible in their management of the work study program. Cristo Rey Boston is located near a public transportation station, providing easy access for most of the students to their employers. Lawrence is much different. The smaller number of companies there makes the work study program more difficult to operate.

Based upon the criteria the Cristo Rey Network currently uses to consider prospective new schools, the lack of employers within a short distance of the school would likely have eliminated NDCR from being approved, says Goettl, of the Cristo Rey Network.³³ The 2002 feasibility study raised the concern about employers, but the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur believed they could overcome the problem.

“We went into this with our eyes wide open, knowing that getting jobs was going to be a struggle and we were going to

have to go much further than most Cristo Rey schools needed to go to find jobs,” says Sr. Gilfeather.

In other words, NDCR made adjustments to the Cristo Rey model. First it divided the work study leadership into two positions: one for operating the program and the other focusing on job acquisition. Then officials looked beyond the Lawrence metropolitan area to sign up employers and found them. Each morning students board 10 vans and two cars and travel as much as 30 miles in all directions to their 75 companies.

For the work study program to succeed, students must be comfortable in a work environment. That’s difficult for many shy teenagers. Cristo Rey judges applicants not only by their academic history, but also by the likelihood of employability. If they seem suitable, they participate in a mandatory two-week summer training program, taking classes on hard and soft office skills, from using a phone to filing records, to making good impressions and demonstrating a proper attitude.

“In the interview we make sure they understand what kind of jobs they’re getting into,” says Julia White, corporate work study coordinator at NDCR. “Some kids have never had a job before. We can’t prepare them for everything in the workplace but we try to give them a good start so that when they get to an office they’ll be familiar with a copy machine even if it’s not the same one they were trained on.”

Cristo Rey schools have programs to address the challenges of their students.

Because they have a clearly defined student population, Cristo Rey schools can create academic programs to meet their students’ needs. Cristo Rey teachers and academic leaders know the socio-economic backgrounds and family structures of their families. Because students enter ninth grade below grade level and often with poor study skills, the Cristo Rey Network works with the schools to devise programs to build core academic skills and accelerate learning.

“All of the Cristo Rey schools, unlike all of the Catholic schools, are serving the same population, the poor,” says Sr. Gilfeather. “What the Cristo Rey Network has done for us is look at that demographic and say what we need in the curriculum to service these kids. They have also done a great deal in helping us understand second language learners, as well as single-parent family learners where the woman is the one who is predominantly the caretaker. The dad is not available.”

To ramp up learning for its students, NDCR has its Academic Support and Assistance Program, with the clever acronym

“ASAP.” Students identified for ASAP have standardized test results that indicate they are performing below grade level in critical areas. These students report to school five days each week during the first marking period. On the day when they would normally work, they receive instruction in math skills, reading, grammar and usage, study skills and computer use. They spend two periods each in math and English, and one each in computers and corporate work study program skills, and they have a study period.

Notre Dame Cristo Rey has also created CASA, the Center for Academic Support and Assistance, which provides students with the opportunity to strengthen basic skills in mathematics, vocabulary, English grammar and usage, reading and writing. CASA is for students who enroll at NDCR with poor placement test scores, performing below grade level, or with failing grades. CASA opens each day for 45 minutes after the conclusion of the regular session. It is staffed with experienced teachers, some with expertise in remediation strategies.

Many students who attend Cristo Rey schools work after school jobs or assist in care taking at home. For those students NDCR created the Early Bird Academic Recovery Program that begins at 6:33 a.m.

Lastly, NDCR created a program to address the academic problems that ninth graders have during mid-terms and final exams. Some of those problems were related to lack of organization or persistence. The Mandatory 9th Grade Study Skills Evening requires all ninth graders to attend two evenings of study skills during the week prior to exams.

“All of our teachers know they need to bring our students up at least two grade levels each year in order for the students to be prepared for college,” says Sr. Gilfeather. “Their commitment to help and their belief in our student learners contributes to our success as a school.”

Cristo Rey Boston initiated a proficiency program designed to get ninth graders ready for the rigors of a college preparatory program. Each August, every entering ninth grader takes a proficiency test in math and English Language Arts. The test assesses skills that an eighth grader should have attained according to the state standards. Students must earn a score of 90 percent on the exam. Different versions of the proficiency exam are offered every month. While a small number pass the tests right away, most do not and are assigned a volunteer tutor. During study halls and after school, they take part in tutoring, and they take the exam each month until they pass.³⁴

In addition to the proficiency program, every ninth grader at Cristo Rey Boston takes double-block classes (96 minutes

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each) of math and English. The additional time allows students to go into depth in the two foundational subjects. The proficiency program, which takes place during study halls and after school, combined with the double block ninth grade level classes in math and English, is designed to get ninth graders ready for honors level classes in grades 10–12.

According to Wagner, vice principal of academics at Cristo Rey Boston, each academic department – math, English, science, foreign language (Spanish), history – offers an Advanced Placement (AP) course during senior year. The faculty aligns the curriculum in grades 9–11 so that students are ready to take an AP course in grade 12. This approach guarantees that students are undertaking a college preparatory curriculum at Cristo Rey Boston that is measured externally.

Every senior at Cristo Rey Boston is required to take at least one AP course. School officials want to make sure that all students are doing college-level work and have any extra support they need. Some students might choose to take more than one, and some take one during their junior year.

Each spring, most Cristo Rey schools tout the achievement of all their graduates being accepted into at least one four-year school. But Wagner says simply being accepted isn't acceptable.

"Schools are very eager to have our students," she says. "But getting 100 percent accepted does not mean we've done our job in getting them prepared for college. What helps us understand if we are doing our job is whether they are able to earn their degree and graduate from college."³⁵

Yet being able to earn their degree sometimes isn't enough for low-income students and Cristo Rey Boston addresses that as well. Even if a student has 100 percent of their tuition and housing covered, that could include \$15,000 per year in loans. Through tracking they've found that students will complete a year or two, but eventually the financial burden becomes overwhelming. During the 2016–2017 school year, Cristo Rey Boston's college counselor advised families to consider other financial options if they needed to take out more than \$7,000 per year in loans.³⁶

"The name of the school is not the most important thing," says Wagner. "It's the fit of the school that is. That includes the support that's in place, how students are going to pay for it and how much of it is covered for them. We work very hard with students to get them the best possible financial package that we can."

Faculty and staff are on a mission

Employees at start-up companies often talk about their goal to "change the world." A common sentiment among Cristo Rey teachers, development officers, corporate work study directors and administrators is that they are on a daily mission to help

low-income teenagers get a college education. They could educate students at any public or private school. At Cristo Rey they believe they do more.

Elena Zongrone, director of development at Cristo Rey Boston, thinks the difference between her school and other Catholic schools is the mission. When she speaks with potential donors she talks about "changing the trajectory" of the lives of low income students through a Cristo Rey education. Elite Catholic high schools such as Boston College High School in Dorchester or St. John's Prep in Danvers, have large parent populations who can donate to the school. Cristo Rey does not.

"Our parents are more than happy to help in any way they can, but in actual donation of dollars that's not an option for them," she says. "So we have to look at people who believe in the mission, who believe in Catholic education, and who believe in taking kids and offering them a better opportunity than maybe has been presented to the parents."³⁷ "It's our collective desire that these kids will go on to college," she adds. "We want to get everyone on board to support the dream in changing the path of our students. There's a more successful future and a fulfilling life for them."

Her attitude is echoed at other Cristo Rey schools. Rebecca Twitchell, marketing director and interim development director at NDCR, acknowledges that her school does not have the alumni base or parent donors as other Catholic high schools. But the work motivates her colleagues.

"Our story is very clear and our mission is very clear," she says. "The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur are about serving the poor through education. It would be nice to have the fundraising of some of the other Catholic schools. But that's why we're so passionate. The people who work here, knowing what we're doing, that passion and dedication tell the story."³⁸

Teachers at Cristo Rey Boston earn \$45,000 to \$65,000 per year, according to Wagner. The school often loses people who move on to higher paying jobs. She says it is difficult to diversify the staff and hire more people of color, because the Boston Public Schools recruits aggressively to hire those teachers and Cristo Rey can't match the starting salaries. Still, there are teachers who join the faculty at Cristo Rey schools and stay.

"One of the reasons is because people don't come here to make money," says Wagner. "If that's a top priority then people are looking somewhere else. People work here because they believe in the work we're doing."

Sometimes people previously employed in higher paying sectors join the school because they're looking for a meaningful change. John O'Keeffe, director of the work study program at Cristo Rey Boston, previously worked for a Boston investment firm selling mutual funds. He saw an advertisement for his

position and went for it as “an opportunity to give something back.”

He says of his colleagues, “There are some very talented people here who could easily get another job. They work here for a reason and that’s because they have a sincere wish to give back and love the mission.”

All that is not to say there isn’t turnover at Cristo Rey schools. O’Keeffe has been on the job for a year at Cristo Rey Boston, as has Zongrone as director of development. In Lawrence Rebecca Twitchell is the marketing director at NDCR, but currently the interim development director as well. Cristo Rey Boston began the 2017–2018 school year with its third new president in three years, and a new principal. Finding leaders of Catholic schools is always a challenge, but Cristo Rey schools in particular depend on mission-driven people willing to work long hours and serve low-income students. Few traditional Catholic school leaders end up working at Cristo Rey schools.

Conclusion

Cristo Rey schools were formed for families who wanted a Catholic education for their children, but couldn’t afford the tuition. Since 1996 the founding school in Chicago and 31 others that followed have separated themselves from most other Catholic schools by staying true to those families.

“People here are committed to making a Catholic, private education available for the poor,” says Sr. Gilfeather. “I think in rhetoric our other schools would say that, but in reality those kids who go to most of our Catholic schools are not poor.”

Defenders of middle and upper income Catholic schools say they educate students who will one day be in positions to help others such as the poor. Sr. Gilfeather agrees, but makes a further point about Cristo Rey schools.

“I have never seen any metric that says how many graduated (from those schools) and this is all the good they’re doing for the poor,” she says. “I can give you the metric for how many poor kids I have and how many poor kids get to college and through college. The (return on investment) here is a miracle. You see what you’re doing.”

Many public high schools have boosted their enrollments over time by incorporating vocational technical education into their curriculum. Gossart of the National Catholic Education Association says many Catholic high schools are now considering it. But historically Catholic secondary schools have offered college-preparatory education while public schools

offered other tracks.

In her book *Putting Education to Work: How Cristo Rey High Schools Are Transforming Urban Education*, journalist Megan Sweas states that one of the reasons Catholic schools did not broaden their curriculum was the belief, “intrinsic to the Catholic faith,” that “all deserve and are capable of receiving a classical education that advances their spiritual understanding.” She cites the study *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, by Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland, who said that “such intellectual development was deemed necessary in order to grasp fully the established understandings about person, society, and God.”³⁹

While that mission remains essential, it is the financial model that makes it possible in Cristo Rey schools. It is a thoroughly fleshed-out concept that is being replicated around the country. In 2002, when Boston and Lawrence were being considered for Cristo Rey schools, a feasibility study was conducted. The published report described the conditions in which a school would be started.

“A Cristo Rey school must demonstrate an ability to reach students not currently served by Catholic high schools and to increase the total number of students and families receiving a Catholic education. Furthermore, the fuel that makes a Cristo Rey school go is revenue from the work-study program, which represents a business expense, not a charitable contribution, for a corporation. The experience in fundraising apart from the work-study in (other Cristo Rey cities) is that Cristo Rey attracts new donors who previously have not given to Catholic education.”⁴⁰

Critical to the growth of the Cristo Rey Network has been the financial backing of, at first, the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation and later the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Together they provided \$28 million in grant money, which was used as start-up funding for new schools in inner cities.

“There are some very talented people here who could easily get another job. They work here for a reason and that’s because they have a sincere wish to give back and love the mission.”

RECOMMENDATIONS: LESSONS FOR OTHER CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

1 Clearly define your market

Cristo Rey schools are unique in that they are one organization with two clearly defined markets: students and employers. The sharp understanding of its students helps Cristo Rey administrators tailor their programs to their student needs and tell a compelling story to donors and corporate work-study program partners. They also match their schools to their communities. Cristo Rey Boston, for example, adjusts its admissions process to the Boston area by reaching out to more public and charter middle schools since many Catholic middle schools have closed.

By conducting a feasibility study in a city before committing to opening a Cristo Rey school, officials determine if the employer base is large enough to hire students. The staff includes a director for the corporate work study program, who is on par with the principal and often has past sales experience.

Struggling Catholic schools might stabilize their enrollment declines by developing a target student population, educating students with similar challenges and motivations.

2 Establish your brand.

It is not sacrilegious for a Catholic school to consider what it does in commercial terms. Cristo Rey schools are known as the Catholic schools that serve poor kids. Catholic is who they are, educating poor kids is what they do. There is a Cristo Rey national logo and “mission effectiveness standards” that all schools follow. There’s no misunderstanding. But what about the product at other Catholic schools? Gossart says the brand needs to be the best education product available.

“The proof is in the product despite our struggles,” she says. “Catholic high schools are producing 98 to 100 percent college acceptance rates and 99 to 100 percent high school graduation rates. I wish I could say that everyone who gravitates toward a Catholic school is looking for the authentic Catholic identity, the call to mission, the spiritual community. But the number one reason listed for

parents sending their children to Catholic secondary schools is academic excellence. Our product has to be competitive in the marketplace for us to survive.”

Academics aren’t sacrificed for work study

Catholic schools that might consider their own corporate work study approach should note that academics remain the priority at Cristo Rey schools. They focus on preparing students ready for college prep including a proficiency test that students take at Cristo Rey Boston until they pass, support during mid-terms and final exams, then tracking and counseling for college success. The Academic Support and Assistance Program (ASAP), the Center for Academic Support and Assistance (CASA) and the Early Bird Academic Recovery Program are all initiatives that Notre Dame Cristo Rey has taken to accelerate learning for students behind the curve.

3 Campaign for tax credits.

BJ Cassin, California entrepreneur, venture capitalist and the man who believed in the potential of the Cristo Rey model enough to form a foundation and invest \$12 million in its expansion, thinks the Catholic Church has done a “terrible job in running their school systems.” The enrollment collapse was expected and forecast, yet it’s now too late for the corrective action that could have been taken before. He thinks the solution for the crisis is tax credits.

There are 38 states with laws that prohibit taxpayer money from being used to fund religious schools—so-called Blaine Amendments. But many are revising those laws to enable tuition assistance for needy families. States such as Florida, Illinois and Pennsylvania allow an allocation of state funds or tax credits to be used to fund education choice scholarships. Tax credits are more valuable than traditional tax-deductible donations. The donations reduce the amount of money a business or individual pays taxes on, while tax credits reduce the amount of taxes owed.⁴¹

Though many private and religious school officials are wary of “government money,” fearing that government regulations will follow, successful tax credit programs exist. In Arizona, the Original Individual Tax Credit Program, for example, allows Arizona taxpayers to make a contribution to a “school tuition organization,” such as the Catholic Tuition Support Organization of the Diocese of Tucson that will help to fund private school students’ tuition.

A school tuition organization is one that is tax exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, allocates at least 90 percent of its annual contributions to scholarships or grants and makes its scholarships/grants available to students of more than one qualified school.⁴²

4 Be rigorous but find ways to respond to students who struggle

Both Cristo Rey Boston and Notre Dame Cristo Rey High School, along with other schools in the network, have designed their curricula to accommodate the overwhelming number of students who come to school below grade level. Remarkably, Cristo Rey schools have succeeded in getting students into college. Rather than searching for students overseas, could traditional Catholic schools learn something from Cristo Rey and become places not just for good students, but for those who struggle? Such an approach could revolutionize their academic programs and make them attractive to a whole new market.

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