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New Educational Options

By Tom Vander Ark

I married my high school sweetheart. When we started dating, this was not a popular thing to do; we attended cross-town rivals, Denver Christian and Denver Lutheran. The Metro League also included two urban Catholic schools, Machebeuf and Holy Family (who ruined a perfect season for us in the state championship in 1976). I took for granted the college preparatory curriculum, dedicated teachers, personal attention, and culture of respect and responsibility in my religion-based school.

Over the last five years, in my work with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, I have been on a journey of discovery—trying to figure out what it is about schools like Denver Christian and Denver Lutheran—or Machebeuf and Holy Family—that make them work so well. In my travels, I have had the opportunity to walk the hallways of hundreds of schools, talk to students and teachers and observe classroom activities. From these experiences, I have found that good schools, whether public, parochial or private, share four common principles: a common intellectual mission, high expectations and quality teaching, smallness and a focus on persons, and a positive culture.

The result? At the high school level, no matter the ethnic, socioeconomic or geographical location, the students in these good schools are engaged, their teachers experience professional satisfaction in their work and over 80 percent of the students graduate and go on to college.

Unfortunately, these good schools—especially in our poorest, neediest communities—are the exception rather than the rule. Most low-income families living in America’s urban areas do not have the option of attending a high school that integrates those four common characteristics of a good school.

In struggling communities around the country, young people are usually funneled into the large local high school, where teachers do not know their students or one another, and where there is a maze of choices and courses, few of which seem relevant and even fewer of which are academically rigorous. More likely than not, students are left either to muddle through or, far too often, to just disappear. Recent studies from the Manhattan Institute suggest that one out of three American high school students will drop out and almost half of all African American and Latino high school students will fail to earn a diploma.

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Civic leaders have recognized the need to address the lack of educational opportunity in many of America’s poorest cities and towns by creating more choices for our country’s most vulnerable young people. New federal legislation seeks to create school choice for students in failing high schools. Unfortunately, the legislation does not address the fact that most low-income families have few schools to choose from and even fewer resources to draw upon. While these families often have no choice but to send their children to the large neighborhood high school, more affluent families have long had the opportunity to choose from a variety of schools with different approaches.

Catholic High Schools and Choice

Catholic schools have long played a critical role in creating high quality educational options for inner-city youth. From the Nativity middle schools in several cities throughout the country to such standard-bearers as Regis High School in New York City, these schools have an often overlooked track record in the nation’s ongoing conversation about improving the effectiveness of our secondary schools.

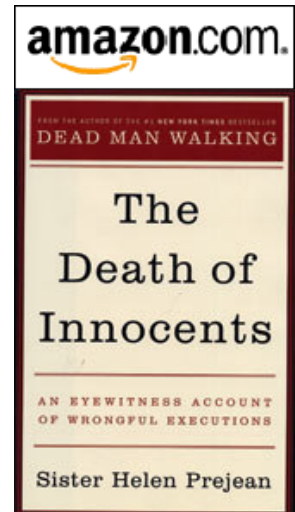
Each of these outstanding Catholic high schools offers its students a prescribed and rigorous curriculum that prepares them all for college. This is a contrast to the curriculum of a comprehensive public school, which may offer 100 courses with five tracks of optional difficulty. These Catholic schools are often small and have developed a personalized approach within a climate of respect and responsibility. They are shaped by a common worldview that integrates the curriculum, staffing, structure and culture. Their teachers are dedicated and share a sense of mission. In short, Catholic schools have a lot to teach public schools.

Despite their long history of success, a decline in income and number of students has put tremendous strain on the typical operating and financing strategy of urban Catholic schools. Over the last two decades, in many of the largest cities and neediest communities around the country, Catholic schools have been closing and consolidating. Others (like Machebeuf and Holy Family) have left the city for the suburbs. This has contributed to the reduction in viable educational options for disadvantaged students and the elimination of low-cost, faith-based options.

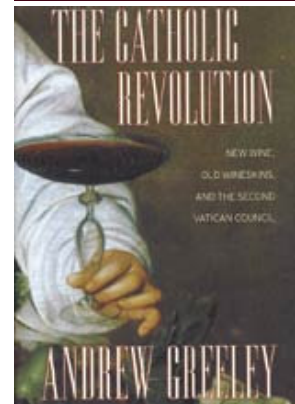
Yet along with the growing socioeconomic gulf, the number of urban poor people also continues to grow. Consequently, the need to create better educational options for our young people becomes more urgent.

Cristo Rey

Members of the Society of Jesus have been educating young people of all backgrounds, ethnicities and incomes for almost 500 years. In the mid-1990’s, faced with failing schools and growing needs, a group of Chicago Province Jesuits collaborated to develop an educational model designed to enhance the financial viability of inner-city Catholic high schools. Working closely with community and business leaders, they were able to create a high school that would enable them to continue to serve the inner-city student population in the greatest



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need of their educational expertise. They called this school Cristo Rey Jesuit High School.

The first Cristo Rey was opened in 1996. Today this pioneering school serves a Chicago neighborhood in which there is a 65 percent public high school dropout rate. Ninety-two percent of the students in this area qualify for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program (open to students whose family income is less than 150 percent of the federal poverty level). The median family income of the students at Cristo Rey is \$29,000 for a family of four.

To ensure that Cristo Rey is affordable, the school offers a unique work-study program in which the students themselves finance most of their education by taking on entry-level clerical jobs at local businesses. The money they earn pays three-quarters of their tuition. This reduces the stated tuition to less than \$2,200 and makes Cristo Rey an affordable option for most families. The school's scholarship fund provides 50 percent of the student body with tuition assistance, making the Cristo Rey experience accessible to the lowest income families in the community.

In other respects, Cristo Rey is a typical Catholic high school. It offers a college preparatory curriculum taught by dedicated teachers in a positive environment. Like all good high schools, it has a set of clear goals and high expectations concerning student performance. Since I wondered whether or not the work component would be a hardship, I visited a number of Cristo Rey schools and interviewed some of their students. Every interview indicated that the work experience was what the students liked best in the school's program. They appreciated their connection with the adult world and its work. They also valued the respect they received as a contributor to the work team.

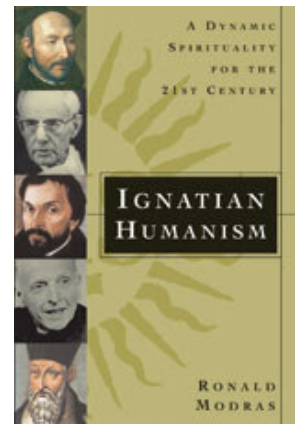
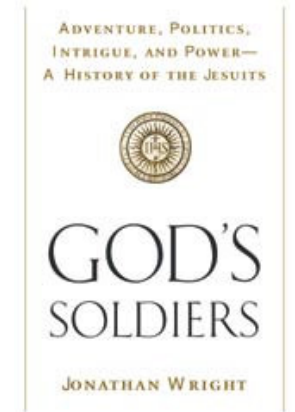
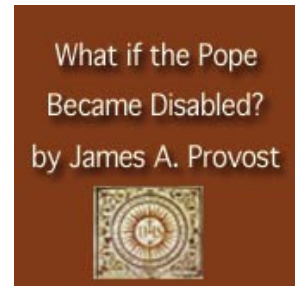
Finally, it should be noted that Cristo Rey has sent on average more than 85 percent of its graduates to college, and 100 percent of the class of 2002 were admitted to a four-year or two-year college. The model is working.

More Options Around the Country

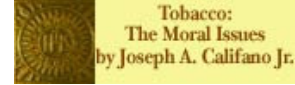
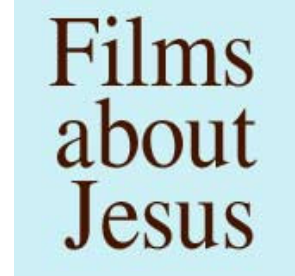
Recognizing the potential of the Cristo Rey model for retaining Catholic education as a high quality and affordable option for urban families, the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation in 2000 funded the creation of a Cristo Rey network to facilitate the development of similar high schools in other parts of the country.

To date, three Cristo Rey network schools have been established—in Los Angeles, Portland and Austin. The Jesuits opened another of these schools in Denver this fall. Up to six schools are scheduled to open in the fall of 2004, and many more are in the planning stage. Last spring, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation joined the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation to announce an additional \$18.9 million commitment to expand the Cristo Rey network to 16 more cities around the country.

As a member of the Cristo Rey network, a school community gains access to all training, contract and other materials of the Corporate Internship Program of Cristo Rey Jesuit High School. Network



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members send personnel to Chicago for training, and the Network Liaison provides guidance and assistance to new schools embarking on the work-study program. Administrators from Cristo Rey Jesuit High School provide advice on budgeting, fund-raising and curriculum. Network members also enjoy the chance to share ideas and to learn from each other.

In cities and towns where the Cristo Rey network has been established, the local Catholic leadership, the business community and civic officials have come together to figure out how the Cristo Rey model may be applied in the specific circumstances of their municipalities. In some cities, the local Jesuit community has led the drive to create the school; in other places the diocese or a group of committed laypeople or a religious congregation like the De La Salle Christian Brothers, the Sisters of the Holy Child, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and the Sisters of the Humility of Mary have organized the initiative. Working together, these communities have been able to return longstanding but empty Catholic school buildings into the vibrant learning communities they once were. In each case, these schools have become a beacon of hope in neighborhoods that have long been underserved, and for young people who have rarely enjoyed the benefits of high quality educational options.

In the Cristo Rey network schools that representatives of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation visited in Chicago, Portland and Austin, all the students we interviewed said they enjoy and appreciate the work experience. It creates what the education reformer Deborah Meier calls opportunities for students to “spend time with adults that they can imagine themselves becoming.”

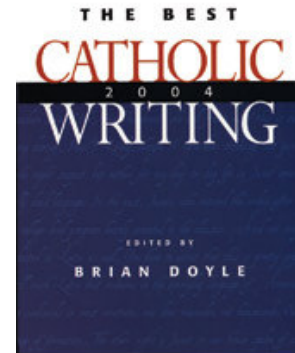
Jessica Quijano, whose parents came to Chicago from Mexico, is one such student. Now a senior, she chose to attend Cristo Rey because it offered a safe and affordable alternative to the large local high school. As part of the Corporate Internship Program, Jessica worked during her first year at the Chicago Board of Trade, and then for three years at ABN AMRO, a global banking group. Upon graduation, she will be the first person in her family to have a high school diploma and the first to go to college. Jessica plans to pursue a degree in international business and has been accepted at several highly regarded private colleges in the Midwest.

Our Commitment

Our foundation is committed to creating more and better options for all of America’s young people. Its investment in Cristo Rey is one example of the kind of work it is doing around the country. In partnerships with school districts and communities committed to transforming their high schools, the foundation is sponsoring the creation of small, high-quality high schools in needy communities. This is also an effort to create for disadvantaged students the kind of quality school that is available to middle class and affluent families. The foundation also sponsors school improvement efforts with urban districts and encourages new developments with public, charter and private schools.

Early evaluations of the foundation’s investments demonstrate that these experiments are making a difference. Students in these new

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schools feel that their current teachers know them better, care more about them and have higher expectations for their success than their past teachers did. As a result, students report feeling more engaged in their schoolwork and in the school community than they did in their larger high school.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation applauds the leadership of the Jesuit community in Chicago, the vision of the Cassin Foundation and the initiative and commitment of local Catholic leaders in cities and towns across America for supporting the development of sustainable high quality educational options in our inner cities. We are excited to be part of the team.

Tom Vander Ark, executive director for education of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is responsible for the development and administration of the foundation's K-12 education grant programs and scholarship programs. Click here for [a sample of author's writings in America](#) and for [books by author at amazon.com](#). Link to "sample writings" is slow; link to amazon may list books by authors with similar names.

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