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On May 22, 2003, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation pledged \$18.9 million to the Cristo Rey Network, a series of Jesuit high schools that serve poor students in American cities. The funds, to be paid over the course of five years, were intended to “bolster the schools and export the [Cristo Rey] model to 12 additional cities.”<sup>1</sup> Marie L. Groark, a spokeswoman for the Gates Foundation, called the Cristo Rey Network “an incredibly innovative model that serves our target population — disadvantaged kids who don't have high-quality education options.”<sup>2</sup> The gift was at the time, and remains today, one of the largest single donations the Gates Foundation has made in the field of education. Beyond the large amount, the donation was additionally impressive in its boldness; the Cristo Rey Network had only been founded two years earlier. The purpose of this paper is to examine the Cristo Rey educational model, investigate the degree to which it is successful, and illuminate the impact the model has had on education in American cities.

The Cristo Rey model was begun in 1996 by Father John Foley, a Jesuit priest from Chicago. Like many Jesuits, Foley's goal was to give Chicago's poor children access to a top-quality, Catholic-based high school experience. The problem lay in how these poor students would fund that education, which came with an estimated price tag of \$9,000 a year. Foley began visiting Chicago businessmen for help, but not charity; the idea was to have the students pay for the majority of their own education by working one day a week and having their earnings go directly to the school. Students would attend classes four days a week and work the fifth. To the delight of Foley and his fellow Jesuits, the model worked. Students received not only entry-level pay at white-collar jobs, but were also given job training, life skills, and an education in how to carry oneself professionally.<sup>3</sup>

The school – called Cristo Rey Jesuit High School – was so successful that various Jesuit educators decided to try to expand the model into urban communities across the United States. In 2001, philanthropist B. J. Cassin established the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation with the hope of fulfilling that goal; the Cassin Foundation became the fundraising arm of the Cristo Rey Network. There are currently eleven high schools operating under the Cristo Rey model, with two more slated to open in the fall of 2006. Additionally, the Network is currently conducting feasibility studies in ten other urban areas.

Cristo Rey Network schools serve and actively recruit students from poor, urban backgrounds. Though tuition is only around \$2,500 (after work-study funds are collected), 62% of students in Cristo Rey schools receive financial aid. Approximately

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<sup>1</sup> Schemo, Diana Jean. (2003, May 21). Charities Pledge \$19 Million to Jesuit Model Schools. *The New York Times*, p. 22:3.

<sup>2</sup> Zehr, Mary Ann. (2003, May 28). Foundations' Gift to Help Expand 'Cristo Rey' Model. *Education Week*, 22(38), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Mabrey, Vicki. (2004, October 27). In A Class By Itself. *60 Minutes II*. Transcript available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/10/27/60II/printable651804.html>.

56% of students receive free or reduced-price school lunches. 62% of students are of Hispanic descent, and 23% of students are African American. The vast majority of students come from Catholic households. All the Network's schools are intentionally small; Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago is the largest school in the Network with 520 students. At the same time, the schools are experiencing incredible growth. In one year, Notre Dame High School, a Cristo Rey model school in Lawrence, Massachusetts, grew from 80 to 136 students. Verbum Dei High School of Los Angeles has grown from 142 to 329 students in just four years.<sup>4</sup>

Most of this growth is attributed to the Network's educational model, which centers on ten "mission effectiveness standards." The school must (1) be explicitly Catholic and have Church approval; (2) serve only economically disadvantaged students; (3) be family centered and play an active role in the local community; (4) have an accredited college preparatory curriculum that requires a high level of student engagement; (5) require work-study participation from all students; (6) integrate learning opportunities experienced in the work program, the classroom, and during extracurricular activities; (7) have an effective administrative structure that includes religious, education, community, business, and civic leaders; (8) be financially sound; (9) seek to understand, assure, and improve how and how well its students learn and grow; and (10) be an active participant in the collaboration, support, and development of the Cristo Rey Network.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the school must offer small class sizes and remain small on the whole.

To ensure that these standards are carried out on a daily basis, the schools all have a rigorous discipline policy that mandates professional dress (including shirts and ties for boys), professional language, and professional demeanor. Any student involved in or associated with gangs is immediately expelled from school; this policy includes the wearing of gang colors, the flashing of gang signs, and the altering of personal style (such as haircuts) to reflect gang requirements. Though students commonly complain that some of the rules are too strict, school leaders maintain that strong discipline is necessary for students to develop the six requirements for graduation: openness to growth, religiousness, intellectual competency, belief in God's love, a commitment to justice, and work experience.

Because the school week is shortened as a result of the work-study program, school days are lengthened. Students receive an average of six-and-a-half hours of instruction each day, more than an hour above the national average. School days normally last from 8:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon. The schools also enjoy a very high rate of daily attendance; the average attendance for all schools was 95.86% during the 2004-05 school year. 98% of students graduate within four years, and 95% of graduates attend two- or four-year colleges. At Cristo Rey Jesuit, where the local dropout rate was nearly 65% when the school opened in 1996, attrition has fallen to less than 1%.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The figures quoted here can be found in Cristo Rey Network, The. 2005-06 Directory. Retrieved June 25, 2006, from [http://www.cristoreynetwork.org/about/directory\\_total\\_final.pdf](http://www.cristoreynetwork.org/about/directory_total_final.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Cristo Rey Network, The. (2005, August 8). Mission Effectiveness for the Schools of the Cristo Rey Network: Standards and Assessment Process. Retrieved June 25, 2006, from [http://www.cristoreynetwork.org/about/Mission\\_Effectiveness\\_Standards\\_0805.pdf](http://www.cristoreynetwork.org/about/Mission_Effectiveness_Standards_0805.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> The figures quoted in this paragraph can be found in Cristo Rey Network, The. 2005-06 Directory. Retrieved June 25, 2006, from [http://www.cristoreynetwork.org/about/directory\\_total\\_final.pdf](http://www.cristoreynetwork.org/about/directory_total_final.pdf).

Of course, we must recognize that Cristo Rey schools have many advantages. They select their own students, boy and girls who commonly come from families that may be poor, but have also commonly stressed the importance of education. The schools are also able to design their own curriculum, keep a dress code, and enforce harsher rules than public schools.