

A Life-Changing Educational Opportunity

An Interview with William P. Henson, Vice-Chair of the Board of Directors, Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School

EDITORS' NOTE William Henson previously served as the president of Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School (CRBHS) and has been a member of the Board of Directors since May 2011. Henson was previously on the Board of Directors of Cristo Rey New York High School, and then served as the director of Enrollment Management and Strategic Initiatives. He also chaired the Economics of the Schools Committee on the New York Archdiocese's Pathways to Excellence task force.



William P. Henson

Prior to Cristo Rey, Henson spent more than 30 years in the financial services industry, developing and providing corporate finance and capital raising solutions to firms of all sizes. He is a co-founder of Grail Partners, where he headed the company's merchant banking activities. Prior to Grail Partners, Henson worked at Putnam Lovell Securities, co-founding the Corporate Finance Group and eventually culminating in the positions of chief operating officer, head of capital markets and member of the Board of Directors. Henson also worked at Citicorp Securities, Bankers Trust Company and Manufacturers Hanover Trust. Henson graduated from Chaminade High School and attended Union College. He holds an MBA from the Stern School of Business, New York University.

INSTITUTION BRIEF Cristo Rey Brooklyn (cristoreybrooklyn.org) is a college prep, Catholic high school located in central Brooklyn that educates young people of all faiths but exclusively serves families of modest financial means. It does so with a unique and innovative model. A member of the national Cristo Rey Network, Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School opened to freshmen students in September 2008 as Lourdes Academy High School in the former Our Lady of Lourdes elementary school building in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn. In 2011, the school was renamed Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School. In 2013, after five years in its initial home, it moved to the former Catherine McAuley High School in the East Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn. This facility provides the capacity to grow enrollment and offers numerous resources that were lacking in the previous location. In May 2018, after a two-year accreditation review period, CRBHS achieved full accreditation by the New York State Association of Independent Schools (NYSAIS).

CRBHS is supported by its religious endorser, the Mid-Atlantic Community of the Sisters of Mercy, and it also works closely with the Diocese of Brooklyn.

How do you define Cristo Rey Brooklyn's mission?

Cristo Rey Brooklyn is "A Catholic High School open to students of all faiths that transforms young people of limited economic means into men and women of faith, purpose and service. By offering a rigorous curriculum, a unique work-study experience and

the support of an inclusive school community, we prepare students to succeed in college and beyond with the values essential to a fulfilling life." We summarize our specific academic mission as "college acceptance, college access and college success."

"We are animated by the principle that 'educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.'"

In other words, we are driven by the conviction that each and every child in this country deserves equal educational opportunity regardless of background or financial circumstances and that given the right mix of challenge, accountability and support, young people of limited economic means can meet high expectations as ably as their more affluent peers. We are occasionally mistaken for being a charter school and though generally speaking we serve a similar population and can claim outcomes equal to or

better than leading charter school networks, we differ in several critical aspects:

We are independent and as a consequence, receive virtually no public funding, and we are animated by the principle that "educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all." Our core and complete mission is as much, if not more, one of faith, morality and values as it is of reading, writing and arithmetic. If successful with the former, the latter becomes far easier. While we are explicitly Roman Catholic in practice and programming, we are open to children of all religious backgrounds. In fact, approximately half our students are non-Catholic. As the cliché goes, we teach them not because they are Catholic, but because we are.

Unlike charter schools whose admissions process is largely lottery driven, we exclusively serve families of modest income. In fact, we will decline applicants whose family income can support another more traditional private school so as to reserve our limited number of seats for those not so fortunate. The average gross income of a Cristo Rey Brooklyn family is approximately \$36,000, which is less than the annual tuition for one student at many of New York's top independent college prep schools. Notwithstanding the economic status of our students, all our families have real "skin in the game" by contributing some level of tuition, on average between \$1,000 and \$1,500 per year, with many paying less than \$1,000. While tuition only makes up 10 percent or so of our annual operating budget, to a single mom bringing home \$25,000 per year, paying several hundred dollars so her son or daughter can receive a Cristo Rey education represents an incredibly powerful statement of commitment and priority. Needless to say, when we encounter such compelling demonstrations of personal sacrifice, which we do by the hundreds every year, it inspires us even further to fulfill our end of the bargain. That is why we are especially proud of the fact that for the last eight years, virtually every one of our graduates has received at least one college acceptance to a four-year college with full financial needs met.

In light of the fact that family contributions only constitute 10 percent of our cost base and as a private school barely 12 years old with no wealthy alumni to call upon yet for significant support, we must find additional sources of economic support to provide our students with a genuine college preparatory education. In addition to the support of generous institutional and



Students at Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School

individual benefactors, coupled with our rigorous academic program, is the innovative Corporate Work Study Program (CWSP), which provides students with a life-changing opportunity to work and earn up to 50 percent of the cost of their education. Every CRBHS student works one day a week at close to 100 New York area businesses and community partners such as American Express, Brooklyn Hospital, Morgan Stanley, Blackstone, Brooklyn Law School and Paul Weiss. The CWSP, however, is far more than a source of school revenue and a way for students to finance their education. It offers our young people real-world experience and translates dreams into ambition, motivating them to finish high school, enter and complete college, and join the workforce as productive citizens and become “professionals for others.”

How has the school evolved since its founding?

Located in the geographic heart of Brooklyn, the most populous of New York City’s boroughs and roughly equal in population to the whole of Chicago, Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School, formerly Lourdes Academy High School (LAHS), first opened its doors as a provisional member of the national Cristo Rey Network of high schools at the advent of the so-called Great Recession in 2008. LAHS welcomed 43 freshmen students in a 100-year old former elementary school building in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn. In its first three years, LAHS grew slowly to 135 students. This sluggish rate of growth during an economically difficult period led the LAHS Board of Directors to decide in early 2011 to make significant organizational and staffing changes. Since then, the school has evolved and grown in numerous ways:

- Rechristened the school Cristo Rey Brooklyn High School.
- Received full membership in the Cristo Rey Network in 2012, the largest network of

high schools in the country exclusively serving students and families of limited economic means.

- More than doubled enrollment, to 300, and graduated 500 students.
- Grew staff and faculty from 15 to approximately 50 and expanded the board of directors from a half dozen to 20 members.
- Relocated from a former elementary school location in Bushwick, Brooklyn to a full-fledged high school facility in East Flatbush.
- Successfully executed a \$5+ Million Growth Capital Campaign in 2014, grew its donor base from a few dozen to several hundred and endowed a CRBHS Scholarship Fund.
- Expanded the school’s innovative Corporate Work Study Program to nearly 100 corporate partners.
- Received full accreditation from the prestigious New York State Association of Independent Schools in 2018, subsequently extended earlier this year to 2024.
- Earned a 100 percent four-year college acceptance rate since its second graduating class in 2013, with virtually all graduating seniors receiving at least one college acceptance with full financial needs met.
- Seen its alumni graduate from college with four-year degrees at a rate nearly four times that of traditional public high school graduates from the same economic cohort. Through the Class of 2018, 82 percent of alumni have graduated from or are persisting in college, compared to a 48 percent rate for all other college goers regardless of socioeconomic status.
- Bolstered academic programming by expanding our lineup of Advanced Placement offerings bringing us to a total of 7 AP classes and even more Honors classes.
- Partnered with the Early Scholars Program at Long Island University to offer students college credit bearing classes over and above their normal college prep curriculum

and offered dual credit bearing classes in concert with St. Francis College.

- Launched a new, full-day, four-week Summer Institute in 2019 with over 100 students attending to further support our college readiness ambitions for all our students by providing additional advanced and/or refresher classes in math, science, social studies and Spanish.

- 43 rising juniors and seniors attended on-campus classes and programs in the summer of 2019 including the Columbia University Summer Immersion Program, Syracuse University Sports Management Program, Georgetown Medical Institute, Beijing Career Pathways Program, and George Washington University Pre-College Program, among numerous others.

In sum, in barely more than a decade Cristo Rey Brooklyn has evolved from start-up/turn-around to early growth and success and now sits on the verge of becoming a permanent beacon of academic excellence and opportunity for even more high potential, low income New York city youth.

What are the key issues that schools need to address to be effective for the future and how critical is it for Cristo Rey to plan and invest for the long term while addressing the short-term pressures all institutions are facing today?

Notwithstanding its growth and success of the last several years, CRB faces very real short- and long-term challenges. Given the population we serve, our relative youth as an institution, the fact that we receive no public funding in the ordinary course, and our subsequent dependence on the work study program and traditional philanthropy from non-school affiliated sources for the lion’s share of our operating revenue, means that the short-term economic impact of COVID-19 is quite real. At the same time, health and safety considerations for our students, their families as well as faculty and staff, pose unprecedented challenges in crafting and executing an instructional solution that satisfies the educational expectations and needs of our students while minimizing health risks. As mounting evidence strongly suggests, the families we serve are simultaneously most at risk from COVID-19, but at the same time it is their children who arguably are also most in need of the instruction, counseling, support and social interaction and development offered by a full in-person program.

Additionally, we have the opportunity, really the need, to acquire our current facility and make it our permanent home so that the life-changing educational opportunity provided to hundreds of deserving young people from Brooklyn and beyond these past several years can be extended for decades to come. This initiative of course will require a major capital investment by the school and its partners.

In light of our impressive track record of recent years, the unique and unifying benefits of the proven Cristo Rey model, and the growing realization by multiple segments of our society that it is incumbent upon all of us to do more to offer genuine opportunity to the least fortunate among us, we remain confident and excited that this special school, just as its motto advocates, will continue to “Grow in Brooklyn.” ●