

Catholic schools take big step forward

Archdiocese on board with tracking students' post-secondary performance

By John Swope and Robert Birdsell

2:32 PM EDT, May 17, 2010

The Archdiocese of Baltimore has a deep and distinguished history of commitment to urban education in Baltimore, dating back to St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's pioneering work more than 200 years ago. Yet, the rich educational tradition of Catholic education faces formidable challenges on a number of fronts as Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien leads an ambitious renewal of Catholic education through an organizational reset of archdiocesan schools.

The Cristo Rey Network, a national consortium of 24 urban Catholic high schools, has been overcoming these challenges through its new model of education for more than a decade. Baltimore's Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, a new, independent Catholic school in Fells Point, will graduate its first class in June 2011. The 24 Cristo Rey Network high schools serve almost 6,000 low-income students across 20 cities, 17 states and the District of Columbia.

The focus on educational outcomes and accountability established under "No Child Left Behind" has been sharpened under the leadership of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. In today's rapidly changing educational landscape, urban Catholic schools find themselves under extraordinary pressures to demonstrate their value through clear, measurable results. For urban high schools, such results have traditionally been measured through graduation and college acceptance rates. Cristo Rey Network graduation and college acceptance rates have averaged around 98 percent for the last several years.

Through the leadership of The White House, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and many others, a new college completion standard is taking hold. Urban high schools will no longer be able to measure their impact solely through graduation and college acceptance rates. Rather, high schools and districts must now begin to report their long-term outcomes by tracking the college enrollment, persistence and completion rates of their graduates.

Tracking postsecondary outcomes can be a challenging and time-consuming task. Lacking the necessary staff, time and data systems, the majority of urban Catholic high schools are simply racing to catch up with their peers in charter and traditional public schools in the era of outcomes. Individual Catholic high schools cannot do this mission-critical work on their own. They desperately need leadership and support from their dioceses.

Fortunately, here in Baltimore, the archdiocese has taken a great first step in supporting its high schools through this transition. It recently made the decision to support leader schools interested in joining the National Student Clearinghouse's StudentTracker service to follow the postsecondary outcomes of their graduates. This small step is actually a huge leap forward because it will allow these schools to measure their long-term impact in the most reliable, objective and cost-effective way. We applaud Baltimore archdiocesan school leaders for being among the first urban, Catholic schools to take this step, and we encourage their peers to join them in the broader campaign to track every high school graduate. Locally, Baltimore City Public Schools and the Baltimore and Harford County public school systems already participate in the StudentTracker service.

During the past three years, the Cristo Rey Network and its member schools have partnered closely with the National Student Clearinghouse. It has been an epiphany experience for us. We are learning about the successes and challenges our graduates encounter in transitioning to and through college. Our college counselors are looking to steer students toward strong colleges and universities where our graduates succeed academically and socially. The Cristo Rey Network has formed a strategic alliance with 22 of these colleges and universities that are eager to establish a pipeline for talented college-bound students from our schools.

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