

# Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School Opens

By Jeremy Langford



Until its new and permanent building is completed at 5088 W. Jackson for the 2009–2010 school year, Christ the King is located nearby at the former St. Martin de Porres School (116 N. LeClaire Street). Christ the King banners signify for all to see that the much-anticipated school is open. What began more than two years ago as a call from the West Side community for a Cristo Rey model school led to the school's creation under the Chicago Province Jesuits and with the help of many benefactors and supporters.



Sonji Cooks, director of admissions, and Brendan Conroy, principal, have been very successful in recruiting students to attend CTK. According to Rob Birdsell, president of the Cristo Rey Network, “The 120 students of Christ the King’s inaugural class represent one of the top recruiting efforts for a new Cristo Rey School in the nation.”

“Christ the King is an example of Catholic education’s commitment to serving wherever the need is greatest.”

—Francis Cardinal George, Archbishop of Chicago

On August 25, 2008, Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School (CTK) became the first Catholic high school to open on Chicago’s West Side in 85 years. As the 120 members of the inaugural class of 2012 made their way to the school’s temporary location at the former St. Martin de Porres Grade School, their smiles told a profound story of faith and hope, of dreams becoming reality.

The students, many of them accompanied by family and friends, were greeted on the school’s front steps by CTK faculty and staff, as well as local media. “I think Christ the King is about to make history,” one student told a reporter. “And I’m going to be part of it.”

That history began 460 years ago in Messina, Italy, when the Jesuits opened their first school and began providing high-quality Catholic education that helps students grow in their faith, intellectual competence, and commitment to justice.

It took on a new chapter 12 years ago, when the Chicago Province opened Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood and launched an innovative, nationally replicated work-study model that allows students who otherwise couldn’t afford a college-prep education to earn 75 percent of their tuition while gaining life-changing experience in the

workplace. With a total enrollment of 3,000 students nationwide and a 98 percent success rate at sending graduates on to college, Cristo Rey schools are transforming education in this country and making dreams come true.

Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School is the 22nd Cristo Rey model school in the United States and the first to serve African-Americans on Chicago’s West Side, where there are more than 14,000 high school-age students but only 7,000 seats at nearby schools.

On a sunny, late-August morning, the dreams of St. Ignatius, of countless Jesuits, educators, benefactors, parents, and

students through the ages joined those of everyone affiliated with Christ the King. To kick off the new school year at the new high school, students gathered for the opening day assembly to hear words of inspiration from Christopher Gardner, author of bestselling autobiography *Pursuit of Happyness* and later a producer of the hit movie of the same name starring Will Smith. “If you’ve got a dream,” he said, “go get it!”

And that’s exactly what the 120 members of Christ the King’s class of 2012 are doing.

The photo story that follows captures the excitement and promise of Christ the King’s opening day.



In the days before CTK’s opening, boxes of desks and chairs filled the entranceway and required many hours of labor to be assembled. Faculty, staff and volunteers worked tirelessly to prepare the temporary school building for the 120 incoming freshman. Parents of Christ the King students and parents of St. Ignatius College Prep students volunteered and worked together to repair and clean the classrooms and halls for the first day of school.

**“I commend the** West Side community leaders and educators in the area who have supported Christ the King from the beginning. I also commend the Jesuits for responding to the concerns of parents and community residents who will be served by this school.”

—Mayor Richard M. Daley

Throughout the West Side neighborhoods, students like Brandon could be seen walking to Christ the King dressed in the business attire that is characteristic of Cristo Rey-model schools.



Since the Jesuits of the Chicago Province first announced in September 2007 that they were opening Christ the King, the school has received significant media attention. Reporter Frank Mathie of the local ABC affiliate was on hand to cover CTK’s opening day and spoke with incoming freshman Eric about his hopes and dreams for the future.

To view ABC’s coverage, please visit <http://abclocal.go.com/wls/media?id=6350524>



Members of the class of 2012 were eager to begin their first day of school at CTK. “We set a goal of 120 students in the freshman class, knowing that it would be a challenge recruiting families for a school they could not yet see. By making the commitment to attend CTK, our students and their families have proven that they are motivated and hungry for quality education, and that they are open to growth. The students are so proud to be a part of the founding class and to set the bar for future CTK students,” said Sonjii Cooks, director of admissions for CTK.



**“We greet students** as they enter the building by shaking their hands, looking them in the eye, and asking how they are doing or encouraging them to have a great day,” explains Principal Conroy. “You won’t see metal detectors out front; our gatekeepers are the faculty and staff who promote safety in a manner that is in tune with who we are as a Catholic Jesuit high school.”

—Brendan Conroy, principal of CTK

**“When the Chicago Province started Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in 1996, our hopes were to provide a college prep Jesuit education for students whose families could not afford one. The innovative corporate internship program, faculty, staff, parents, volunteers, and benefactors have given Cristo Rey students an opportunity for a better life, and the students have succeeded beyond our expectations. Today, the Chicago Province proudly sponsors Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School. I welcome parents, faculty, staff, and benefactors to offer Christ the King students the same opportunity to work and dream to succeed for the Greater Glory of God.”**

—Edward W. Schmidt, SJ, Provincial

CTK’s president, Fr. Christopher Devron, SJ, was delighted to welcome the school’s first class of 120 students. CTK will add a new class each year and will enroll 600 students at full capacity.



During CTK’s opening assembly, students performed in the choir and gave presentations for their classmates, families, and community members in attendance.



For more information on CTK, please visit the Province website: [www.jesuits-chi.org](http://www.jesuits-chi.org)



Fr. Brian Paulson, SJ, president, and Dr. Catherine Karl, principal, of St. Ignatius College Prep presented CTK with a special plaque welcoming the newest Jesuit high school in Chicago.



At the opening day assembly, CTK students enjoyed some moments together.



**“It’s an honor** to know that the core of Christ the King Jesuit College Prep is based upon Jesus, the word of God. It’s an awesome thing for me because the teachers reiterate what I’m already teaching my children.”

—Shawntel Mables, parent

**“The internship program** depends on the relationships between business leaders and young people who need exposure to living role models of leadership. Much more than a way to finance education for low-income families, it provides a path for students to become the dream they desire by seeing that dream realized in the lives of others who have made the most of the opportunities afforded by quality education.”

—Fr. Christopher Devron, SJ,  
President of CTK

In his address on CTK’s historic first day of school, Christopher Gardner, author of the bestselling autobiography *Pursuit of Happyness*, delivered two key messages to the students: first, “Set your sights on five colleges” and second, “Don’t ever let somebody tell you what you can’t do.” Having risen from hardship to great heights as the owner and CEO of Christopher Gardner International Holdings, Chris made a profound impact on students, who were captivated by his personal story and wisdom.

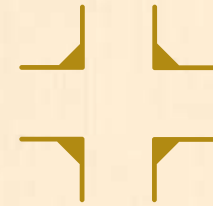


CTK students have a wide variety of jobs as part of the work-study program. This group shares a full-time job at Loyola University Medical Center.



Behind Fr. Chris Devron, SJ, are blueprints for CTK’s new home. Fr. Devron explains, “We are constructing not just a building, but with God’s grace, a beacon of light and hope—a place where our young people will become tomorrow’s leaders; leaders who not only better themselves, but commit to serve and lift up their community.”

## The Chicago Province and Jesuit Educational Ministries Welcome the Newest Jesuit School



### CHRIST THE KING JESUIT COLLEGE PREPARATORY SCHOOL

Rev. Christopher Devron, SJ, President  
5058 W. Jackson Blvd.  
Chicago, IL, 60644  
(773) 425-2921

[www.ctkjesuit.org](http://www.ctkjesuit.org)

Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School is a Catholic Jesuit secondary school (grades 9–12) using the Cristo Rey work-study model to serve young men and women from the Austin neighborhood and surrounding communities of Chicago’s West Side. Small, safe, and faith-based, Christ the King expands on a tradition of successful education with a new urban idea.

The Jesuits invite and welcome your interest in this important mission. For more information, please call Jeff Smart at (800) 922-5327.



St. Xavier High School  
Established 1831  
Rev. Walter Deye, SJ,  
President



Xavier University  
Established 1831  
Rev. Michael Graham, SJ,  
President



SAINT  
IGNATIUS  
COLLEGE PREP

Established 1870  
Rev. Brian Paulson, SJ,  
President



LOYOLA  
UNIVERSITY  
CHICAGO  
Established 1870  
Rev. Michael Garanzini, SJ, President



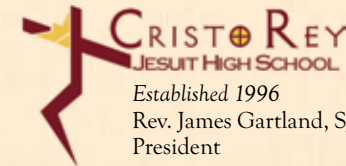
Established 1876  
Rev. Timothy Howe, SJ, Pastor



Established 1909  
Rev. Theodore Munz, SJ,  
President



Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School  
Established 1962  
Dr. Matthew Hayes, President



Established 1996  
Rev. James Gartland, SJ,  
President



Established 2005  
Mr. Matthew Lynch,  
President



Established 1928  
Very Rev. Edward Schmidt, SJ,  
Provincial  
[www.jesuits-chi.org](http://www.jesuits-chi.org)



1870: St. Ignatius College opened next door to Holy Family Church in Chicago.



1909: Loyola Academy opened on Loyola University’s Lakeshore campus. Dumbach Hall, above, housed the academy before it moved to a separate campus in Wilmette, IL, in 1959.



1958 groundbreaking, St. Xavier High School’s new campus in Cincinnati.



1961 groundbreaking, Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School in Indianapolis.



1996: Cristo Rey Jesuit High School opened its doors in Chicago.



**Brendan Conroy** is the principal of the new Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School. After earning his BA in English from the University of Notre Dame in 1985, he began his teaching career at Leo High School on Chicago's South Side. During his tenure there, he taught English and served as department chair, coached three sports, and held several other posts.

Brendan left Leo High School to pursue an MA in English at the University of Mississippi, where he also taught composition and literature to undergraduates. After finishing his degree, he taught and coached for a year at Oxford High School. He then returned to Chicago to work at St. Ignatius College Prep.

In his thirteen-plus years at St. Ignatius, Brendan served in several roles: teacher, department chair, coach, director of admissions and recruiting, and assistant principal. He founded the St. Ignatius Higher Achievement Program (SIHAP), which helps deserving students of modest means gain the benefits of a college preparatory Jesuit education. While at St. Ignatius, he earned an MA in Educational Leadership, Curriculum and Foundations from Chicago State University.

Brendan and his wife, Terry, a freelance writer, live in the Beverly neighborhood on the Southwest Side of Chicago. Their five children attend or have attended Catholic schools in Chicago.

# Q & A

## Christ the King Jesuit College Prep

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS

Interview by Jeremy Langford

**Q What is the most important part of being principal of CTK?**

**A** There is no high school that can say it's a good and excellent school without amazing faculty. My most sacred and important responsibility is to find excellent teachers. Our faculty has a very high level of commitment, which is extremely important, especially at this stage as we open CTK and build a foundation for the future. My secondary role is to ensure that our students know the kind of people we want them to be when they get their diploma.

**Q Why did you take the job of CTK principal at this time in your career?**

**A** I wanted to take this job at Christ the King not because the students are Catholic, but because *we* are. That is where Catholic schools ought to be—where we are needed most. With all the schools that have closed in the archdiocese of Chicago over the last few decades, this was a great opportunity to show that the Catholic Church still has a mission in the neighborhoods. I wanted to be a part of bringing the experience that I had at St. Ignatius College Prep to families who are eager for their children to have the same kind of education. I wanted to be a part of that first opportunity for a community to see that there really is a bigger world out there than the options they've been offered in the past could provide them.

**Q What is distinctive about Catholic and, more specifically, Jesuit education?**

**A** What occurs to me first is that in Catholic education you have the opportunity to educate the whole person. Having taught in public schools as well, what I've found is that a Catholic setting allows both teachers and students to explore the whole dimension of being human. It allows you to explore questions like, who is God? Who am I in relationship to God? You just can't do that in a public setting. A Jesuit education examines and re-examines the mission and what it's all about. It looks at how to find God in all of the students, teachers, administrators, and parents, as well as how to care for the whole person.

**Q How do you maintain CTK's Catholic, Jesuit identity when less than 10 percent of your student body is Catholic?**

**A** We stay strong with who we are. We make it very clear that CTK is a Catholic, Jesuit school, and that we're not going to back down from that. Families and students respond to institutions and people who really believe in what they say and who act on what they believe. So for us to water down our Jesuit identity because most of our kids aren't Catholic would be a huge mistake on our part. We make sure that our students and our families are aware that we come from this great 450-year-old tradition of Jesuit education and that we teach students what it is to be Catholic, to be women and men for others, what it means to find God in all things, to seek excellence, and to reflect on how to grow and improve. We remind our families that we're not here to proselytize or convert, but that we *are* here to bring all our students closer to God. We are building these principles into what we do, and so far the response from the community has been phenomenal.

**Q What do you believe is the greatest challenge for CTK students?**

**A** Our students face many challenges, whether academically or in home life, but the greatest challenge for them is to believe that they can succeed. We are preparing students for success in college and we want them to know that they really can earn a college degree. A lot of the students have seen family members go off to college and come back without graduating, and even the same with high school. Once they believe they can do it, through the support of staff and faculty, the challenge will become how far they can go.

**Q Christ the King is situated in an area of the West Side that is known for high crime rates. What does it mean to be a safe school?**

**A** Christ the King is situated in Austin very intentionally. It's been well chronicled that our students are coming from tough areas, areas with gangs, violence, and drugs—and they are dealing with the social issues and ills that come along

with that. It is incumbent upon us to be a place of refuge and safety for our students. When I am describing Christ the King to prospective families, I always say the same thing, "Christ the King is a safe, affordable, faith-based, Catholic, Jesuit college preparatory high school." It's a mouthful, but I always start with the word *safe* because as a parent of five, I know that there is nothing more important than ensuring the safety of your children. We communicate to students that all they have to think about when they are here is How am I going to learn? How am I going to grow in faith? How I am going to grow in my understanding of what it means to be a Christian? These things are all that matters once they walk through the front doors of Christ the King. Our hope is that when our kids walk out across that threshold and back into the world, we have provided them with the tools to transform it.

**Q What kinds of extracurriculars are available to students?**

**A** We want the creation of athletics and co-curriculars to be led by the students. We have, however, taken some steps in talking with other schools in the area about setting up some athletic competitions. We can't be a high school without athletics, service organizations, and other types of clubs, but we do hope the students take ownership of that, and so far they've been doing a great job.

**Q What are your greatest needs at the moment?**

**A** Our needs begin with a sense of deep gratitude for the faith and generosity of our job sponsors, benefactors, volunteers, board members, and friends of the school. There are financial needs for the new building, for our Rising Leaders Committee, for the adopt-a-student tuition program; there are needs for volunteers in various areas; and mostly a need for prayers for our students and their families. ■