

# Retention Strategy

2013-14

## Cristo Rey Boston in Context

Cristo Rey Boston High School is an increasingly popular option for low-income families looking for a school with a proven record of graduating students and placing them in college. For the past four years, 100% of the school's graduating classes have gained admission to four-year colleges and universities, with 90% enrolling in these institutions immediately after high school. The academic curriculum coupled with an innovative work-study program that provides young people with the opportunity to work in area corporations motivates an average of 425 8<sup>th</sup> graders from 54 Boston schools to apply to Cristo Rey each year. Annual surveys confirm that 8<sup>th</sup> graders' primary reasons for applying are the work program and our success with college placements.

Our feeder schools serve Boston's lowest income families and include 31 Boston public, 11 Catholic, nine charter, and three independent schools. An evaluation done by our admissions team shows that 16% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders who qualify for the federal free/reduced lunch program at these feeder schools apply to Cristo Rey each year.<sup>1</sup> Accepted applicants who do not enroll in Cristo Rey generally attend charter and pilot schools, with some enrolling in the city's exam schools. The young people we attract have limited resources but a strong desire to go to a high school that can prepare them for college.

## Who and How We Serve

Since 2010, consistent with our mission of providing quality education to underserved young people, Cristo Rey Boston has recruited 8<sup>th</sup> graders from the city's lowest income neighborhoods. For the class that entered in August of 2013, the average family income is \$23,865 or \$6,206 per capita, 45% less than it was five years ago. The percentage of those living in single parent households is 67%, and 83% of our population qualifies for the federal free or reduced lunch program. Two thirds of our students enter 9<sup>th</sup> grade below level in reading. Based on the Gates-MacGinitie reading test administered in June of 2013, 19% of the entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade class (class of 2017) is reading below the 6<sup>th</sup> grade level, 47% is between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade level, and the remaining 34% is at or above the 9<sup>th</sup> grade reading level.

Guided by the belief that urban young people can meet high expectations, Cristo Rey Boston has increased academic rigor with significant intentional supports. Our counseling program includes regular, scheduled check-ins with all students and provides individual assistance to them and their families. A proficiency program, required for all freshmen, identifies deficiencies students may have in 8<sup>th</sup> grade skills in math, grammar and writing and provides tutoring during study halls and after school to help them reach grade level. Freshmen must pass this program to advance to sophomore year. A reading intervention program was added in the middle of 2012-13 school year to provide additional support.

In addition to mastering skills they should have learned by the end of middle school, all freshmen take double block classes (two consecutive 48-minute periods) of Algebra and English Language Arts (ELA) each day for the entire year, allowing them to go into greater depth in these core courses. One section (25 students) takes Algebra II, while remaining freshmen take Algebra I. The ELA and Algebra courses

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<sup>1</sup> The work-study program requires that all students are legally able to work in the United States. Therefore, Cristo Rey Boston is not able to take undocumented students. In addition, the school does not have appropriate services for English Language Learners (ELL). The 16% figure represents only eligible students who apply to Cristo Rey Boston from our feeder schools.

are aligned with the new Common Core standards, and PSAT-style questions are incorporated into assessments to increase students' ability to think and reason at higher levels.

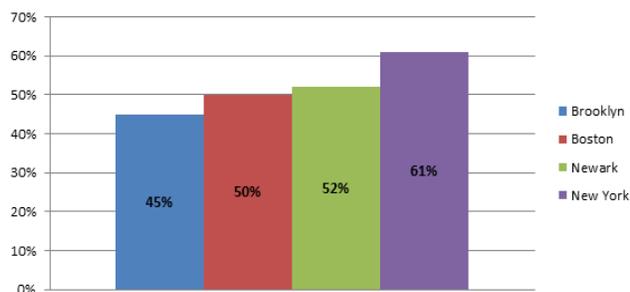
The intense academic program continues in 10<sup>th</sup> grade with double-block classes in Geometry and History. As students move to their final years of high school, their hard work pays great dividends. By junior and senior year, attrition is minimal. Every student takes at least one Advancement Placement course by graduation, a requirement that increases the rigor of teaching and learning in the lower grades and gives upperclassmen an intense, college-level academic experience. By senior year, everyone is on the path to a four-year college.

The retention of students at Cristo Rey from 9<sup>th</sup> grade through graduation, however, averages slightly more than 50%. The most critical year in assessing students remain in our school is 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and we are not happy with the current trend. Of the 130 9<sup>th</sup> graders (Class of 2016) enrolled at Cristo Rey on October 1, 2012, 86 or 66% moved to sophomore year in the fall of 2013. The majority who left did so for behavioral and personal reasons.

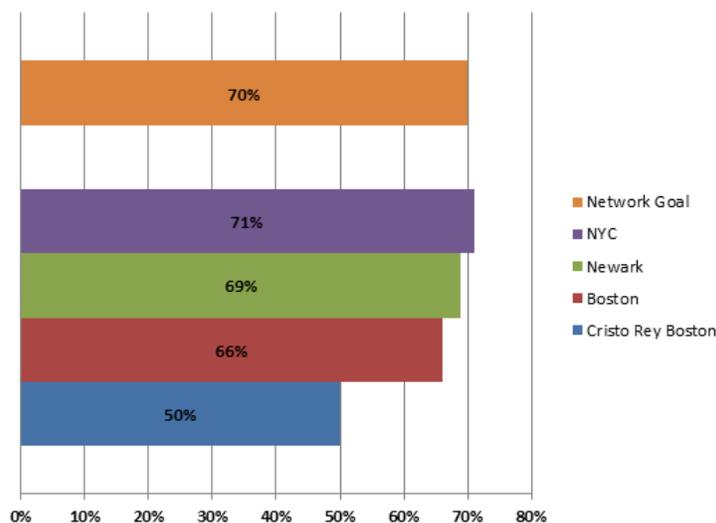
### The Retention Challenge

Given where Cristo Rey Boston is today – with an average of 50% of 9<sup>th</sup> graders graduating from our school four years later – we have set a goal of increasing retention to 70% for the class of 2017 that entered Cristo Rey in August of 2013. The 70% target would put our school at the top of the Cristo Rey Network and in the highest ranks of regional public and charter schools. By increasing retention, Cristo Rey Boston will send more low-income, minority students to four-year colleges.

Four-Year Graduation Rates, Class of 2012  
Regional Cristo Rey Schools



Four-Year Retention Rates, 2012  
Cristo Rey Boston vs.  
Regional Public and Charter Schools



[http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/grad/grad\\_report.aspx?orgcode=00350000&orgtypecode=5&](http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/grad/grad_report.aspx?orgcode=00350000&orgtypecode=5&)  
<http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/tools/report/default.htm#FindPR>  
<http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/12/12/05/scoresmap/>

### Who Leaves Cristo Rey Boston?

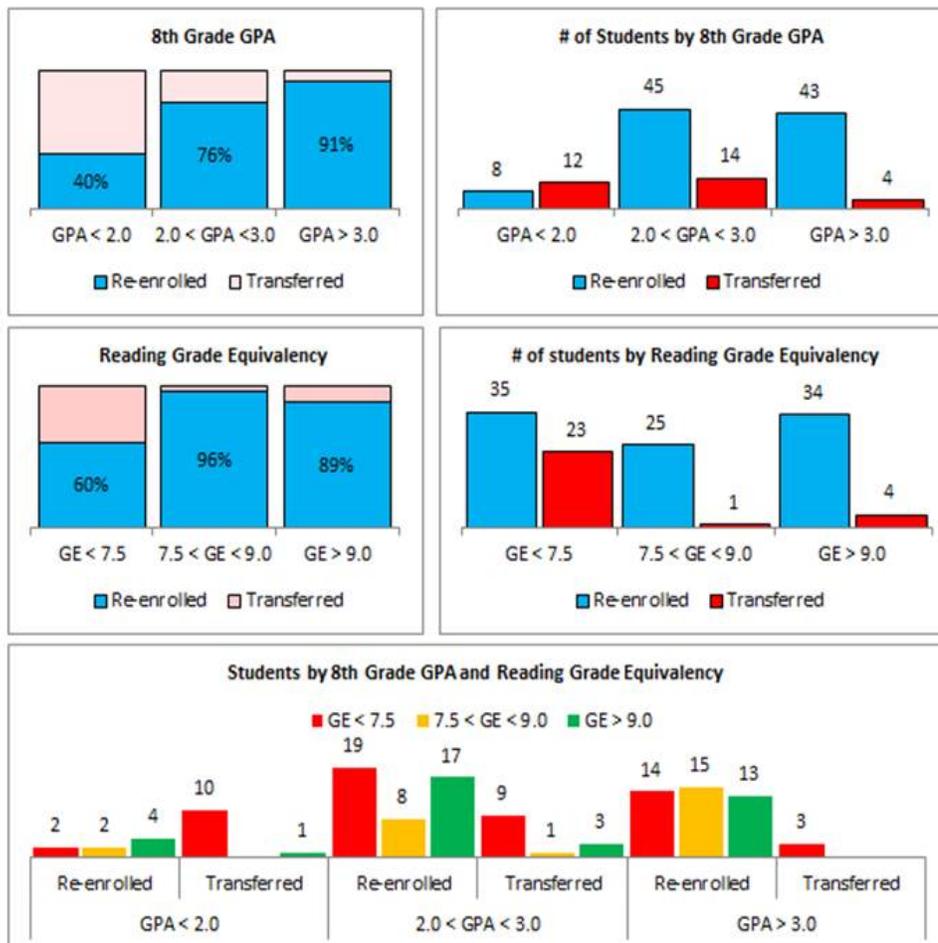
An analysis of the academic, attendance and behavioral data of those who transferred from Cristo Rey shows there are three primary indicators that a student is likely to struggle and ultimately opt out of

Cristo Rey Boston: the Reading Grade Equivalency of entering 9<sup>th</sup> graders, “grit”<sup>2</sup> (a measure of perseverance and passion for long term goals) and attendance, and student attention to the “effort” portion of their academic grades.

**Reading Grade Equivalency**

An entering 9<sup>th</sup> grader’s Reading Grade Equivalency is the most accurate early predictor of high school retention. Of the 9<sup>th</sup> graders from the class of 2016 who did not enroll in Cristo Rey as sophomores, 82% read below average, and 67% had an 8<sup>th</sup> grade GPA (Grade Point Average) below 2.0. The school generally is successful with entering freshmen who have a reading grade equivalency above 7.5 (reading above a mid-year seventh grade level). Of the 9<sup>th</sup> graders who entered at this level in 2012-13, 92% advanced to sophomore year. The charts below show trends that guide our new retention strategy:

- 83% of the class of 2016 (freshmen in 2012-13) who had an 8<sup>th</sup> grade GPA below 2.0 AND a reading grade equivalency below 7.5 left Cristo Rey, representing 10% of the class
- 68% with an 8<sup>th</sup> grade GPA between 2.0 and 3.0 AND a reading grade equivalency below 7.5 transferred
- 17% with an 8<sup>th</sup> grade GPA above 3.0 AND a reading grade equivalency below 7.5 transferred

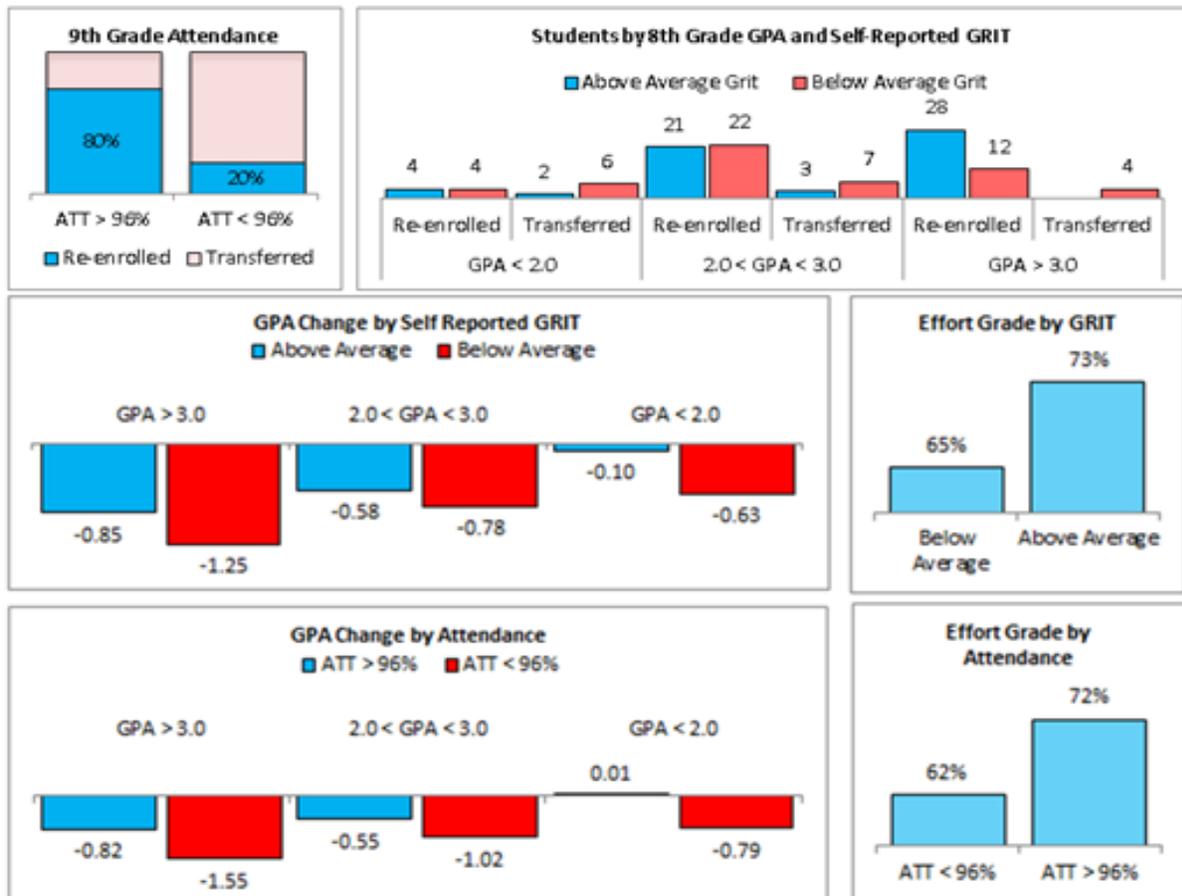


<sup>2</sup>Duckworth, A.L. & Quinn, P.D. (2009). Development and validation of the Short Grit Scale (GRIT-S), Journal of Personality Assessment, Vol. 91(2), pp. 166-174.

### Character Challenges

Lack of resilience, grit, persistence and self-control – character traits necessary for success in the face of new or challenging situations – is a common thread among those from all grade levels that leave our school. Students who graduate from Cristo Rey appear to have developed these character traits because of family support or due to their ability to integrate quickly and learn from their experience in the work place. A lack of these character traits contributes to absenteeism, poor work performance, and behavioral challenges, which all directly correlate to weakened academic performance and hence, impact retention. Critical data points on the issue of character challenges include:

- 80% of students that transferred had a below average attendance rate (below 96%)
- Students with a self-reported grit score<sup>3</sup> below average (below 3.3 out of a 5.0 scale) and/or an attendance rate below average (less than 96%) have a GPA drop of .5 points higher (on average) than those above the average in grit and attendance
- Those with above average grit and attendance show effort grades that are on average 8 to 10 percentage points higher than students with below average grit and attendance



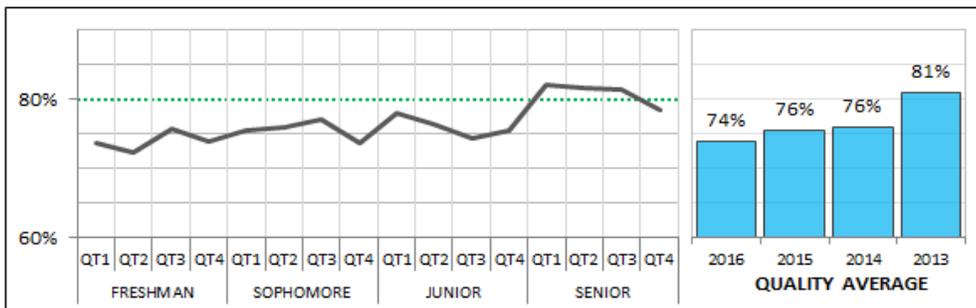
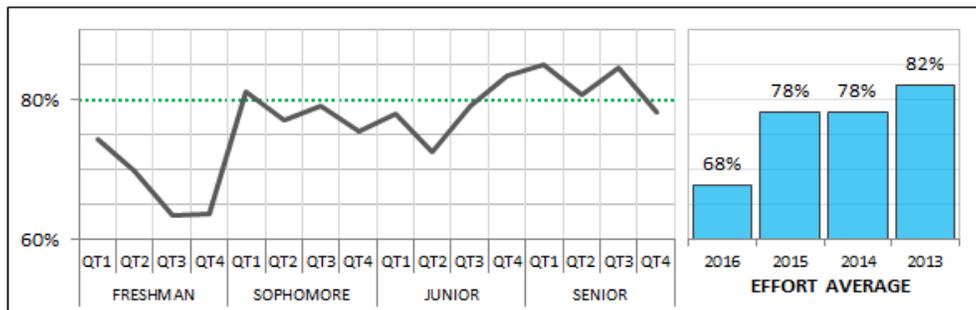
### Effort

The four quarterly grades given to Cristo Rey Boston students represent 80% of their final course grade, 10% of their grade is a mid-term in January, and the remaining 10% is a final exam at the end of the academic year. This approach gives them an authentic college preparatory experience.

<sup>3</sup> Students take the grit scale test each fall during an Advisory class. The scale is a self-measure of a student's ability to overcome challenges and persist in the face of difficulties. To learn more, please see Duckworth, A.L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M.D., & Kelly, D.R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 9, 1087-1101.

For each quarterly course, 80% of the grade is the result of performance on content mastery –known at Cristo Rey Boston as the “quality grade” – through assessments such as tests, quizzes, laboratory work, writing assignments, and research projects. These assessments allow teachers to measure what students learn. Only 20% of a quarterly grade in each subject is based on assignments that measure effort such as homework and classroom participation. Effort grades measure the ability to work consistently as well as attention to detail. They are generally consistent with how well students perform at work-study assignments and correlate with good attendance, resilience, self-control, and time management. By carefully calibrating grades using an 80/20 rubric (80% content mastery and 20% effort), we have eliminated grade inflation and created a GPA scale that accurately indicates a student’s readiness for college.

When comparing senior and freshmen grades, the biggest difference is the effort grade. Seniors score an average of 82% on the effort portion of their grade while freshmen score 68%, a difference of 14 percentage points. Increasing effort grades for underclassmen is critical to reaching the 70% retention goal. The following charts compare effort and quality grades. The classes indicated on the right side of the chart (2016, 2015, 2014, and 2013) correspond to our freshmen, sophomore, junior and senior classes during the 2012-13 school year.



### 2013-14 Retention Strategies

For 2013-14, our retention strategy includes two initiatives: an *Early Identification Plan* that helps freshmen who, according to our data, are highly likely to struggle at Cristo Rey and enhanced *Global Supports*, which are designed to strengthen the academic and personal capacity of all students.

#### Early Identification

One of the internal weaknesses we uncovered was the late identification of at-risk students. In the past, students were identified in mid-November, almost three months into the year, after the first quarter

grades were analyzed. Having lost almost 40% of the year, many of those who struggled had decided that they were not strong students, which increased the challenge the faculty faced in helping them to succeed at Cristo Rey Boston.

By studying the classes of 2015 and 2016, we developed a Risk Prediction Model that allows the school to identify – before classes begin – those who will struggle to complete four years at Cristo Rey Boston. Early identification allows for early intervention. The Risk Prediction Model has two main predictors: *academic ability* and *academic behaviors*.

### **Academic Ability**

Incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders who show two or more of the following predictors are considered at high risk of failing multiple classes and not being promoted to sophomore year:

- Reading Grade Equivalent below 7.5 as assessed by the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test administered to all incoming Cristo Rey 9<sup>th</sup> graders each June
- 8<sup>th</sup> grade GPA below 2.0
- MCAS scores in ELA or Math below 230, the midpoint of the “Needs Improvement” quartile on the statewide exam administered annually to all public and charter school students, about 76% of our entering class each year

In the class of 2016, 18 students would have qualified for the high risk category because of MCAS scores and their 8<sup>th</sup> grade GPA, and 80% of them – more than 10% of the class – transferred.

### **Academic Behaviors**

Experience shows that students with a low 8<sup>th</sup> grade GPA and a high amount of grit can succeed at Cristo Rey Boston. Early identification of students with at-risk academic behaviors, including a lack of grit or resilience, therefore, is critical in providing them with targeted academic and personal support.

Each incoming 9<sup>th</sup> grader is scored on reliability, readiness and respect by their teachers in Foundations, the two-week summer orientation program required for all incoming students. The school operates a normal schedule, 7:40 a.m. to 3:05 p.m., during the second and third weeks of August to provide an authentic experience of Cristo Rey Boston’s expectations and demands at work-study placements and in the classroom. Each day teachers in Foundations give students a score between 1 and 3, with 2 equal to “meet expectations,” on their performance in a series of training classes. Those with an average below 2.2 are considered at risk – their academic behaviors are consistent with students who struggle at Cristo Rey. On a daily basis the staff meets to evaluate the class, identify those who need extra attention, and strategize on ways to help them. A few who do not respond are asked to leave Cristo Rey, and some decide to matriculate elsewhere during or after summer orientation.

To further understand each student’s academic behaviors, the counseling department meets with all 9<sup>th</sup> graders during Foundations to assess home protective factors, such as the presence of adults in a student’s household who support the academic expectations at Cristo Rey, and internal protective factors, including a young person’s sense of self-confidence and their academic and personal goals for the coming year. Counselors also conduct a health survey, taking a close look at any mental health issues that may impact them in the coming year.

The early analysis of academic behaviors informs the selection of the Reading Intervention class (described below), guides decisions about work-study placements, and helps the counseling staff chart an intervention strategy for students who will need additional assistance during the school year.

### **Early Intervention Classroom**

Prior to the start of the 2013-14 school year, our staff identified 23 students from the entering class of 2017 who have an 8<sup>th</sup> grade GPA below 2.0 and a reading grade equivalency below 7.5. Freshmen in this cohort were placed in one academic section, known as “Perspectives,” which is being taught by our strongest instructors. Students will have weekly check-ins with the counseling department, and the school staff will be in contact with each family every week. An AmeriCorps member will proctor a daily homework hour from 3:10 to 4:00 p.m., check-in with teachers, and be the point of contact with families. Every effort will be made to help these students succeed. While each will be carefully evaluated on a variety of factors including their “grit”, students in the Early Intervention Classroom who are not able to sustain a C- average or above by September 30<sup>th</sup> will be counseled to enroll in another high school that can offer more services.

We would not be fulfilling our mission if we moved to a strategy of accepting young people with higher academic and grit standards simply because they are easier to retain. If students cannot meet minimum standards during their first month of school with the resources being applied to help them, however, we have an obligation to guide them to a school that is better able to serve them.

### ***Enhancements to Universal Supports***

In 2013-14, the school will enhance the Advisory, Positive Behavior and Intervention Support (PBIS), and Reading Intervention programs, and place more faculty and staff energy on helping students improve effort grades.

### **Advisory and Positive Behavior Intervention & Supports Program**

In 2012-13, Cristo Rey Boston High School piloted two programs to develop the character traits students require to succeed in our school and, eventually, in college: a weekly class called Advisory that teaches character education, and the Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) program, which helps our population take greater control of their personal development. The programs were implemented because many students lacked resilience and other characteristics critical in tackling increasingly complex academic work.

The Advisory curriculum implemented in 2012-13 is based on research by Angela Duckworth of the University of Pennsylvania and Carol Dwek of Stanford University. A weekly class provides a formal opportunity to study the traits of successful people and engage in self-reflection on character. Throughout the year, students studied ten character traits – openness to growth, self-control, persistence, initiative, teamwork, reliability, curiosity, gratitude, classroom contribution and active studying – and charted their development of these skills. In 2013-14, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade Advisory program is focusing on resilience.

PBIS systematically teaches behavioral expectations and rewards students for following them, a more positive approach than a traditional discipline model in which schools wait for misbehavior to occur before responding. The program resulted in the elimination of detention, led to a significant decrease in class dismissals and suspensions, and is helping students become self-directed learners.

A Boston-based foundation eager to see more young people graduate from Cristo Rey is funding professional development for all faculty and staff on PBIS, the development of a system to track and reward students for positive behavior, and the design and implementation of a four-year curriculum for the Advisory Program.

## **Reading Intervention**

The implementation of the Early Intervention Classroom will allow 9<sup>th</sup> graders with a reading grade equivalency between 7.3 and 8.9 and a lower 8<sup>th</sup> grade GPA to be placed into a year-long “pull-out” reading program known as “Points of View,” which was piloted in the second half of 2012-13. The cohort of 36 9<sup>th</sup> graders selected for the Reading Intervention Program does not possess all the risk factors that would place them in the early intervention classroom. The class complements the grammar and writing components of the proficiency program by placing 30% of our freshmen into three small reading classes (12 per class) to more quickly bring their skills to a 9<sup>th</sup> grade level. Because reading is critical to overall academic success, this strategy will allow more freshmen to perform at higher levels in all courses. With a total of 59 freshmen in either the reading or early intervention classes, nearly 50% of the class of 2017 that entered Cristo Rey in August of 2013 is receiving targeted academic support.

## **Focus on Effort Grades**

A focus of the faculty professional learning communities (PLCs) and biweekly individual meetings between teachers and either the Principal for Academics or Dean of Curriculum will be on helping students at all grade levels improve effort grades. As our internal analysis has shown, higher effort grades lead to higher GPAs, greater personal satisfaction with academic performance, and a stronger likelihood of retention.

## **Conclusion**

A Cristo Rey Boston graduate who entered a top university in the fall of 2013 recently told us that classmates who left Cristo Rey did so because they “did not want to work hard.” While this may true, our job as educators of young people in the last stage of their formal, legally-mandated education is to give them the tools they need to work hard in high school and in college.

Using our own teaching talent, we have developed a multi-faceted, low-cost intervention strategy designed to increase the number of young people who graduate from Cristo Rey Boston High School and consequently enter a four-year college. Cristo Rey Boston is part of the national effort to close the educational achievement gap between children from high and low income families.<sup>4</sup> With one of the highest percentages of low-income students in Boston<sup>5</sup> and one of the lowest per capita incomes in the Cristo Rey Network,<sup>6</sup> we understand well the challenges faced by urban high school students and recognize that a comprehensive approach is needed to help them complete a rigorous college prep program.

The retention strategies outlined in this memo offer an opportunity to create a culture by which students come to understand, within the first weeks of school, that success is dependent on 100% completion of all tasks, full engagement with their own education, and the capacity to manage their emotions and behaviors in the face of challenges and setbacks. Understanding our students’ needs early in their high school careers – even before academic classes begin – is critical. We are focused on the goal of 70% retention without sacrificing the rigor of our curriculum. We are committed to reflecting on our effort this year, sharing our practice with others, and accepting critical feedback from educators, funders, and others engaged in the ongoing effort to prepare underserved urban populations to enter and graduate from college.

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<sup>4</sup> Greenstone, M., Looney, A., and Patashnik, J., *Thirteen Economic Facts about Social Mobility and the Role of Education*, The Hamilton Project, June 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, *School Profiles*, 2013

<sup>6</sup> Annual Data Report, Cristo Rey Network, Fall 2012