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High School Finds New Home in Renovated Historic Building

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A historic building in downtown Columbus, Ohio that once housed a school for deaf children will once again open its doors to students when Cristo Rey Columbus High School moves in this month. Project partners say Cristo Rey received nearly \$12.4 million in combined federal and state new markets tax credits (NMTCs) allocation and \$7.6 million in federal and state historic rehabilitation tax credits (HTCs) to renovate the 85,000-square-foot building into a modern high school with historic charm.

"It's long overdue for a renovation and the beauty is that we're returning it to its original use as a school; it's a natural fit," said Jim Foley, Cristo Rey Columbus High School's president.

The Cristo Rey Model

Cristo Rey is a national network of college preparatory Catholic high schools open to children of all faiths who come from economically disadvantaged households. The first Cristo Rey school opened in Chicago in 1996. Today there are 26 Cristo Rey schools, and another two are scheduled to open in August.

Cristo Rey schools operate a corporate work-study program in which students help offset nearly half the cost of their education by working an entry-level job at a professional company for five days a month. Four students work as a team for each company, and together they work enough hours to equal one full-time employee.

Foley called the work-study program the "secret sauce" of Cristo Rey not just because it helps support the school financially, but also because it gives students positive role models. "It allows kids to envision possibilities that they didn't know were open to them," said Foley. "In addition, it opens their eyes to dream of something better and it gives them a road map of how to get there: [Go to] college and then work and act like a professional."

A New Home for Cristo Rey Columbus High School

Cristo Rey Columbus High School opened at a temporary location 1.5 miles from downtown Columbus with a freshman class of 84 students in August 2013. The school will open its new campus in the downtown Discovery District, where it will eventually expand to 500 students by adding one freshman class a year for the next three years.

Foley said students will benefit from exposure to the Discovery District's educational and cultural resources, which include the main branch of the Columbus Metropolitan Library, Franklin University, Columbus State Community College, the Columbus College of Art & Design, Capital Law School and the Columbus Museum of Art. The downtown location also allows students to walk to many of their part-time jobs, which will save Cristo Rey long-term busing expenses.

Cristo Rey's new home was constructed in 1899 as the Ohio Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb (later renamed the Ohio School for the Deaf). When the school moved to another campus in the 1950s, the building was

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converted into office space. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1984 and had been vacant in recent years.

One of the overarching design goals was to adapt the building for use as a modern high school while preserving its historic character. "It's not an easy project—it's the kind of building that a lot of people wouldn't have the guts to tackle," said architect Robert Loversidge, president and CEO of Schooley Caldwell Associates. Since 1978, Loversidge had worked intermittently on several adaptive reuse designs for the building. Loversidge said that for reasons that ranged from timing issues to financial shortfalls, none of the designs were ever implemented, so having the chance to design Cristo Rey and to see it finally get built was especially rewarding for him.

Still, the architecture team had a lot of work to do. "It was insensitively renovated a number of times," said Loversidge. "There were dropped ceilings everywhere and [it had] the cheapest of cheap mechanical systems, so it was way beyond the end of its useful life."

Work included replacing mechanical and plumbing systems; restoring historic chair rails and wooden flooring; and uncovering ornate plaster detailing that had been concealed by layers of drywall in previous renovations. Architects also designed a new front entrance accessible by ramp.

Many of the classrooms were too small, but rather than demolishing dividing walls completely, crews cut openings into them. The compromise expanded classrooms and kept enough of the original walls to satisfy the Secretary of the Interior's standards for the treatment of historic properties.

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Photo: Courtesy of Schooley Caldwell Associates Inc.

As shown here before its recent renovation, Cristo Rey Columbus High School in downtown Columbus, Ohio was originally constructed as a school for deaf children in 1899.





Photo: Courtesy of Schooley Caldwell Associates Inc.

Cristo Rey Columbus High School in downtown Columbus, Ohio received nearly \$12.4 million in combined federal and state new markets tax credits (NMTC) allocation and \$7.6 million in federal and state historic rehabilitation tax credits (HTCs) to renovate a former school for deaf children into its new home. It is scheduled to open in August for the 2014 to 2015 school year.

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“When doing that for tax credit purposes, it’s a good idea to keep a bit of the original wall expressed ... so people can read that this was the delineation instead of just blowing out the wall entirely,” said Richard Jarvis, technical preservation manager for the State Historic Preservation Office at the Ohio History Connection. “You don’t want to convey a false sense of history.”

The project is expected to create 42 construction jobs and 100 full-time jobs within two years of completion. Classrooms on the first two floors will be completed by the first day of school in August, said Jim Negrón, executive vice president of local construction company Corna Kokosing. He said office space on the third floor and a chapel on the fourth floor are scheduled for completion by the end of 2014.

Financing

Project partners say that renovating the historic school would have been impossible without tax credit financing. “The tax credits allowed us to take a harder look at what components [of the historic building] can remain,” said Negrón. “The creative financing gave us the tools to make the building very special.”

Finance Fund, a Columbus-based community development entity (CDE), provided a federal NMTC allocation of \$8 million and a State of Ohio NMTC allocation of \$2.56 million. “We truly see education as a pathway for students to achieve success in their lives and to overcome the cycle of poverty they were born into,” said Diana Turoff, Finance Fund’s executive vice president and

chief financial officer. “It helps set them up for success to become responsible adults and contribute back to society.”

Others felt the same way. “The school’s mission to provide the work-study opportunity for each student in a professional environment is a perfect match for the new markets tax credit,” said Shawn Larson, vice president of community development banking for Chase’s NMTC group. “Students will graduate from Cristo Rey with a deep understanding of the expectations in a corporate environment, and will have the academic skills to compete and succeed at the highest levels.” Chase provided \$1.8 million of its own federal NMTC allocation, as well as \$3.2 million in federal NMTC equity and \$650,000 in state NMTC equity.

The project received \$3.7 million in federal HTCs and the Ohio Development Services Agency (ODSA) administered another \$3.9 million in state HTCs. “We’re taking a vacant building and it’s becoming an economic generator for the community,” said Nathaniel Kaelin, ODSA’s historic preservation tax credit program manager. “It’s creating jobs and building human capital.”

RBC Capital Markets syndicated \$6.5 million in HTC equity, provided by Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company. “I think it’s going to be a tremendous success and something that’s much needed in the city of Columbus,” said Eric Klipfer, vice president of RBC Capital Markets. “It affords kids the opportunity to get a good education and advance in life.”

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Foley agreed. "This gives the very best education facility that we can plan for them," he said. "Without the tax credits, that simply would not have been possible." ❖

Cristo Rey Columbus High School FINANCING

- \$8 million federal new markets tax credit (NMTC) allocation from Finance Fund
- \$6.5 million in federal and state historic tax credit (HTC) equity from Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company, syndicated by RBC Capital Markets
- \$3.9 million in state HTCs administered by the Ohio Development Services Agency
- \$3.7 million in federal HTCs
- \$3.2 million in federal NMTC equity from Chase
- \$2.6 million state NMTC allocation from Finance Fund
- \$1.8 million in federal NMTC allocation from Chase
- \$650,000 in state NMTC equity from Chase

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