

A Case Study of Cristo Rey High School, Minneapolis

Yes We Can! Designing for Literacy, Numeracy, and Personalized Learning



Obama's famous slogan, "Yes we can!", could also serve as the theme for the culture of hope and excellence at the Cristo Rey Jesuit High School. Many students arrive each morning gang-dominated neighborhoods without basic job skills or the reading and writing skills of students eight or nine years younger. The Cristo Rey Network has transformed the graduation rate in under-performing neighborhoods from 20% to over 90% using innovative approaches:

- Each student has a corporate internship, coordinated by Cristo Rey, and spends one to two days per week off site, honing professional skills.
- Four students share one full-time internship, and the income funds more than 70% of the tuition.
- The 500-student Minneapolis school is personalized through division into four 125-student academies.
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Why 125-student Academies?

Malcolm Gladwell, in *The Tipping Point*, writes about professional learning communities with a maximum number of 150 people "for a group to function efficiently and happily." The Fielding Nair International's design experience with personal learning communities extends over two decades and includes notable successes such as Avalon School in St. Paul, and Harbor City International School in Duluth, Minnesota

Learning Studios & Learning Suites

Mention the word "classroom" and many students think of long days of captivity, waiting for the bell. A "Studio" brings to mind an active, project-based environment where students take more responsibility for their use of time and learning. One might build something in a studio, or rearrange the tables, or capture a corner or bay and make it their own for a particular project. For Cristo Rey, a mix of seminar rooms for enquiry-based learning, studios for collaborative, interdisciplinary, and project-work, and an active commons fosters both structure and freedom.

Hi Tables, Low Tables, and Soft Seating

Look across a prison or school cafeteria and you are likely to see rows and rows of hard chairs or benches, all at uniform height. In contrast, your favorite restaurant or coffee shop probably has booths and tables of varied sizes. Visiting coffee shops around the world, ranging from Starbucks in Abu Dhabi to The International Cafe in Prague, it's apparent that these informal, varied spaces have become vital work centers in the global economy. When FNI surveys students on environmental preferences, respondents invariably select these coffee shop-like environments for both independent and collaborative work ambiance.

Lockers and open closets in small family-like groupings

At Cristo Rey, small family-like groupings of lockers and open closets are distributed in each academy. Locker or "cubbies" are large enough to store a purse, iPod and books. The open closets, shelves and hooks adjacent are intended for backpacks, coats, and athletic bags. The design approach for Cristo Rey's student storage is in consonance with the principles established by the [International Association of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design \(CPTED\)](#), where a culture of caring, responsibility and natural surveillance are emphasized as the foundation for a safe school environment.

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