

Creating a School that Works

A NEW MODEL FOR HIGH SCHOOL SUCCESS IS LAUNCHED IN OREGON

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“What do the young people of North Portland really need?” That was the question educators at La Salle High School in nearby Milwaukie asked themselves. The answer: A Catholic, Lasalian high school, located right in the neighborhood, offering a college prep curriculum that is affordable for those who need it most. An impossible dream? Not when it’s a school that works.



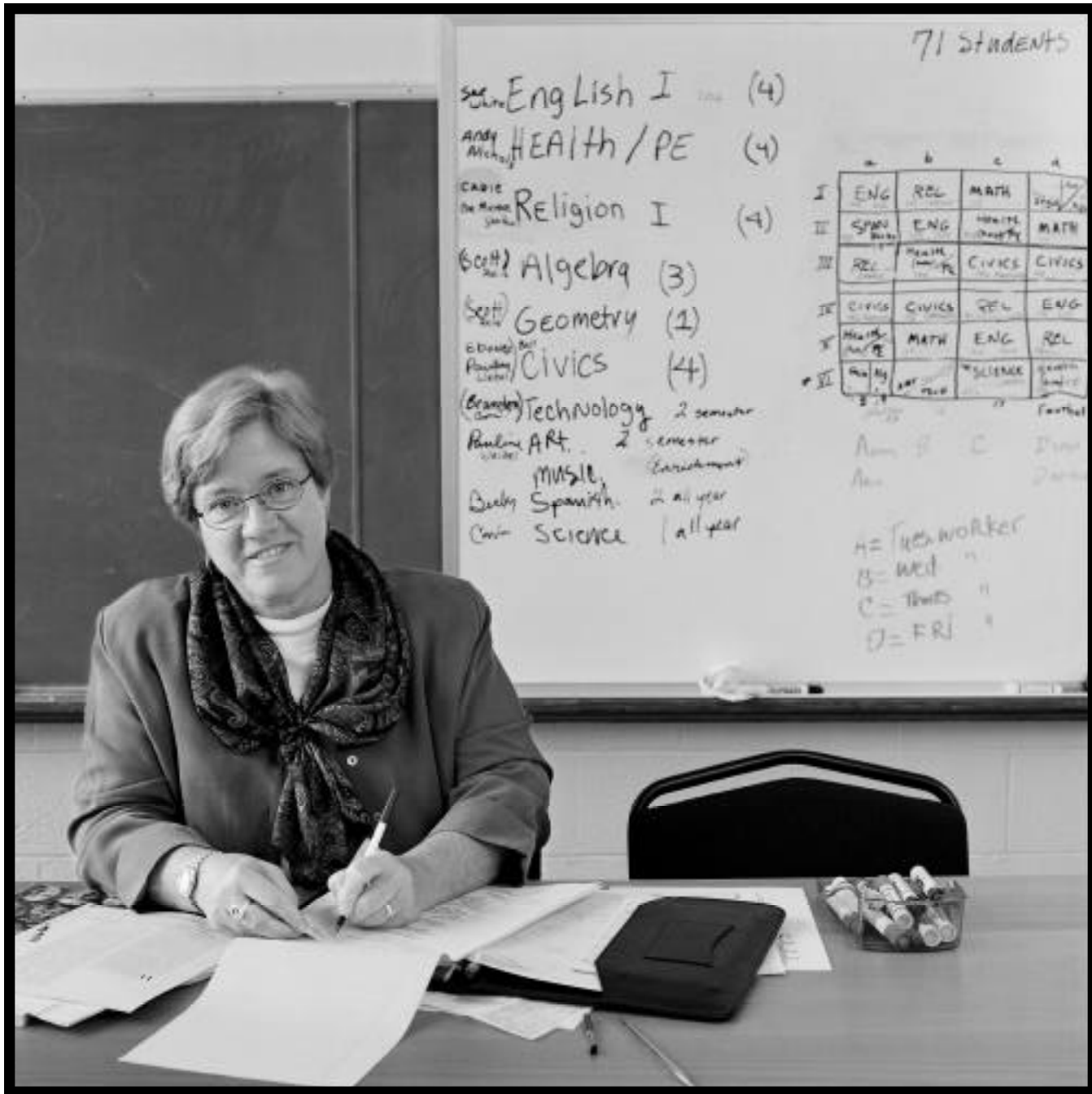
September 4, 2001, is the opening day of classes at De La Salle North Catholic High School (DLSNC), an initiative of the District of San Francisco that brings college preparatory high school to an area where public high school dropout rates are among the highest in the state of Oregon. “We want to bring the best education to kids who haven’t had access,” says Matt Powell, President of the school. “We see ourselves as a neighborhood

school. We will not turn anyone away for their inability to pay.”
“There is no substitute for a neighborhood high school,” says Kathy Gritzmacher, “especially when other Catholic schools are a long commute away.” Gritzmacher grew up here and has worked in North Portland for 25 years as an educator. She is the Principal of Holy Redeemer Area School, a K-8 school located just a mile and a half from the new high school. “Over thirty of our graduating eighth-graders have been accepted

into the initial freshman class at DLSNC, and they are excited.”
Kevin Fuller is another person who knows the neighborhood well: “People in the community, Catholic or not, are happy about it. Around here, when you say ‘private, Catholic, college prep,’ it sounds to many people like you’re saying ‘expensive, distant, different.’ But DLSNC will be truly representative of this community – socio-economically, racially, culturally.” Fuller



Members of De La Salle North Catholic’s historic first faculty and administration met at the school site in July 2001 to prepare for the inaugural fall semester. This is the second high school in the nation to offer a college-preparatory education made affordable by a corporate internship program in which every student works one day a week while also attending school full-time.



“The corporate internship model . . . breaks down the barriers to private college prep education while giving young people, as they work, exposure to a new world.”

“The Master Schedule is the key to everything,” says Matt Powell, President of De La Salle North Catholic. Sister Judy Murphy, at left, former Principal of Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago, visited Portland to help the new school prepare its master schedule, which allows the students to job-share a responsible office job while achieving a college-preparatory education. De La Salle North Catholic is the first high school in the nation to adopt the corporate internship model that Cristo Rey has pioneered. Cristo Rey, which serves an inner-city area where dropout rates from public high school are staggeringly high, sends more than 75 percent of its graduates to college.

works for Portland’s newspaper, *The Oregonian*, as a liaison to education, and is the founding Executive Director of Bridge Builders, an educational enrichment program for African-American males. “There hasn’t been much for kids on the east side of the Willamette [River]. Finally, there’s something.”

See a Need, and Respond in Faith

Creating that ‘something’ has been, as Greg VanderZanden, President of La Salle High School in Milwaukie, puts it, “a journey of faith.” It’s a story as old as John Baptist de La Salle himself: See a need and, in faith, take one step at a time to answer the need. In this case those who took the first step were educators at La Salle Milwaukie, one of the schools that is, as Gritzmacher said, “a long commute away” from North Portland. North Portland’s local high school, North Catholic High, founded in 1958, had been lost to a fire in 1970. Gritzmacher calls the school closure “a wound from which the community has never recovered.”

VanderZanden says, “We had been talking for years about what to do, with the idea of opening some school there, perhaps a campus of La Salle Milwaukie.” Among the discussants were many of the faculty, administrators, and trustees, including board of trustees chair

Gerald Bitz, Kathy Gritzmacher (who is a La Salle graduate and serves on its board), and Matt Powell, also a La Salle graduate who, in a 16-year career at the school, was a teacher, coach, dean, and vice principal.

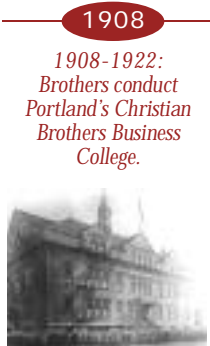
Says VanderZanden, “When the 1999 District Action Plan was published, with Brother David Brennan’s statement of principle about responding where the needs are, that was our green light. We said to ourselves, what we’re doing is exactly what the Action Plan calls for. If we really do our homework, we’ll have the support of the District.”

They did their homework, and approval was given by the District of San Francisco to begin designing a high school that would serve the North Portland area and would be as close as possible to tuition-free – in principle, gratuitous. In announcing the project in 1999, Brother David Brennan, FSC, Visitor, said, “We have learned the value of forming partnerships around our initiatives. We expect that this project will build similar types of partnerships.” That expectation was fulfilled, and with the cooperation and collaboration of many on the scene, including the Archdiocese of Portland, community leaders, and the University of Portland, planning



1886

1886-1908: De La Salle Christian Brothers conduct St. Michael’s College in Portland, (aka St. Mary’s Grammar School and Blanchet Institute).



1908

1908-1922: Brothers conduct Portland’s Christian Brothers Business College.

1958

North Catholic High School founded by Archdiocese of Portland in Oregon.



1966

La Salle High School, Milwaukie, opened by De La Salle Christian Brothers.

1970

Fire closes North Catholic High School.

1998

La Salle Milwaukie administration and trustees spearhead study for a new Catholic high school in North Portland, in conjunction with the University of Portland.



1999

May: Tim McGree appointed by De La Salle Institute as interim Project Coordinator to establish new school.

1999

September: Portland Archbishop John Vlazny extends formal invitation to the De La Salle Christian Brothers to open a Catholic, Lasallian secondary school in North Portland.



1999

December: Press conference held in North Portland to announce creation of new school.

Board of Trustees is formed for new school.



2000

April: Matt Powell named Project Coordinator.
May: School named De La Salle North Catholic High School.
July: Powell named school President & CEO.



2000

October: Former Queen of Peace parish school and rectory are secured for the new school site and Brothers’ residence.

went forward. Matt Powell was named coordinator of the project early in 2000 and pressed forward in faith a step at a time.

The Last Giant Step

But one giant step remained to be taken; that step was to make this high school truly affordable for those whom it was designed to educate.

Go east, young man, was the advice Powell began to receive from various sources. Go to Chicago, specifically. In Chicago, an innovative high school was meeting the kinds of challenges facing DLSNC, and leaders of the DLSNC project and the District of San Francisco explored it. Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, which was bringing college-prep education to a low-income area, had a unique job-sharing program sponsored by area businesses and integrated with its school calendar so that students earned substantial amounts toward the expenses of education while taking no time away from their education. Cristo Rey called it the Corporate Internship Program.

Corporate sponsors contract with the Corporate Internship Program to fill clerical and professional office jobs. Each job is shared by several students, and though each student works one full day per week at the job site, the school day and the school year are extended and designed so that no

student forfeits any classroom time. The fees paid by the corporate sponsors go to the school, and the school in turn can keep tuition far lower than it would otherwise be.

The benefits of the plan, which Cristo Rey had been following for five years, were clear: As interns in corporate and institutional settings, students get invaluable new experiences in the adult world and do responsible work in a variety of professional enterprises – an opportunity that most high schoolers simply don't have open to them. They earn substantial money with which to pay for an otherwise out of reach college preparatory education. They don't have to fit the job into after-school hours, because each student works one full day a week. The work schedule and academic schedule are linked, so the focus on school is never lost, because the work is part of school life. The students don't neglect homework or friends or sports or activities to hold down a needed job. And they aren't alone in their endeavors, because each full-time job is shared among a team.

Saying Yes to Corporate Internship

Matt Powell, who officially began as President of the as-yet nonexistent school in July 2000, visited Cristo Rey in October 2000 and came back convinced that the model was applicable to North

“We’re looking forward to working with the students who will come to us. They’ll do general office tasks to support our staff. They’ll help us while we help them to reach their educational goals.”

– Troy Dockins, a manager at the McMenamin's chain of hotels & eateries

Below: Mike Jacobson describes the Worker Program to potential corporate sponsors. The former bank manager says, “The Worker Program is an integral part of De La Salle North Catholic’s structure and is shared in by all, in keeping with the tradition of making no distinctions among students, of treating everyone equally.”



President, Matt Powell, right, and Mike Jacobson, left, Director of the St. Joseph the Worker Program, introduce prospective students to the new high school at a November 2000 open house.

Photo by Steve Hamhuchen

Portland Corporate Sponsors

The Worker Program contracts with companies and institutions to staff entry-level clerical and professional positions with De La Salle North Catholic students. Each full-time job is shared among four students. The fees paid by the corporate sponsors to the Worker Program help to offset the cost of education and allow for a more affordable tuition.

Among the corporate sponsors for the inaugural year are: Pacific Northwest Title, McMenamin's Inc., The Archdiocese of Portland, Providence Hospital, Nike, Chrome Data, Guardian Management Corporation, Oregon Rails Federal Credit Union, Sage, MKG Financial Group, The University of Portland.

Portland. But the program would need a director who had management skills, wide business contacts, and a passionate interest in education. He talked with a local bank manager whom he knew, described what he needed, and asked the banker, Mike Jacobson, if he could suggest anybody to interview for the directorship. Mike Jacobson thought it over and said, “How about me?” Says Powell, “He had just the skill set I was looking for.” Says Jacobson, “I had always wanted to be involved in education.”

As director of the first corporate internship program outside of Cristo Rey, Jacobson is helping to make educational history. DLSNC is the first school in the country to adopt the program fully. “All eyes are on us,” says Matt Powell, “to see if we can make the corporate internship model work for college prep education as well as Cristo Rey has.” At DLSNC, the internship program has been christened the St. Joseph the Worker Internship Program and is called the “Worker Program” for short.

One person who has no doubt about the Worker Program is B. J. Cassin, a venture capitalist and philanthropist who is a longtime supporter of educational initiatives, including those of the De La Salle Christian Brothers. The Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation has given substantial support to both Cristo Rey and DLSNC and provides grants for spreading the word about the benefits of the corporate internship program.

The Executive Director of the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation, Jeff Thielman, says, “Mr. Cassin knows that to achieve the goal of more college opportunities for underprivileged kids, the foundation has to be laid in high school and middle school. He likes the corporate internship model because it breaks down the barriers to college prep education while giving young people, as they work, exposure to a new world. Currently we are sponsoring feasibility studies of such schools in Boston, Denver,



2000

October: Powell visits Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, Chicago, to explore corporate internship program.

October: Board of Trustees approves corporate internship model for De La Salle North Catholic.



2000

November: First open house for prospective students is held.

2001

January: 74 new lockers are installed in the school hallway.

March: First student is accepted to the new school.



2001

July: Brother Jonathan Cord, FSC, Director of the Brothers' Community, opens the Brothers' residence.

2001

July: First faculty meetings are held.
August: Corporate internship program orientation begins for students.

September 4: First day of classes at De La Salle North Catholic High School.



“How many high school freshmen get to do data entry in a business office or provide clerical support in a hotel sales office?”

– Mike Jacobson, Director of the Worker Program

At De La Salle North Catholic, the answer is: Every freshman. But to succeed, preparation and support are essential. All students attend a special training program to practice the skills they'll be required to use, and to learn about dress, behavior, and accountability. Once school opens and job-sharing begins, the students are accompanied to and from their offices, and they have regular discussions with Worker Program staff about how their work is going.

Tucson, Austin, Cleveland, southside Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles.”

The District of San Francisco has contributed its leadership and important financial support, and the new high school also has the benefit of a community of De La Salle Christian Brothers living and working there. The Director of the Community is Brother Jonathan Cord, FSC, who says, “It’s highly desirable to have the Brothers’ Community here, not only to demonstrate and embody the District’s commitment but also to provide for the students a living connection to the Lasallian mission and tradition. There are three Brothers and two Lasallian Volunteers who will live in community and work in the school.”

Affirming the Neighborhood

“When you build a school in a neighborhood,” says Greg VanderZanden, “you affirm that neighborhood and build it up.” The nearby University of Portland, an institution affiliated with the Congregation of Holy Cross, has been a very good neighbor, in particular through the support and expertise extended by members of its School of Education and School of Business. A mentoring program directed by Professor Ron Hill of the business school will match DLSNC students with college students for regular contact – making the world of higher education an everyday experience, just as the Worker Program makes the adult world of work an everyday experience.

Even the students’ own lives are an educational resource that provides foundational material for their studies. After much discussion around the question of “what do

these students need?” with education professors at the University of Portland and with seasoned high school educators, the school developed a query-based curriculum. Sue White, a longtime teacher and administrator at La Salle High School, will teach at DLSNC, and says, “Our query-based curriculum makes use of the neighborhood. We pose questions that get us deeper into the neighborhood – questions about where we are, who we are, how we got here. This grounds students in what they know, and allows them to expand into exploration of what they don’t yet know.”

Matt Powell says, “The key is the students. We’re here for capable, motivated, interested students. The interviewing process we have done with them and their families has been intensive and very satisfying. A key concept coming down from John Baptist de La Salle is to get to know your students well so that you can understand what they need.”

From seeing a need, and acting in faith, ways have been found to make a new reality for the young people of North Portland. “DLSNC is a real blessing to the community,” says Kathy Gritzmacher.

At this writing, the school is about to open its doors to its first freshman class of 76 students. Says Gritzmacher, whose eighth-graders make up more than a third of that class, “They’re looking forward to being the pioneers. They’re not bothered by the extended school year or any such details. They’re excited about being the ones to start the school off, to choose its mascot, its colors, and all that. And they love to remind me that, really, they’ll never be freshmen. They tell me, ‘We’ll always be the seniors.’”