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Editorial: Proposed Cristo Rey school could be a big win for southern North Charleston

BY THE EDITORIAL STAFF

SEP 23, 2024



Metanoia hopes to soon renovate the old Chicora Elementary School for use as an innovative new school.

FILE/LAURA BILSON/STAFF

The redevelopment of the historic Chicora Elementary School in southern North Charleston has been **a touch-and-go prospect** ever since the nonprofit Metanoia decided to tackle the ambitious project several years ago, in hopes of not only preserving a building but also giving the neighboring community new hope. And the project's fragility was seen *before* the building nearly burned down and before the pandemic first scrambled, then shelved, initial plans.

But Metanoia kept the faith and, a few years later, is now poised to be a partner in creating something special, a remarkable new school. We urge parents, the business community and others to consider what's going on here and how they may help.

As reporter Kenna Coe noted, the delay caused by the fire and pandemic ultimately led Metanoia to **a new proposal with Cristo Rey**, an innovative type of Roman Catholic high school that provides free, college-preparatory education for low-income students. It differs from conventional high schools, even Catholic high schools such as Bishop England, because its students spend one day in the workplace as interns for every four days in the classroom.

The partnership is far enough along that Cristo Rey and Metanoia have unveiled it publicly, but it's not a done deal. A few key pieces, including a feasibility study that will determine if such a school would work in the Charleston region, still need to fall into place. That study in part will evaluate whether enough businesses are willing to hire students on a one-day-a-week basis, mentor them and pay them, though the income earned goes to the school, not the individual student. Even with that income, the school still will need donations and family contributions.

There are encouraging signs to date. The school has found local jobs for 92 students, almost enough for its planned inaugural freshman class of 100 that would enroll and start school two years from now. Almost 20 companies have signed on, and Cristo Rey is hoping to recruit about 25 more. The school also wants to hear from interested students and parents; they can learn more at **cristoreycharleston.org**.

In trying to preserve a large, historic building such as a school, one big challenge is finding an appropriate new use. Metanoia's original plan to renovate and repurpose the vacant Chicora Elementary School for an early learning center, a charter school and as an arts hub was as ambitious as it was complicated, since none of those uses could take up all the

space. Eventually, the fire and related delays prompted the charter school to seek a new option, while another early learning center was created in North Charleston several blocks away, scuttling the need for one in the Chicora building.

Cristo Rey had considered opening a school in the Charleston area before but opted against it. Its revived interest came at an auspicious time for Metanoia, which sought not only a new use for the Chicora building but also one that would serve residents nearby. Cristo Rey's model, which was started in Chicago about 25 years ago, seems an excellent fit, as it is based on serving lower-income families: Students who qualify for free or reduced price school lunches meet its eligibility rules. And while the schools are Catholic, they are not run by their local Catholic dioceses and have an inclusive approach to religion and faith.

Metanoia even arranged for 16 neighborhood leaders, including Union Heights neighborhood president Skip Mikell, to tour the Cristo Rey school in Atlanta, one of 40 that operate across the country. "I was really impressed by the campus and the facilities, but my greatest impression was from the students, parents and faculty," Mr. Mikell tells us. "The parents were involved, and that's what encouraged me."

As promising as this sounds, the timetable is tight for everything to fall into place. If Cristo Rey's feasibility study provides a green light early next year, then Metanoia will seek to close on its financing in April and begin construction at once with the goal of finishing in time for school to start in August 2026.

So both Metanoia and Cristo Rey have some work to do to ensure their shared vision comes to pass. But given the potential upside of this vision — an innovative new high school geared to lift up low-income students in a newly renovated historic building that has been an anchor in North Charleston — we should not only hope that this work gets done but ask ourselves, our neighbors and our leaders to do what they can to ensure it does.

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