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From left, first-grader Leo Vega, fifth-grader Immanuel Rowland, first-grader Ian Montano Alarcon and fifth-grader Camila Lopez listen during Mass April 21 at Holy Name Church adjacent to Risen Christ Catholic School. DAVE HRBACEK | THE CATHOLIC SPIRIT

Now debt free, Minnesota's only Catholic dual language immersion school prepares low-income students for success

Back in 2016, Rosa Brandt was on a mission. She and her husband, Barry, needed to choose a school where their older daughter could start kindergarten that fall. Both parents wanted a Catholic school that offered dual immersion in English and Spanish. They talked to parents and toured about 10 schools, but they could not find a Catholic school that offered Spanish as something more than an introductory language.

Then a breakthrough: Rosa Googled.

Up popped a school in Minneapolis unfamiliar to her, Risen Christ. But she liked what she read: It was Catholic. Check. It supported English and Spanish languages. Check. And a bonus: It was on the way from her home in Bloomington to her job in Minneapolis.

"We were like, wow, there really is one," she said. And she hasn't looked back.



Second-grader Samantha Chavez and teacher Reyna Payan celebrate success with Spanish flash cards during class April 21. DAVE HRBACEK | THE CATHOLIC SPIRIT

The kindergarten-through-eighth-grade school serves more low-income students (85%) and Latinos (93%) than any other Catholic school in the Twin Cities. It is the only Catholic dual language immersion school in Minnesota and one of 22 in the nation. According to the school, English-language learners enrolled at Risen Christ significantly outperform their peers in Minneapolis public schools and across Minnesota. Experience with the school has earned praise from former students, loyalty from families and support from the community.

And while it struggled with costs, parents, donors and others recently stepped up to help the school retire all of its debt.

“The Lord definitely graced us with this school,” said Rosa Brandt, whose father is from Mexico; her mother is from southern Texas. While Hispanic, her daughters face challenges learning Spanish in the family because they speak predominantly English at home.

RISEN CHRIST AT A GLANCE

- 348 children in grades K-8 (260 families)
- Religion (as reported by families): 87% Catholic, 5% other Christian, <1% non-Christian, 8% unknown
- 93% Latino, 3% Black, 2% Asian, 2% Caucasian, <1% multiracial
- Free/reduced lunch: 85%
- English language learners: 66%
- Per-pupil cost to educate: \$8,823
- Full price of tuition: \$3,550
- Receiving financial aid: 96%
- Average daily attendance: 92%
- Student retention: 97%*2021-2022 school year

“We love the teachers and they’re constantly pushing and challenging the kids in both English and Spanish,” Brandt said. She loves the school’s “Catholic base” and celebration of Hispanic traditions, such as Los Posadas, a December custom commemorating the journey Joseph and Mary made from Nazareth to Bethlehem, where Mary gave birth to Jesus. “It’s been really beautiful and amazing, a great blessing to have it all come together,” she said.

Today, the Brandts have a fifth-grader and a third-grader at Risen Christ. Their youngest starts kindergarten there this fall.

Founded in 1993 out of five Minneapolis Catholic schools — Holy Name, Holy Rosary, Incarnation, St. Albert the Great and St. Stephen — Risen Christ is best known for its immersion program. With the school’s “50/50 model,” students receive 50% of their instruction in English each day and 50% in Spanish. Every student receives daily instruction in English and Spanish literacy. Grade-level teaching teams include one teacher fluent in English and one fluent in Spanish.



Second-grader Destiny Gonzalez works on reading. DAVE HRBACEK | THE CATHOLIC SPIRIT

The effort began with the fall 2014 kindergarten class, and one grade has been added each year. Today, only eighth-graders did not start under the immersion program.

That model attracted Sonia Rosas, 28, of Minneapolis, and her husband, Jose, to Risen Christ. They have a 10-year-old daughter in third grade, and a 6-year-old daughter in kindergarten. In choosing the school, Sonia Rosas said it was important that students learn in Spanish and English, that it is a Catholic school, and she heard that people at the school “are very supportive with families and have a deep understanding (of) the culture and the language.”

Rosas and the children primarily speak English at home, while her husband mainly speaks Spanish. But since they’ve gone to Risen Christ, the girls have grown more comfortable communicating in Spanish, she said.

Her children are happy at the school, she said, and she values the way parent-teacher conferences are handled and how the staff makes time for celebrations, such as an autumn festival with student activities, and

some events in which students play games with teachers “and see them outside the classroom environment.”

Including Latino traditions is important to her family. Sonia said there is a special altar at school where on el Día de los Muertos (the Day of the Dead), students can bring photos and mementos honoring loved ones who have died.

While important and a differentiator, school president Michael Rogers said dual immersion is probably the third reason parents choose the school, behind the fact it is Catholic and it provides a safe environment.

“A lot of our families don’t perceive Minneapolis public schools as being very safe, unfortunately,” he said.

GRATITUDE

Many graduates of Risen Christ School in Minneapolis attend DeLaSalle High School or Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, both in Minneapolis, and appreciate their elementary school experience.

DeLaSalle senior Anahi Sanchez Lazcano, 17, said she switched from a public school to Risen Christ in sixth grade and learned to enjoy math and science. She plans to attend Macalester College in St. Paul this fall, majoring in neuroscience to become a biomedical engineer.

“Before I went to Risen Christ, I didn’t really know what I wanted to be or study,” Sanchez Lazcano said. Staff at Risen Christ prepared her not only for high school, she said, but for college.

“There were so many activities that we did in math and science ... that really sparked (my interest) in doing something for other people,” she said, “helping them while also learning.”

She also believes the dual immersion learning environment at Risen Christ will bring more opportunities for her and other students in their careers and in life. “It gives you more possibilities,” she said.

DeLaSalle senior Stacy Ruiz, 18, attended Risen Christ all nine years of her elementary education. Starting before dual immersion began, she took classes in English. Ruiz praised the teachers, especially those who recognized her abilities in math, tutored and challenged her. Ruiz said she plans to attend a community college this fall before starting dental hygiene school.

A mentoring program for middle school students at Risen Christ influenced Daniel Onofre, today a senior at Cristo Rey. Onofre, 18, recalled one mentor whose business worked with an engineering company involved with robotics. The experience helped spark his desire to study mechanical engineering in college. Onofre said the school also made him feel more like part of the community than simply a student. That, he said, along with opportunities to lead group activities for classwork, helped him develop leadership skills.

A Risen Christ classmate of Onofre’s also attending Cristo Rey, Karen Modesto, 17, said everyone at the elementary school, from teachers and counselors to kitchen employees, created a supportive environment for students. Her favorite classes were social studies and religion, but her social studies teacher at Risen Christ, now her advanced placement government teacher at Cristo Rey, James Nelson, influenced her desire to become an attorney.

Two-thirds of Risen Christ students are English-language learners, but the goal is not to teach native Spanish speakers how to speak English, said fourth-grade teacher Susana Villalobos, who has taught at Risen Christ for nearly five years. Instead, the goal is creating bilingual emergence, she said. “Our goal is to help the students grow in both languages at the same time,” Villalobos said. “The knowledge is there; knowledge can be transferred in any language.”

Villalobos, 29, said many children who arrive in the United States as immigrants are very smart, with great knowledge of math and reading. “They have amazing skills that had been underestimated because they think they don’t know anything because they don’t know English,” she said.



Teacher Susana Villalobos stands next to a mural painted by students at Risen Christ that is on display in the main hallway on the first floor. She led the project, in which students painted flowers circling a statue of Jesus. DAVE HRBACEK | THE CATHOLIC SPIRIT

Middle school religion teacher Maria Lara, 45, said she remembers being in second grade and translating for her Spanish-speaking mother when they visited a doctor or a store, even though Lara was not fluent in English at the time. And when Latino students at other schools read, write and speak in English only, some students “cannot communicate with their family,” including their parents, Lara said. Today, her students “know exactly what they are saying,” she said, because they speak English and Spanish.

Carmen Grace Poppert, 26, has taught at Risen Christ for the five years since her college graduation. “Everything I teach is always in Spanish,” she said. Twice a week, Poppert said, she shares planning time with her partner teacher, the first-grade English teacher.



A mural painted by students is on display in the main hallway on the first floor of Risen Christ. DAVE HRBACEK | THE CATHOLIC SPIRIT

In addition to talking with people who speak two languages, students benefit from dual immersion because it fosters a global perspective, Poppert said. Students are invited to be empathetic and to see and understand other cultures, she said.

Being bilingual will open doors to many possibilities for students as companies seek employees with that kind of skill, Poppert said. Spanish-speaking parents appreciate that their native language is as valued as English, and many of them learn from their children and become more comfortable with English, she said.

A global perspective and the school's Latino population is reflected in a colorful, student-painted mural honoring Jesus on a main floor hallway wall. Father Leo Schneider, pastor of Holy Name, which is adjacent to the school, asked Rogers in 2019 if the school could use a statue of Jesus that the church no longer needed. Rogers said "yes" and Villalobos, who has a degree in fine arts and taught art in her native Venezuela, led a project where students painted flowers circling the statue, which is affixed to the wall.

At the suggestion of students, the flowers represent home countries of Risen Christ students and families, including a flor de maga for Puerto Rico, carnation for Spain, ceibo for Uruguay, lotus for Vietnam, dahlia for Mexico, orchid for Venezuela, lobster claw for Bolivia, roses for Ecuador and the United States — and a pink lady's slipper for Minnesota.

"We wanted to do something that would represent our cultures and our people and everyone who has been here at school," Villalobos said. Painting faces might be more cliché, she said, so students came up with the idea of painting flowers.



Second-grade teacher Jessica Hentges sits with students who are playing a game during what is called Center Time. DAVE HRBACEK | THE CATHOLIC SPIRIT

“It is so beautiful because we’re serving our community, predominantly Latino-Hispanic families, and not telling them you need to choose your culture or the culture of the U.S.,” Poppert said. “You ... get the best of both worlds, so to speak, that you can be fully bilingual, fluent in both English and Spanish.”

Having passionate teachers — many of whom are native Spanish speakers who later learned English and understand what students live day to day — helps create a community and a family at Risen Christ, Poppert said. The school is tight-knit, she said. Everyone looks out for each other.

Because many students at Risen Christ come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, often with parents who work several jobs to support their children and give them more opportunities than what they had, students look to teachers as parental figures, Poppert said.

“I think that is why we have such strong connections with our students, because they get this really positive attention from adults. With both parents working long hours, sometimes an older sibling serves as the parent, she said. “We create families within our classrooms.”

Expectations are high at Risen Christ, not only with academics, but with daily life skills, Villalobos said. “My kids are amazing,” she said. “They’re so capable of understanding ‘Why are we here? Who are we together in Christ?’ We’re brothers and sisters who create a community to help each other and grow. That’s why I love working here.”

Future once in doubt, Risen Christ now debt free



Bidders raise their cards at the Risen Christ gala live auction May 13. Auction items included a gourmet Central American food and wine experience for 10 and a five-day trip for two to Old Head Golf Links of Kinsale, Ireland, to play what's been called the most scenic golf course in the world. COURTESY MAX HAYNES

During an annual gala May 13, Risen Christ School's largest fundraising event, school president Michael Rogers made a surprise announcement to the more than 400 attendees: The school's debt — which had grown as large as \$4.5 million — was officially paid off. More than a year and a half ahead of schedule.

Cheers erupted from the audience, which included donors to the school, foundation partners, school families, alumni, teachers, staff and volunteers. Many donors had accelerated their payments toward the debt, Rogers said.

Rogers asked attendees to stand, and many raised a glass of champagne to toast the big news, the champagne courtesy of the Risen Christ board of directors. Rogers thanked everyone who had faith "that we can do this," including those who contributed to a capital campaign to retire the debt, or to maintain the school's general operations year after year, as well as foundation supporters, teachers and staff, students and families "who we are honored to partner with and blessed to serve for many generations to come."



Mike Rogers, president of Risen Christ School in Minneapolis, addresses those at the school's gala May 13. COURTESY MAX HAYNES

The school had carried debt for years. Formed from five Catholic schools, Risen Christ opened two campuses in 1993, one on the school's present site next to Holy Name church and the second at the former Incarnation school in Minneapolis.

"At some point, they wanted ... everybody in the same location, in the same building, to have some efficiencies," Rogers said. The move happened in 2003, but it required an addition with four classrooms made to the north side of the present Risen Christ building. It was a big project, and the school had not raised all the money needed. With interest payments, other loans and falling behind on paying its obligations to the archdiocese, the debt added up. For a long while, the school owed \$3.75 million, said Rogers, who joined the school in 2015. The debt increased to \$4.5 million in 2018.

The school started a capital campaign in 2017 solely to apply funds toward the debt, which raised about \$1.5 million. But more was needed.

By fall 2019, finances and the school's future looked bleak. Rogers discussed the issue with Archbishop Bernard Hebda and funders, including the St. Paul-based Catholic Community Foundation of Minnesota. "We explained ... that if the debt was gone, we're going to be fine," Rogers said. "We were making ends meet. We were becoming more efficient with costs. So, it was just the debt."

Rogers said it came down to "people have to come together and help us with this or this school ceases to exist."

The timing did not help, as it preceded the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit school families hard because so many parents are frontline workers holding multiple jobs. Civil unrest and violence following the police-involved killing of George Floyd not far from the school in May 2020 also impacted school families. One school family's apartment building burned to the ground in rioting that followed Floyd's death, Rogers said. When stores were boarded up, generous people brought food and household supplies for school families, he said.

The GHR Foundation stepped up to help with the debt, Rogers said, and brought financial expertise and other funders to the table. A plan came together in November 2020, with the debt consolidated into a low-interest commercial bank loan estimated for payoff in December 2023.






"We've continued to operate in a very sustainable way with our general operating budget," Rogers said. "Our donors have continued to support us."

With the debt retired, Rogers said school leaders can plan the school's future. "We really couldn't with the debt," he said. "I could never look past the next year."

The gala itself, held at the InterContinental Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport in Minneapolis, raised more than \$450,000 to support the school's mission to make Risen Christ financially accessible to all families who want their children to attend, Rogers said. Funds were raised through benefactor gifts, live and silent auctions, a special appeal, raffle ticket sales, sponsorships and gala ticket sales.

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