

Preparing Students Beyond the Classroom

“How Philadelphia’s Cristo Rey High School Bolstered Student Engagement and Confidence with a Crash Course in Improv”

the unscripted project

A Critical Juncture for Our Future Generation

Across the nation, high school students are leaving school feeling underprepared for life beyond graduation. And this goes beyond just struggling test scores; a modern world and ever-evolving professional landscape call upon today’s students to possess both social and emotional intelligence in order to succeed.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequities in education, especially for students who could not effectively participate in online learning. The city of Philadelphia is no exception as 35% of Philadelphia children live in poverty;¹ creating challenges for both economic and academic stability. Consequently, the most recent data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress² placed Philadelphia near the bottom when it comes to academic performance.

This problem was felt acutely by Cristo Rey High School based in North Philadelphia. Founded in 2012 as a private high school made possible by a unique partnership of local educators, businesses, and universities, Cristo Rey and its leadership team saw firsthand the need to better prepare its students for what lies ahead by linking the learnings in the classroom to the world beyond its walls.

¹ Philadelphia City Council, 2020 ² Nation’s Report Card, 2022



Email info@unscriptedproject.org to learn more

67% of students increased in social self-efficacy after the program

Working to Create Holistic Learners

The “Grad at Grad” program is a critical part of the Cristo Rey curriculum and school ethos, placing students in cohorts to take part in several activities and experiences outside of the classroom to best prepare them for life after Cristo Rey. The school doubled down on learning recovery and prioritizing the social-emotional needs of students following the pandemic as the new school year began. That led to a collaboration with The Unscripted Project, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit teaching life skills through improv education.

Students in dozens of high schools and middle schools benefit from the group’s 10-week in-school workshop series built on a curriculum developed in partnership with advisors from the Magnet Theater NYC, Philly Improv Theater, and Second City Chicago. The series is taught by trained, professional teaching artists in collaboration with classroom teachers. Using improv, the program creates a safe and nurturing environment for students to be themselves, make mistakes and grow with their peers.

With a specific focus on developing one key life skill each week, The Unscripted Project aims to give students the improv toolkit – a mindset that enables and empowers young people to be more adaptable, confident, and collaborative in life within and beyond the classroom. Put simply, the program works; according to pre/post program surveys

from student participants across the city of Philadelphia, **82% of students feel like they have become better communicators and 86% feel more confident participating in class.** At Cristo Rey, the program was abridged to the equivalent of 3 weeks to accommodate the scheduling criteria of the Grad at Grad Program; yet the impact was still felt by students and teachers alike.

Teachers shared: *Working with the Unscripted Project was a refreshing experience for students to step outside of their comfort zone, specifically with other students they might not always interact with. For those who bought in, it was incredible to see them begin tentatively to loosen up before giving themselves permission to be silly, goofy, and authentically themselves.*

Saying “Yes, And” to Improv Education

Another teacher noted that several activities that students learned in the workshop have since been incorporated into their classrooms. Encouraged by the response from both students and teachers, Cristo Rey has expanded its relationship with The Unscripted Project and is offering the program to the entire freshman class, so all graduates moving forward can look forward to applying the lessons of an improv education to all aspects of their lives.



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