

## PWC, O'Neill up stakes in battle to lower dropout rate

BY JENNIFER LECLAIRE  
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

With public high-school dropout rates on the rise in Massachusetts — especially among low-income youth — efforts such as the **Cristo Rey Corporate Work-Study Program** are proving to be more important than ever.

**North Cambridge Catholic High School** is tackling this issue by offering at-risk youth a challenging curriculum and real-world experience through the **Cristo Rey Network**, a national association of high schools that provide Catholic

and college-prep education to urban youth. And local corporate sponsors — namely accounting and business-services firm **PricewaterhouseCoopers** and public-affairs specialist **O'Neill and Associates** in Boston — are providing the resources and leadership to help further that mission.

According to NCC President **Jeff Thielman**, the program is vital to the career success of his students, 93 percent of whom are African-American and Latino youth from low-income families.

"It's a powerful experience for them ... where they learn about the world of work and learn skills that prepare them for college," he said.

PWC has supported the program

since it launched in 2004. **Michael Costello**, a partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers, chairs the sponsor development committee to bring other companies into the program. He said the firm has helped place more than 30 students with local companies.

"We didn't anticipate how much our full-time employees would adopt these kids as younger brothers and sisters," Costello said. "Being mentors to these kids as they are preparing to enter college has been rewarding for us."

Meanwhile, **Thomas P. O'Neill III**, CEO of O'Neill and Associates, assembled a plan for NCC to join the Cristo Rey Network when the school was threatened with closure.

O'Neill's staffers mentor students — tutoring them before exams, helping them prepare for SATs and even attending school events to support the student workers. The impact is unmistakable: North Cambridge's four-year college acceptance rate increased to 91 percent in 2008 from 27 percent in 2005 in the years since O'Neill stepped up to the plate.

"This model helps defray about 70 percent of the cost of education. The students are actually helping pay the teachers' salaries," said O'Neill, who is chairman of the board of directors at NCC. "Today, everyone of our kids goes to college — every one of them. And that is the main goal of the program."



W. MARC BERNASAU / BUSINESS JOURNAL

Clockwise from top left: Barry Nearhos and Michael Costello, both of PricewaterhouseCoopers; Tom O'Neill of O'Neill and Associates; and Jeffrey Thielman, president of North Cambridge Catholic High School.

Education  
Partner of  
the Year