



Brendan Conroy is the principal of the new Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School. After earning his BA in English from the University of Notre Dame in 1985, he began his teaching career at Leo High School on Chicago's South Side. During his tenure there, he taught English and served as department chair, coached three sports, and held several other posts.

Brendan left Leo High School to pursue an MA in English at the University of Mississippi, where he also taught composition and literature to undergraduates. After finishing his degree, he taught and coached for a year at Oxford High School. He then returned to Chicago to work at St. Ignatius College Prep.

In his thirteen-plus years at St. Ignatius, Brendan served in several roles: teacher, department chair, coach, director of admissions and recruiting, and assistant principal. He founded the St. Ignatius Higher Achievement Program (SIHAP), which helps deserving students of modest means gain the benefits of a college preparatory Jesuit education. While at St. Ignatius, he earned an MA in Educational Leadership, Curriculum and Foundations from Chicago State University.

Brendan and his wife, Terry, a freelance writer, live in the Beverly neighborhood on the Southwest Side of Chicago. Their five children attend or have attended Catholic schools in Chicago.



Q What is the most important part of being principal of CTK?

A There is no high school that can say it's a good and excellent school without amazing faculty. My most sacred and important responsibility is to find excellent teachers. Our faculty has a very high level of commitment, which is extremely important, especially at this stage as we open CTK and build a foundation for the future. My secondary role is to ensure that our students know the kind of people we want them to be when they get their diploma.

Q Why did you take the job of CTK principal at this time in your career?

A I wanted to take this job at Christ the King not because the students are Catholic, but because *we* are. That is where Catholic schools ought to be—where we are needed most. With all the schools that have closed in the archdiocese of Chicago over the last few decades, this was a great opportunity to show that the Catholic Church still has a mission in the neighborhoods. I wanted to be a part of bringing the experience that I had at St. Ignatius College Prep to families who are eager for their children to have the same kind of education. I wanted to be a part of that first opportunity for a community to see that there really is a bigger world out there than the options they've been offered in the past could provide them.

Q What is distinctive about Catholic and, more specifically, Jesuit education?

A What occurs to me first is that in Catholic education you have the opportunity to educate the whole person. Having taught in public schools as well, what I've found is that a Catholic setting allows both teachers and students to explore the whole dimension of being human. It allows you to explore questions like, who is God? Who am I in relationship to God? You just can't do that in a public setting. A Jesuit education examines and re-examines the mission and what it's all about. It looks at how to find God in all of the students, teachers, administrators, and parents, as well as how to care for the whole person.

Christ the King Jesuit College Prep

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS

Interview by Jeremy Langford

Q How do you maintain CTK's Catholic, Jesuit identity when less than 10 percent of your student body is Catholic?

A We stay strong with who we are. We make it very clear that CTK is a Catholic, Jesuit school, and that we're not going to back down from that. Families and students respond to institutions and people who really believe in what they say and who act on what they believe. So for us to water down our Jesuit identity because most of our kids aren't Catholic would be a huge mistake on our part. We make sure that our students and our families are aware that we come from this great 450-year-old tradition of Jesuit education and that we teach students what it is to be Catholic, to be women and men for others, what it means to find God in all things, to seek excellence, and to reflect on how to grow and improve. We remind our families that we're not here to proselytize or convert, but that we *are* here to bring all our students closer to God. We are building these principles into what we do, and so far the response from the community has been phenomenal.

Q What do you believe is the greatest challenge for CTK students?

A Our students face many challenges, whether academically or in home life, but the greatest challenge for them is to believe that they can succeed. We are preparing students for success in college and we want them to know that they really can earn a college degree. A lot of the students have seen family members go off to college and come back without graduating, and even the same with high school. Once they believe they can do it, through the support of staff and faculty, the challenge will become how far they can go.

Q Christ the King is situated in an area of the West Side that is known for high crime rates. What does it mean to be a safe school?

A Christ the King is situated in Austin very intentionally. It's been well chronicled that our students are coming from tough areas, areas with gangs, violence, and drugs—and they are dealing with the social issues and ills that come along

with that. It is incumbent upon us to be a place of refuge and safety for our students. When I am describing Christ the King to prospective families, I always say the same thing, "Christ the King is a safe, affordable, faith-based, Catholic, Jesuit college preparatory high school." It's a mouthful, but I always start with the word *safe* because as a parent of five, I know that there is nothing more important than ensuring the safety of your children. We communicate to students that all they have to think about when they are here is How am I going to learn? How am I going to grow in faith? How I am going to grow in my understanding of what it means to be a Christian? These things are all that matters once they walk through the front doors of Christ the King. Our hope is that when our kids walk out across that threshold and back into the world, we have provided them with the tools to transform it.

Q What kinds of extracurriculars are available to students?

A We want the creation of athletics and co-curriculars to be led by the students. We have, however, taken some steps in talking with other schools in the area about setting up some athletic competitions. We can't be a high school without athletics, service organizations, and other types of clubs, but we do hope the students take ownership of that, and so far they've been doing a great job.

Q What are your greatest needs at the moment?

A Our needs begin with a sense of deep gratitude for the faith and generosity of our job sponsors, benefactors, volunteers, board members, and friends of the school. There are financial needs for the new building, for our Rising Leaders Committee, for the adopt-a-student tuition program; there are needs for volunteers in various areas; and mostly a need for prayers for our students and their families. ■