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## Daniel Rodriguez's Big Win

Chicago student wins charter-school "education lottery" and earns full college scholarship.

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By Chris Cooper

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All photos: Alexander Calatayud

Daniel Rodriguez won the lottery when he was 13.

A kid from Chicago's inner city, Rodriguez faced a bleak outlook. His mom is from Puerto Rico, his dad from the Dominican Republic, and English is not the first language of either parent. Rodriguez struggled in elementary school, and his parents feared for his future in high school.

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"I was so far behind as far as classes and learning," Rodriguez says. "You're influenced by the people you're around all the time. Even if you want to do really well, it's harder because the other students don't want the same thing. So public high school wasn't an option."

Though it would be hard for the Rodriguez family to afford a private high school, they were prepared to make any sacrifice to help Daniel succeed. That's when they heard about Chicago Bulls College Preparatory High School, one of 14 institutions in Chicago's Noble Network of Charter Schools.

Charter schools are public but exist outside of public school boards and receive only 75 percent of the funding of a normal public school. Though students are held to the same standards as their peers in non-charter schools, charter institutions have more freedom in how they get students to meet and exceed those standards.

Noble charter schools are open to any student living in Chicago who has graduated from eighth grade, and while they have a smaller budget than most public schools, they consistently score highest in the city on test scores, in graduation and college-placement rates, and in degrees earned. Noble schools are free, just like other public schools, but their high success rate puts them in such demand that admittance must be done through a lottery system.

"We regularly receive more applications than slots available," says Angela Montagna, director of external affairs of the Noble Network. "Every student's name is entered, and we pull them out according to the seats available at each school. There's a waiting list, and we go right down it until all the slots are filled."

Rodriguez graduated in Chicago Bulls College Prep's first senior class, and 100 percent of the senior students were accepted to four-year university programs. A figure like that means that if a student misses a seat in the lottery, she might be missing her best chance to attend college. She might also miss the rigorous but character-building discipline of the charter school and lose out on learning in a building free of metal detectors.

"Most schools around here have them," says Montagna. "We, on principle, will not allow it. We're not training our kids to go to prison. We have zero issues with weapons and maybe one fight per year across all 14 campuses. If you go to high schools that are two blocks away, there are metal detectors, there are police processing centers in the

basements, there's police presence everywhere. They're more violent places. We're less chaotic and safer, and we don't have any of those things."

David Oclander is principal at Chicago Bulls College Prep. He left the military to pursue a career in education at the Noble Network.

"There's a difference between security and safety," Oclander says. "Schools with metal detectors and police officers might be secure, or they might not be, but that doesn't necessarily make them safe. We're safe."

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Rather than being confined by the strict rules at Noble, students seem able to relax in the atmosphere of consistency. No gum chewing. Shirt buttoned to the top. Arrive early—one second after the bell is a demerit. And so on. In some cases, school might be the only oasis of stability in the lives of Noble students.

"The discipline culture is really strict," says Rodriguez. "But each rule did make sense if you look at our students. It works."

For Rodriguez, the alternative may have been a disaster. Some of the kids from his neighborhood are on drugs; some are in jail. Most are no longer in school.

"Unfortunately, some dropped out because either they have a child on the way, or other family situations, and now their resources are very limited," he says. "None earned scholarships. That's the norm. I don't want to think about that, but it might have happened to me."

But it didn't happen to him.

These were the two worlds available to Rodriguez: stability and rigorous discipline on one hand, and a chaotic danger zone on the other. Rodriguez didn't enter the Noble lottery lightly.

Luckily, he won.





*CrossFit was an important part of high school for Rodriguez, and it influenced his decision to study kinesiology in college.*

### Forward Focused

"Ninety-five percent of the kids here live in poverty," Oclander says as he leads a tour between classrooms. "A lot of them stay here until 5 o'clock at night because they just don't want to go home."

He knocks on a classroom door, and a student in khaki pants, crisp blue polo shirt and shined shoes comes out. She introduces herself, makes eye contact with each adult and invites us in. Chosen at random from her classmates, Brenda Vega is practicing to interact with adults when it matters most: at intake interviews for university.

Inside the classroom, kids from the inner city, dressed in their best, are sitting up straight and reading *The Catcher in the Rye*. The book's protagonist, Holden Caulfield, is an alien to these teens: a white kid who unravels is a foreign concept to a minority kid who's working hard to hold everything together. Students discuss the book and prepare for the teacher to ask them pointed questions about its content. They may not care about Caulfield, but they care about being ready for entrance interviews.

"Many of these kids come from families where they're the first generation to go to college," Oclander explains. "So we built a class called College Seminar where the whole first semester is dedicated to finding schools that appeal to them. Then they apply to those schools. The second semester is dedicated to applying for scholarships."

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The Noble Network leverages federal aid, Reserve Officer Training Corps scholarships, private scholarships and university funding for its graduating students to the tune of US\$53 million per year.

"At a single school last year, Pritzker Prep, we had \$17 million in scholarships for a graduating class of 150 kids," Oclander says. "These families can't afford college. That's why we put so much work into providing counselors and giving students daily help to get in."

"Everyone at Noble knows the goal is to finish high school, finish college, get out there and make everyone better," Rodriguez says.

And Rodriguez is on that path.

At first, he struggled to adhere to the level of discipline required of Noble students. Eventually, though, Rodriguez found his rhythm and began to excel within the consistent environment.

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**"One of the pillars of Bulls Prep is fitness, and CrossFit was for the students who are serious about fitness."**

**—Daniel Rodriguez**

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After graduating from Chicago Bulls College Prep in June, Rodriguez began his post-secondary career at the University of Wisconsin in September, studying kinesiology. He's receiving a four-year full scholarship from the [POSSE Foundation](#). When he graduates, he wants to be a physical therapist. But first, he wants to find a CrossFit gym around Madison; Rodriguez did CrossFit as a senior at Chicago Bulls College Prep.

"I'm going to adjust to school a little and then start a membership there. I have to get myself in there," Rodriguez says. "One of the pillars of Bulls Prep is fitness, and CrossFit was for the students who are serious about fitness."

Bulls Prep brought CrossFit into its physical-education curriculum in 2012. Jason Ronai, the assistant principal of

Bulls, attended a CrossFit Level 1 Seminar and began to replacing his P.E. classes with CrossFit workouts. In 2013, Ronai added burpees and shuttle runs into his study-hall sessions, and students talk about the CrossFit model in their business classes.

"I can tell you that, in that class, the environment was ridiculous. No embarrassment, no fear, everyone wanting to get better. The encouragement was crazy. If someone was struggling, everyone would motivate them. You just don't see that everywhere," Rodriguez says.

A year later, CrossFit has been adopted as the physical-education program in five Noble schools. Some, like Pritzker Prep, use CrossFit to instill leadership and accountability lessons in the students.

### **Given a Chance to Succeed**

The Noble Network in Chicago gave Rodriguez a way out. His friends took a different path, but the discipline and focus of the charter school gave Rodriguez a way to get into college. His obvious maturity, intelligence and strength of character were allowed to flourish in a safe environment. But for chance, things could have gone very differently.

"Noble was like my game-winning shot," says Rodriguez. "I was nervous to take the opportunity because I didn't want to fail. But I took the chance at the shot because I knew I had what it took to become successful in an institution like Noble. I am lucky and fortunate to have been a part of the Noble mission, but that all came with the hope, risk and hard work to become better."



### **About the Author**

*Chris Cooper is a staff writer for CrossFit. He owns CrossFit Catalyst in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., and is a member of the CrossFit For Hope team.*