

**Food for Thought**

► (L to R) Kevin Tiber, executive vice president, COO, Farmers and Merchants Trust Company; Ashley, speaker, Cristo Rey Orange County High School's inaugural CEO Breakfast; Paul Nolta, managing director, J.P. Morgan Private Bank

Sixty Orange County business and education leaders gathered on Feb. 13 at **The Pacific Club** in Newport Beach for **Cristo Rey Orange County High School's inaugural CEO Breakfast**, where industry executives shared insights on the event's topic: The Future of Work and Education in Orange County.

Sponsored by **Irvine Ranch Water District**, the executive panel was moderated by **Ian Williamson**, dean of the **UC Irvine Paul Merage School of Business**. Panelists included **Paul Cook**, general manager, Irvine Ranch Water District; **Oscar Gonzalez**, president, **Northgate Gonzalez Market** and vice chair, Cristo Rey Board; and **Annette Morgan**, chief operating officer, **City of Hope Orange County**. The panel discussion explored artificial intelligence's impact on the future workforce and the critical importance of developing students' soft skills.

Williamson, Gonzalez and Morgan are all founding corporate partners of Cristo Rey Network's **Corporate Work Study Program (CWSP)**, which provides early workplace exposure for students. The program currently partners with 43 leading Orange County businesses and aims to add 30 partners this year. Panelists highlighted how Cristo Rey's innovative model bridges the gap between education and industry, preparing students for tomorrow's workplace while delivering value to local businesses today.

"It really boils down to awareness, access and ambition. People can only pursue opportunities of which they are aware," said Williamson. "Even if a person is aware of an opportunity, it's very difficult for them to try something they've never seen. So, access to people who have been successful changes a person's perspective as to what they can achieve. It raises the ambition for what is possible in their life."

The transformative impact of CWSP came to life through sophomore **Ashley's** testimony about her program placement at Costa Mesa law firm **Latham & Watkins LLP**. Her last name was not provided to protect her privacy.

"I've been given the privilege of working with my mentors who have given me the best advice and guidance," Ashley said.



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