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Employers Help Students Get a Private Education

Low-income students get a lesson in business while reaping the benefits of an education they couldn't otherwise afford.

Newark becomes the latest community to join the Cristo Rey Network

NEWARK - Local employers are partnering with a new Catholic high school that opened in Newark last week to enable low-income students to defray up to 70 percent of their tuition costs.

Christ the King Preparatory School, Newark's first new Catholic high school in 50 years, has so far signed up 26 local employers that include Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey, Seton Hall University and Maher Terminals, the largest shipping terminal operator in the Port of New York and New Jersey.

The new Jesuit co-educational high school is part of the Chicago-based Cristo Rey Network, which has employed its work-for-tuition model at 18 other schools across the country. Contributors to the network include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has put up \$15.9 million, and the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation of Newton, Mass., which has added \$10 million.

The Newark high school chose its students through an extensive outreach program that included open houses and tapping local Catholic schools. The first crop of freshmen come mainly from Newark, with some from East Orange and Irvington. The Rev. Edward Glynn, the former president of St. Peter's College in Jersey City, is president of the high school.

Principal Kevin Cuddihy says the school, which gets no state funding, is looking to sign up employers for 78 more jobs to cover all 106 of its incoming students. The school itself employs some students in administrative functions. "The parents are extremely supportive because we are able to provide what they would otherwise not be able to afford—a Catholic private education," Cuddihy says.

Some employers participate in the program by providing funds for students to work at nonprofits. The PSEG Foundation, an affiliate of the parent of PSE&G, put up the money to enable the Newark Museum to hire a student. "One thing that appealed to us is that students would get real-life work experience while financing their education," says Jo Ann Dow-Breslin, manager of community affairs at PSE&G in Newark, the state's largest utility.

Under the Cristo Rey plan, each student will work one day per week plus an additional day each month. The students are technically employed by a work-study entity owned by Cristo Rey, which leases their services to sponsoring employers who pay \$25,000 a year for teams of four students that are considered the equivalent of one full-time employee.

Cuddihy says the school makes up for the students' lost time in the classroom by holding 50-minute classes instead of the standard 40-minute ones.

Jeffrey Theilman, national development director at Cristo Rey, says it costs between \$4.5 million to \$5 million a year to run a typical high school at a full enrollment of 500 students. He says the work-study program is able to cover 70 percent of that cost, with the rest coming from tuition and donations.

"If they were to go to a private Catholic school, they would easily be paying about \$10,000 each," he says of the enrollees. "All of our students come from low-income families."

Anthony Nicotera, director of development at the school, says each student pays about \$2,500 of an annual tuition fee of \$8,000 to \$9,000. Nicotera hopes to raise \$1 million during the school year to offset any deficits. Support has so far come from the Cristo Rey Foundation, the Archdiocese of Newark and other groups.

Nicotera says participating employers assign entry-level, administrative functions to the students, including filing work and answering phones. Essex County College is placing students in the information technology department of its career development centers, for example, while the Archdiocese of Newark employs them in its finance division and Catholic Health has placed them in its administration department.

Nicotera says the students receive basic job training before heading off to work. For three weeks last month, the incoming students attended a boot camp where they were taught basic computer and clerical skills along with business etiquette and grooming tips.

Nicotera and Theilman say that 99 percent of Cristo Rey graduates are accepted to two- or four-year colleges. Some also find summer work with their sponsoring employers.

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