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Learning

from the August 25, 2005 edition



"Here, you have to earn something for yourself... I'm earning my education." - Carla Recinos (left), student at Notre Dame High School JOSH ARMSTRONG

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When high schools put teens to work

Students from low-income families can afford to attend private schools four days per week by agreeing to work in entry-level jobs. But will these kids stay in school?

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald | Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

LAWRENCE, MASS. — On a sweltering morning in early August, a couple of dozen teenagers fresh out of eighth grade are lining up outside a classroom to learn from a nun how to give a firm handshake. The reason: These teens, mostly born to Hispanic immigrants, want a shot at success. And corporate America is ready to give it to them, helping to reduce the cost of a Catholic-school education from the Sisters of Notre Dame to just \$2,200 per year. In exchange, the students agree to work in a real business setting one day per week.

Notre Dame High School in Lawrence, Mass., is one of 11 schools in the Cristo Rey Network about to start a new school year. The concept behind the network is fueling discussion about the promise and perils of corporate-sponsored private education.

Observers are hopeful the model of company-subsidized tuition could lead to expanded opportunities for low-income students. At the same time, they are also cautious to monitor the influence of companies that smell opportunity in the arrangement.

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All seem to agree it's a worthwhile experiment. "For these kids, the alternatives are pretty dismal," says Prof. Henry Levin, director of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education at Columbia University, "so you can take some risks with them."

What makes this program both risky and promising, as Professor Levin sees it, is its unconventional way of plucking students from rough neighborhoods and plugging them into office jobs when they're 14 or 15 years old.

Here's how it works: Participating companies divide one full-time, entry-level position among four students who take turns doing the work, which typically includes filing, copying, or answering phones. They pay market rates for entry-level work, but students never see the money. Instead, the school gets a check, puts it toward operating expenses, and thereby keeps tuition well below the \$5,000 to \$9,000 tuition charged by Boston-area Catholic schools.

Levin warns that schools must monitor dropout rates to make sure students aren't quitting to join the wage-earning environment permanently. Since only low-income families qualify for admission, pressure to help support the family can be a potent force in students' daily lives.

But so far, students at Notre Dame High - all of whom participate in the program - see more pros than cons in an arrangement that requires them to dress sharply, arrive on time, and speak in language anyone can understand.

"This school makes you think, 'I can have a future if I just prepare,'" says sophomore Mark Johnson of Kingston, N.H. Before last year, he says, "fooling around in class and getting in trouble" were his specialties. Now he says, "my family has faith in me" as he takes his first steps toward a banking career by doing filing work at a Banknorth branch in Haverhill, Mass.

## Learning in two settings

The four-year-old Cristo Rey Network is not alone in exploring corporate-sponsored education. Florida, Pennsylvania, and Puerto Rico, for instance, offer state tax credits to companies that donate to subsidize tuition for particular primary- and secondary-school students. What makes Cristo Rey different, education experts say, is its quid pro quo. Companies get inexpensive student labor in exchange for underwriting education costs. But according to school administrators, students benefit as much from their on-the-job education as they do from their classes.

"If we didn't have this work-study program, I don't think that our youngsters would be able to hack a five-day college-preparatory program," says Notre Dame High School's president, Sister Mary Murphy. The confidence and self-respect they gain through their jobs, she says, equip students to do well in a setting more structured and demanding than what they've known at home.

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On this day, teenagers in their best ties and slacks, or blouses and high heels, listen politely to a 75-minute PowerPoint presentation on workplace behavior. By the end, they know what's expected: no wimpy handshakes, no flirtatious smiles, no nervous fidgeting or counting the minutes until lunch. When placed in a circle for an exercise in social skills, some force a "winning" smile. Others can't bear to make eye contact. But during a break, they discuss the whole adventure with pride.

"Here, you have to earn something for yourself," says 14-year-old Carla Recinos of Lawrence, Mass. Her friends at other schools take school for granted, she says, but she sees it differently: "I'm earning my education."

Corporate sponsors have had their own risks to consider. The American Automobile Association (AAA) is among the 20 firms participating in the Lawrence area. The club had to weigh whether freshmen in high school could effectively represent the company when answering calls from stranded drivers, according to Pauline Gagnon, director of human resources at AAA regional headquarters in North Andover, Mass.

Then AAA managers considered the 40 percent savings it would incur by using four students instead of one full-time employee with benefits. Add in the public relations value of being a corporate sponsor at a new school, and the risk seemed worth taking, Ms. Gagnon says.

Students mastered their assignments and boosted spirits at a 60-person call center by arriving each day remarkably "happy to be at work," she adds.

Being able to attract participants like AAA could bode well for corporate-sponsored education, says Marcus Winters, senior research associate in education policy at the Manhattan Institute in New York, but the place to watch out for problems is back in the classroom.

"Something to keep an eye on is how much the curriculum is going to be driven by ulterior motives" of sponsoring companies, Mr. Winters says. "It would be important to make sure that the skills these schools are conveying to students are showing up in other [transferable] skills" and not just equipping students to continue in their current entry-level jobs.

[Story continues below](#)



**CAREER VETS:** Left: High school sophomores (l. to r.) Jose Reyes, Mark Johnson, and Marlipsen Cacerez participate in an internship program that helps pay their tuition. The program includes classes in word-processing skills, right. PHOTOS BY JOSH ARMSTRONG

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To compensate for time spent on the job and away from school, school days stretch to 3:30 p.m. and the school year runs until the end of June. Skipping work is a costly option for students, as the school fines families \$100 per unexcused absence.

Carrying an extra load might pay off not only in skills and habits but also in personal contacts, since these students don't come from families "plugged into" professional networks, says Jane Hannaway, director of the Education Policy Center at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C. Still, such benefits need to outweigh costs.

"The downside is it does sort of distract from their academic work," Ms. Hannaway says. "The question really is one of trade-offs for the kids."

Benefactors believe the model is replicable. The Cristo Rey Network is considering adding five new schools and has 12 feasibility studies under way. "We think [corporate-sponsored education] is an important model for ... the Catholic school community and the tuition-paying community," says Barbara Semedo, spokeswoman for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which donated \$9.9 million to Cristo Rey in 2003.

As long as companies stand to benefit, donors envision a bright future for students as well.

"There's a high turnover rate on entry-level jobs," which can be costly in lost productivity and training, says California venture capitalist B.J. Cassin, whose foundation committed more than \$10 million to Cristo Rey. "We're filling a need [for business] at market prices."

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