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School work

For many students across Colorado, it's simply back to school this time of year, but for students at a new high school in Northwest Denver, it's back to business

Written By Lynn Bronikowski

Photography by John Johnston

On a typical school day, Micaela Escontrias is like any sophomore making her way through high school halls and classroom academia. But one day a week, she works on the 18th story of a Denver skyscraper mapping oil wells for Tipperary Oil Co.

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"I'm doing things I never thought I could do — staying busy all day working on a computer mapping Felder wells and holding wells," said Escontrias, the daughter of a single mother who moved to Denver two years ago from Chicago for a better life. "I'm now thinking of going into the energy field. There's not a lot of young people going into that field so it would be a good one for me.

"Or maybe I'll become a lawyer."

Escontrias is one of 200 students enrolled this fall at Arrupe Jesuit High School in Northwest Denver, an inner-city college-prep high school created by the metro-area's business community to not only address Denver's 20 percent dropout rate, but to expose students to the real-world of business in an effort to grow a future workforce.

"It's a life-changing thing for me because without it I don't think I would care much about going to college but now I want to be nurse," said Alisha Taylor, a sophomore, who worked in Great West Life's human resources department during the last school year and was hired on through the summer. "My supervisor Lori Collier in health and wellness made me feel like part of the company, not just an intern. There are not that many black women who have that kind of job and I see her as a role model."

At the heart of Arrupe, which opened in 2003, is a corporate work-study program in which students job-share to cover a standard 40-hour workweek at 51 companies and agencies throughout the metro area. The \$19,500 annual salary that the companies pay for the position goes toward tuition costs at Arrupe where academic schedules are structured so each four-student team can work without missing classes. In the fall of 2006 — just three years after opening — Arrupe is expected to be self-sustaining and at full capacity, with 400 students working at 100 companies.

"It's truly the business community responding to a problem in the inner city," said the Rev. Steve Planning, president of Arrupe Jesuit. "Not only are these students getting help with their tuition but they are seeing the careers we want them to aspire to." About 80 percent of the Arrupe's predominantly Hispanic student body lives in poverty.

Businesses ranging from leading Denver law firms, financial institutions, hospital networks and insurance providers to energy and real-estate companies participate. The school has a 100 percent retention rate with companies, said Planning.

Arrupe is so unique that it's been cited by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation as one of five high schools in the nation to watch. The foundation is so confident in schools like Arrupe that it committed nearly \$10 million toward setting up a network of 16 similar high schools across the nation.

Denver businessmen Dick Campbell, of the Denver law firm Campbell Bohn Killin Brittan and Ray LLC, and Bill Fortune, who now runs an investment firm, Fortune Enterprises, were among those leading the charge to open Arrupe nearly a decade ago.

"We keep hearing about the problems in the inner city and that the business community really wants to make a contribution to the inner city," said Fortune. "So bringing these students into their offices not only gives the students some pride and bolsters their self-esteem but gives the kids a wonderful flavor of business and a dream they can aspire to."

At the same time, employers working side by side with the students also gain.

Campbell, who employs students nearly year-round at his Cherry Creek law firm, said he's seen employees

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benefit from having the students around. "Having them here enriches the lives of employees, rallies the troops and inspires your own employees," said Campbell. "They are working with kids who never thought they'd go to college. They raise the bar on learning."

At Wells Fargo Brokerage Services, a team of students staffs the reception desk in the busy lobby of the "cash register building" in downtown Denver. "They are superior to many of the entry-level people we have had because these students recognize that this job, this school is their chance for a better life," said Kevin O'Conner, senior vice president for Wells Fargo Brokerage Services. "And from a business standpoint, we want our staff to reflect the markets we serve so this program creates an applicant pool for the future."

Planning said many companies were initially skeptical about signing on to the Arrupe program, thinking it might be like a "take your child to work day."

"But they soon discovered, these students are doing real work, real jobs, and they (businesses) become very attached to these students," he said.

At Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield, vice president Donna Boreing said the students even bring a fresh spirit to the workplace as they compete with each other to do see who can get the most work done. "We started them out in the mailroom, but soon learned they could do more than that," said Boreing, who promoted the students to the company's OCR (optical character recognition) department. "It gives them a flavor for what computers can do and at the same time our adult workers adopt them and bring them under their wings."

Sophomore Mara Gamboa has been so inspired working at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center that at age 15 he's decided to become a doctor. "I like to help people, and now I know if I put my effort into it, I can do it," said Gamboa.

And for Heriberto Juarez, the second oldest of five children in his family, it's a chance to inspire others. "I'll be the first one in my family to graduate from high school and go to college," said the sophomore who works at Fleet Car Carriers. "I'll try to be an influence on my brothers. I'm not going to let my mom and a lot of my friends down."

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