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Law firms help prep students cover tuition

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If anybody wants to start a bragging contest with students at Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, good luck.

They get paid to skip school.

Teens who attend the Pilsen college prep school spend at least one day a week, and sometimes two, working entry-level jobs at law firms, banks, medical facilities and other offices.

In return, the businesses help pay the students' tuition bills, cutting what would be a \$10,000 tab to \$2,650. Law firms play a major role in the program, with 23 firms and the Illinois attorney general's office participating.

Considering that some students had never spent much time downtown or visited an office before high school, the experience offers much more than financial relief.

"By being here and getting used to it and understanding the office culture, it won't be so new for them later on. And their adjustment period right out of college will be so much faster," said Vincent A.F. Sergi, managing partner in Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP.

Katten has 32 students who account for a total of eight jobs, making the firm the second-highest employer behind Loyola University Health System and its 33 student workers. The firm has worked with Cristo Rey since it opened and has spent more than \$1.6 million on 275 students, the highest dollar and student total of any employer.

The decision to join the program was easy, Sergi said.

"We wanted to do something right here in our own community," he said. "When you have disadvantaged children who need opportunities to build a sense of self worth, this lets them get experience in a business world they never see growing up."

The Cristo Rey program has proved attractive to both businesses and families.

In 1996, the school opened its doors with 79 students and a little more than a dozen companies participating. Now, 528 students work at 106 offices.

Wildman, Harrold, Allen & Dixon LLP has 14 students, putting it fourth on the list of overall employment. Law firms typically have four or eight students on their payrolls.

The program has drawn national attention, including a segment featured on 60 Minutes in 2004.

Newsweek ranked the Rev. John Foley on its "Who's next in 2007" list, placing the president of the Cristo Rey Network in the company of high-profile government officials, religious leaders, corporate executives, athletes and actors.

And there's good reason.

The Chicago school, which Foley started, has served as a model for Cristo Rey Network schools that followed in 11 other cities. The network will expand this summer to add seven more.

Attendance in Chicago has been at 98 percent for the year.

"They love work," explained Preston Kendall, vice president of work study and administration for the Cristo Rey

Network. "Sometimes work is what keeps kids going in school. We tell them, 'If you want to keep working, you've got to pick up your grades.'"

As urban development continues to head toward their area, school officials said they will maintain the mission of only attracting economically disadvantaged families from Pilsen, Little Village and nearby communities.

To make up for the lessons students miss due to their jobs, Cristo Rey's school days and years are a bit longer than usual.

Almost every student is Hispanic, and they take Spanish classes all four years. In one class each year, discussion is in Spanish and homework is due in Spanish.

School rooms and bathrooms are labeled in both English and Spanish. Students wear business attire every day, with boys required to wear ties.

Last year, Cristo Rey had the highest percentage of students pass the Spanish language advanced placement exam for mid-sized schools in the country, said Peter Beale-DelVecchio, director of development for the school.

Last year's graduating class had a 99 percent college acceptance rate, and of those, 95 percent enrolled in college in the first semester out of school, Beale-DelVecchio said.

And they're heading to college with a resume that includes more than just typical summer jobs. Luis Martinez, for example, went from working at a body shop to working at Katten, where he has handled data entry, paperwork and mail delivery.

"It gives us a different view of how to work in an office, how to act around people, older people," said Martinez, a Cristo Rey junior from Little Village. "When I first came in, I was nervous. Now since I've been working, it gave me more confidence, and I know what I'm doing."

Martinez eventually wants to run a business involving cars, and the work experience has made him more comfortable managing office tasks. Much like a Cristo Rey hallway that features artwork denouncing gangs, drugs and violence, Martinez doesn't downplay the negative influences teens face.

"[Cristo Rey] opens up more opportunities, and it keeps us safe. I live in an environment where we have to look out for ourselves," Martinez said. "I didn't want to go to a school where I would have to worry about who's coming or just walking with the wrong people. I feel safe there."

In addition to Katten and Wildman, the following law firms are involved with the program:

Barnes & Thornburg LLP; Brinks, Hofer, Gilson & Lione; Clifford Law Offices; Corboy & Demetrio P.C.; Cremer, Kopon, Shaughnessy & Spina LLC; DLA Piper; Gardner, Carton & Douglas LLP; Goldberg, Kohn; Jenner & Block LLP; Kirkland & Ellis LLP; Lord, Bissell & Brook LLP; Madden, Jiganti, Moore & Sinars LLP; Mayer, Brown, Rowe & Maw LLP; McDermott, Will & Emery LLP; Neal, Gerber & Eisenberg LLP; O'Keefe, Lyons & Hynes LLC; Schiff, Hardin LLP; Seyfarth, Shaw LLP; Sidley, Austin LLP; Wiedner & McAuliffe Ltd.; and Winston & Strawn LLP.

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