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Catholic school opens this fall

Students expected to learn academics and career employment through internship program

By **TOM HOLMES**
Contributing Reporter

Austin will soon have a new high school opening after all.

It won't be at the ballyhooed-about Brach's candy site on Cicero Avenue just north of Lake Street, a large area that some community and elected leaders have set their sights on as a possible location for a new high school in Austin. That site was sold to a developer in January and is expected to become a distribution center.

The next high school will be located in a brand new building opening in fall 2009 at 5058 W. Jackson, which is currently under construction.

Until then, the students of Christ the King, a Jesuit-run Catholic high school of the Cristo Rey Network, will start classes this fall at 116 N. LeClaire.

But for the first three weeks they won't be learning about history, science or English literature. Instead, they will practice typing on a keyboard and learning to fax and file documents.

Gaining work experience

The student's three-week experience, officials with the school said, will prepare them for the Cristo Rey Network's Corporate Internship Program (CIP), a key component of the new school. Students will be placed in internships in Chicago-



Jesuit Prep: Sonji Cooks, director of admissions for Christ the King Jesuit College Preparatory School, at an open house for the school in September 2007.
Courtesy of Steve Donisch

Cristo Rey—Then and Now

The Cristo Rey Network has 22 schools nationwide. Its Corporate Internship Program (CIP) was created in 1996 at Cristo Rey High School in the Pilsen. The Jesuits that year began an experiment in providing a college-prep education for students in low-income neighborhoods. The purpose of CIP at first was purely financial. Working one day a week would allow the students themselves to earn a large percentage of their tuition

Soon, however, the Cristo Rey administration realized that they had stumbled onto a program which was also educational, and it complemented what the young people were learning in the classroom.

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area businesses.

The internship program serves a dual purpose. It allows students to earn 75 percent of their tuition and provides an opportunity to gain experience working in businesses. The students will spend one day a week at the establishments.

"We aren't creating a simulated environment or 'make work' situations," explained, Preston Kendall, who is in charge of internship program. "The students go to real jobs where they really earn their education. Students are entrusted with real responsibility and held accountable for their performance-you can lose your job."

On June 23-30 and Aug. 11-25, as many as 120 freshmen will begin their studies at Christ the King, one of 22 schools in the Cristo Rey Network, which began in 1996 with a school in Pilsen. The Austin school so far has filled 96 freshmen slots. They'll spend their internships in professional settings like banks, hospitals and law offices.

The internships should not be confused with apprenticeships that could lead to a full-time position. Instead, what the students learn in their internships is how to function in the adult, professional culture of corporate America.

"Instead of 30 young people and one adult [in a classroom], we are sending students, once a week, into an environment where they are only one young person working beside 100 adults," said Kendall.

Christ the King students will find themselves walking into a different world than the one they know in their own neighborhoods. Their jobs will be low-skilled, but they'll be working alongside adults with college degrees and valued knowledge.

Kendall explained what'll likely happen to a kid who every week has to put on a shirt and tie and ride an elevator up to, say, the 14 floor of the Sears Tower.

"It becomes clear that school is not just something to get through and then real life begins-school will help you have more choices for what you do and who you are," he said.

Identity and expectations

One expectation that Christ the King teachers will have for their students is that they become leaders, explained Father Chris Devron, president of Christ the King.

"We are very explicit about wanting to create leaders," he said. "By leadership we don't mean getting ahead to better yourself in your career path, but are you committed to working for justice as informed by faith in Jesus Christ?"

Several of the students already accepted, as well as some parents, shared their thoughts about the school on a promotional CD available at the school.

Student Christopher Dixon, class of 2012, said, "I'll be working in a real job and earning money to help my mom pay for tuition."

Brianna Mitchell hopes to do her internship in a law firm. "It will give me a great work ethic and will look good on my resume," she said.

Brenda Douglas, mother of one of the incoming freshmen, said of the internship program, "It teaches discipline. It teaches independence. My daughter will learn to relate to people who may not be like her."

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Devron acknowledged that the internship for most low-income, neighborhood kids is a cross-cultural experience. He's also aware of his students being sent into what some would call the "white world."

"Actually, we have a great situation here because our kids are going between worlds," Devron said. "They come from a largely African-American setting, but once a week they're going into the 'white world.' Parents say that's one reason why they like the internship program, because it gives their kids the skills to negotiate difference."

The Jesuit model, he explained, is ideally suited to what his students will be going through, which involves real-life experience followed by a time of reflection. The students get a chance to process what they've gone through, with help from their teachers.

"One of the things Jesuit education does so well is this creating of a community, a place where kids feel safe to talk about their own struggles," Devron said. "Ultimately, we want a community of care where there's respect shown between peers and from adults to kids."



Likewise, educators from the West Side and surrounding suburbs had good thoughts about the Catholic School. Bill Gerstein, principal of Austin Polytechnical Academy, expressed admiration for the Cristo Rey schools but wonders if its model could be replicated in other schools.

"It works well for their network of schools," he said. "I am not sure how many schools they can open with that model. It is not easy to pull off."

Other educators weighed in.

Alannah Hernandez, director of academic service learning at Concordia University in River Forest, and whose job is to plug college students into service internships, supports duplicating the model.

"I think all students and all schools should have one or two courses within the curriculum where the kids have to do this," she said.

Sara Dahms, a career counselor at Concordia, pointed out that many high schools in the United States are already including internships as options in their curriculums.

"I strongly believe in the value of internships in providing opportunities for career exploration, self-assessment, [and] academic enrichment."

Within the last year as the idea for a Cristo Rey school in Austin was launched, the community has given the school high marks, officials with the new high school said.

Sonji Cooks, director of admissions at Christ the King, recalled visiting various public schools and receiving a warm welcome.

"Their counselors and teachers have worked with us to help their students complete our application," she said.



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Reader Comments

Posted: Saturday, May 24, 2008

Article comment by: **Douglass Davidoff**


The Jesuit model of education is exceptional. The special programming for the Christo Rey schools sounds focused in an exceptional way. I especially like that they employ the five Jesuit standards for "The Graduate at Graduation," namely that the graduate at graduation is (1) open to growth, (2) religious, (3) intellectually competent, (4) loving, and (5) committed to justice. To which the Christo Rey schools add a sixth standard, namely that the grad at grad is work experienced. What more could we want from our high school graduates? I write as the proud father of a student at another Jesuit high school in the Chicago Province of Jesuits. For more on the "Grad at Grad," visit: http://www.cristorey.net/about/jesuit_identity.html

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