

Cristo Rey Network featured in

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A 'Rey' of hope for urban education to shine in Newark

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BY JEFF DIAMANT**Star-Ledger Staff**

James Gonzales knows the education promised by Christ the King Preparatory School is unconventional for Newark. That's why he's so excited about it.

That's also why the Newark company he runs, Broadway House Continuing Care, will give the new school \$25,000. The money will pay the bulk of 2007-08 tuition for four students, who will do clerical work for Broadway House once a week in lieu of attending classes.

The Newark school, to open in August with 100 freshmen, will be part of the Cristo Rey (Christ the King) network of urban Catholic schools, which has won acclaim for its students high graduation and college-attendance rates. All students spend one day each week working instead of attending classes.

"It was a no-brainer," Gonzales said last week, of his company's decision to participate. "We're here to support the North Ward of Newark and thought it was a terrific idea when it came to us."

The archdiocese had hoped to open for the 2006-07 school year but couldn't sign up enough sponsors. That changed this year, said the Rev. Edward Glynn, hired in April as president of Christ the King.

About 25 to 30 area companies and agencies -- including Broadway House, City National Bank, Parsons Brinckerhoff, and The Star-Ledger -- have agreed to pay the bulk of tuition needed to run Christ the King, in return for students' work-hours and a high-quality college preparatory school in Newark for children in low-income families.

"What I'm hoping it will do for the community is, a group of students whose families are below the poverty line will be able to attend a demanding college preparatory school," said school trustee John Gibbons, of the Newark law firm Gibbons Del Deo, which also will pay the school \$25,000 and "hire" four students part-time. "There's lots of talent among the youngsters in these below-poverty-line families that is currently going to waste."

A great hope of Cristo Rey schools is the social and business demands of the workplace will make students more mature, less likely to drop out and better qualified for college and the work world. To that end, first-year students spend three weeks in August taking classes on workplace behavior as basic as giving firm handshakes and, for males, tying a tie.

"A lot of people have given up on urban education," said the Rev. Glynn, a 70-year-old Jesuit who has been president of St. Peter's College in Jersey City, Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash., and John Carroll University in Cleveland. "As a result, hundreds of thousands of lives of kids are ... never developed. But this has worked."

Most executives interviewed from companies participating said it shouldn't be much trouble to find entry-level jobs for the students, who do not get paid for their work.

"The opportunity to support students who would share a job, we saw as a worthy effort to make sure they had the opportunity," said Raymond Ocasio, of La Casa de Don Pedro, a social services agency in Newark. "At the same time, it will meet one of our needs. We have needs for workers to help out answering phones."

To be considered for the school, students must come from families eligible for the federal government's free or reduced lunch program.

When it opens with a freshman class, Christ the King will be one of seven Cristo Rey schools starting in August. Others are opening in Baltimore, Indianapolis, Omaha, Washington D.C., Minneapolis and Birmingham, Ala.

There will then be a total of 19 Cristo Rey schools nationwide, including one in New York. The first one opened in Chicago in 1994.

When people rave about Cristo Rey schools, these are the types of figures they cite: A minuscule 2.6 dropout rate for last spring's graduating class, more than nine-tenths of which was Hispanic or African-American; and a 99 percent acceptance rate for its students into at least one college. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is so impressed that it has donated \$15.9 million to the Chicago-based network since 2003.

"Newark was an obvious choice for a school," said Jeff Thielmann, vice president of new initiatives for Cristo Rey. "The need there is great. It's a city that needs educational alternatives, especially at the high school level."

In convincing the Cristo Rey Network of that need, the archdiocese noted the 60 percent dropout rate for Newark's public high schools, high levels of gang violence in the city and a lack of affordable Catholic schools for low-income parents who don't want to send their children to public schools.

Without the companies' contributions, tuition at Christ the King would be out of reach for many students, Glynn said. Tuition will be \$2,500. Tuition at Newark's three other Catholic high schools -- St. Benedict's Preparatory, St. Vincent's Academy and Our Lady of Good Counsel -- range from \$3,650 to \$6,800.

Glynn plans to hire administrators and teachers for the school by spring. And when that is done, he and others will ask more companies in the area to give money for the 2008-09 incoming class, and then for classes after that. The school needs 25-to-30 companies to donate for each grade level to keep it funded.

The archdiocese has given the school a building, the site of the old Our Lady of Good Counsel elementary school on Woodside Avenue in Newark, which closed two years ago. It also is contributing \$200,000 for the first year, \$100,000 for the second year and \$50,000 for the third.

Parents can receive an application for Christ the King by e-mailing the Rev. Edward Glynn at glynnedw@rcan.org, calling (973) 497-4596 or writing to the Office of the President, Christ the King Preparatory School, 171 Clifton Ave., Newark, NJ 07104.

Jeff Diamant may be reached at jdiamant@starledger.com or (973) 392-1547.