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AT DE LA SALLE NORTH, 'LOOK AT ME'

Had a bellyful of politicians promising to improve our worst public schools? Tired of waiting for the Portland school district to shape up Jefferson High? Want to hear about a high school that's actually changing young lives right here, right now, today in **North** Portland?

Welcome to **De La Salle North** Catholic High School on Delaware and Lombard. It's a high school that works. Literally and wonderfully.

De La Salle's been educating students since September. Its mission is to serve the area's "underserved" families, who don't have what currently passes for school choice. They can't afford to send their children to traditional private high schools and they can't afford to buy homes in neighborhoods with decent public schools. About 42 percent of the first freshman class is African American; 45 percent is Caucasian. Half of the kids are Catholic.

The Christian Brothers wanted to return to their original mission -- teaching the children of the working class -- and made a \$1.2 million investment over five years. But that will only help the school get up and running. It won't cover the cost of educating each student, which comes to \$7,000 a year. Each family pays tuition of \$2,000, but that still leaves a \$5,000 gap.

How to fill this gap?

The answer came out of a Catholic school in Chicago, and it's proven a financial and educational winner. Students work one day a week to defray the remaining \$5,000. (Their school day and school year are both longer to make up for lost classroom time.)

We're not talking "job shadowing" here. They work full eight-hour days at "real jobs." Each day of the week, the minivans leave the school to deliver a fifth of the student body to their jobs in the Portland area. The kids work inputting data, faxing and scanning, answering phones, filing, copying and more at law firms, financial institutions, health-care companies, McMenemy Kennedy School, the University of Portland and Nike.

And it's serious business. Students who miss a day of work are fined \$100, though they can make up most of the fine. "If they have a work day and a game, they will not leave work early," **De La Salle North** President Matt Powell says. "Work is the priority."

What do the students gain, beside a chance to attend a school of their choice? They learn the ways of the work world. They learn how to talk, dress and act appropriately on the job. "The students are very mature. What they learn while at work you can't teach in the classroom," says Powell. "They can feel it in themselves. They've seen the maturity."

The students do seem more mature, and they echo Powell's assessment. Billy Holiday works at CareOregon, running errands, making copies and answering phones. Sometimes he uses his at-work voice when he picks up the phone at home: "I sound proper and I'm like, 'What, look at me.'"

These kids are in buildings and cultures that they'd never enter in their young lives. Their eyes are opened to the world beyond their neighborhood -- and the possibilities and requirements of those new worlds. Something else grows out of the one-day work experience: appreciation.

"Now I know what my Mom feels like every day," says Jessica Albright, who works at Chrome Data.

English teacher Sue White sees the spillover in her students. "They appreciate their education more than any I've ever seen."

The **De La Salle North's** work program seems to be a winner for businesses, too. Each company receives five student workers over a school week. There's no paperwork burden, since a nonprofit corporation does the payroll and taxes and covers the liability. It's telling that all participating businesses signed up for next year.

The sole problem is that this high school needs more business sponsors. The cost of a business sponsorship? \$17,500.

The value of changing young lives in a neighborhood where about a third of the students drop out of high school? Priceless.
David Reinhard is an associate editor