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De La Salle gets Gates grant

11/09/2006

CHICAGO — A network of innovative Catholic schools has announced a \$6 million investment from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to expand the Cristo Rey group to 23 schools serving about 10,000 students in some of the nation's poorest urban areas.

De La Salle North Catholic High School in Portland is among the institutions getting a boost for a professional development program to assist staff in meeting students' needs.

The grant also helps create new Cristo Rey schools, which are characterized by internships that send students into the corporate world one day per week to gain life experience and work off tuition.

De La Salle North opened with 71 ninth graders in 2001, and has since grown to 250 students. Keys to success with the students include small classes, high expectations, personal attention, parent involvement, work study, a prolonged school day, and a school year that stretches 10 and a half months.

Cristo Rey schools serve low-income areas and now operate in 12 cities, including Portland.

Plans call for an expansion in 2007 to include schools in Maryland, Alabama, Indiana, Minnesota, Nebraska and Washington, D.C. Five more possible locations are under study.

According to the 2006 Diplomas Count report, about 3,000 students drop out of high school every day, and fewer than 20 percent of African American and Latino students graduate ready for college-level academics. Cristo Rey schools have had success at reversing the troubling trend. The four-year dropout rate for the network's Class of 2006 was 2.6 percent. Network-wide, 99 percent of the graduating class of 2006 was admitted to a two- or four-year college and 95 percent enrolled this past fall.

"We continue to be humbled by the terrific growth and achievements of young people in our schools, and it remains our mission to see them achieve their fullest potential," says Jesuit Father John Foley, president of the Cristo Rey Network. "We are gratified to know that this investment will allow us to serve even more young people, so that they, too, can reap the benefits of this tremendous educational model."

Students work entry-level jobs with local companies, including the University of Portland, Oregon Catholic Press, Nike and various medical and legal offices.

All income earned on the job gets disbursed directly to the school.

"All students, regardless of income or background, should have access to a high school education that truly can prepare them for success in college and in life," said Tom Vander Ark, executive director of education for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has previously invested \$9.9 million in the school network.

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