



Members of the first graduating class of De La Salle North Catholic High School try on their caps and gowns in preparation for their commencement on June 11.

Pictured from left are, along with their destination colleges, Luke Johnson, St. Mary's College of California; Sam Ford, Lane Community College; Nathanael Stewart, Mt. Hood Community College; Billy Holiday, University of Nevada-Las Vegas; Rashida Saunders, Seattle University; Stephen Randolph, Hofstra; Mariana Lindsay, Beloit; Unique Saunders, Seattle University; and Van Do, Portland State University.

## First Grads Leave De La Salle (6/9/2005)

### The innovative school sets a higher academic bar

By Helen Silvis  
Of *The Skanner*

What if there was a high school in North/Northeast Portland, where every graduate went on to college? What if those students also had impressive resumes? A track record of community service? Self-confidence, and the ability to communicate with diverse groups of people? And what about the spiritual and ethical grounding that will help students overcome challenges and help their communities throughout their lives?

If it seems impossible that a school in a traditionally underachieving neighborhood could achieve such stunning results, think again. The first graduating class at De La Salle North Catholic High School has achieved all of this. And because of its cutting edge corporate internship program and a financial assistance program for low-income families, the school is affordable for most neighborhood families.

"Most of our kids will be the first in their families to go to college," said Tim Hennessy, vice-president for institutional advancement at the school. "We stay away from labels, but many of our kids — not all — come to us at below grade level, and that's why this number all going to college is remarkable."

Fifty-five students who entered the school in the fall of 2001 will graduate June 11 at Emmanuel Temple with a combined total of \$1.2 million in college scholarships. More than half the graduates have been accepted to four-year private universities. About 40 percent will attend local community colleges and just one senior plans to go to work and postpone further education, for now.

Matthew Powell, De La Salle North's president, was one of the first on the ground after a Catholic organization called the Christian Brothers decided to sponsor a school for low-income and minority children in North and Northeast Portland. "The Brothers committed some start-up money, but it was not nearly enough to fund a school that was not tuition-driven," Powell said. "So we looked around and learned about Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Chicago. They said: 'What if every student had a job?' We took that idea and we were the first in the country to replicate it."

With help from a \$9 million donation from the philanthropist B.J. Cassin, the school's founders set out to find corporate sponsors who would hire students to help finance their education. A long list of nonprofit and corporate sponsors — including the Black United Fund of Oregon, Oregon Health & Sciences University, Nike Inc., New Seasons Market, Walsh Construction Co. and Stoel Rives — signed up. That total is now at 50, resulting in a work program that pays for 70 percent of the school's costs.

Each student works one day per week plus one extra day a month. All students are on campus on Fridays. For participating corporate sponsors it means that four students — one from each year of the program — share a full-time job.

The school has an extended year so students get the required instructional hours. A special two-week course before the school year begins trains students in job skills, office etiquette and how to dress for the workplace. For boys, that means wearing a necktie.

Datriona Spears, a graduating senior who plans to major in psychology and biology at the historically Black Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, N.C., said working at jobs with Advantage N.W. Credit Union, Don Morissette Homes, MKG Financial and, currently, Xerox, has helped prepare her for life.

"It made me want to work harder at school because of the successful people I saw around me," Spears said. "I met the CEO and the president of my company and one was a woman. I decided I wanted to be like her — I wanted to own my own company. It makes me strive more, and have more motivation when I see people I want to be like. And it makes your resume look awesome."

It costs about \$9,600 a year to educate each student at the school. But income from the students work placements means the tuition for parents is just \$2,200 a year — much less than most other private schools. In addition, a scholarship program that helps 135 of the school's 225 students means even very low-income students can attend. In fact, 81 percent of families qualify for the federal free and reduced lunch program, and 45 percent of the student body is African American.

So what's the catch? No catch, the students said, but you must be committed to your education and prepared to work hard.

"The process to get into De La Salle is a long one," said Tanisha Covington, a

senior heading this fall to Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she plans to major in nursing. "You have to write a personal essay, then you come to an interview, then a family interview. ... In order to go here you have to really want to go here — if not you won't last. The school is challenging in many ways, both the work and the education program. It's not like an ordinary school."

Powell agreed. "We were looking for students who wanted a college preparatory education and wanted to be part of something different and special," he said of the selection process. "Our emphasis is on academic rigor, small class sizes and teachers who want to be in relationship with their students."

Many students enter with skills below grade level, but soon catch up and often exceed the grade standards. Programs such as a seminar program that pairs ninth-grade students with incoming freshmen help students develop effective study habits.

About 18 students of 73 who started in 2001 left before graduating. Most of those who left had relocated, said Powell, but a few simply lacked the commitment required to complete the school's rigorous academic requirements.

"The ones who left probably didn't want to be here. We don't give a test and say we'll take the best and brightest, we take kids from across the academic spectrum — although they have to be able to handle the academics. They have a lot of homework. This is a real college preparatory course."

As a Catholic school, ethics and spirituality are at the center of De La Salle North's mission, but you do not have to be Catholic or even a Christian to attend. Students do, however, learn about religious, spiritual and ethical traditions, each year taking classes in ethics and participating in community service programs.

"We have five schoolwide service projects," Powell said. "Students work at soup kitchens, for example. They take part in van outreach, taking food to people under the bridges and looking people in the eye. When they walk out of here they truly have a sense of justice and a concern for others."

To learn more about the school, to become a sponsor or to seek admission, visit [delasallenorth.org/](http://delasallenorth.org/).

De La Salle North High School graduation: 11 a.m. Saturday, June 11, at Emmanuel Temple, 1032 N. Sumner St.