



Helping students defy the odds

Lawrence school puts kids to work



By Jessica Heslam
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Even at age 16, Tiasha Garcia knows she needs a good education and college degree to beat the odds in Lawrence — a beleaguered city where the unemployment, poverty and high school dropout rates are staggering.

“My mom had me at a young age. She was 16,” said Garcia, who lives with her disabled grandmother and is the oldest of four kids. “My mom just wants me to do good — so badly. I want it. I want to go to college.”

Garcia’s sentiment is echoed throughout the halls of Notre Dame High School, where every graduate heads to a four-year college, from Holy Cross to Georgetown University to Boston College, to name a few.

The school opened its doors in 2004 and is part of the Cristo Rey Network, a national group of two dozen Catholic high schools that gives poor kids a shot at a bright future.

“It represents a way out for a lot of our students. They want more for themselves,” said Sister Maryalyce Gilfeather, director of the school’s work-study program. “The reason this school is here is because we believe these kids deserve more.”

Sister Mary Murphy, the school’s president, said education is the expressway out of poverty. “We’ve sent nearly 200 students to college who probably would not have gone there without our support,” Murphy said.

At Notre Dame, students greet visitors with a firm handshake and a smile. The school is pristine. Students wear tidy uniforms. Boys learn how to put on a tie.



Photo by Patrick Whitemore

DOORS TO SUCCESS: Notre Dame High School students Fabian Rivera, left, and Cristina Nunez chat inside the school.

Students must keep a 2.0 grade-point average. They are taught that attitude is “everything in life.” Tardiness or swearing — though rare — lands them in detention. They’re also encouraged to do community service.

They’re polite, enthusiastic — and, most importantly, they want to be there.

And they’re not just taking classes. The students also take part in the school’s Corporate Work Study Program. The school day and year are longer so students can work one, sometimes two days a week at an array of local companies that include MITRE Corp., Covidien, Zwicker & Associates and Raytheon.

School officials say the program is the “financial bloodline” of the school — but the tough economy has forced some companies to scale back on the number of students they hire.

Businesses pay \$26,000 for a team of four Notre Dame students who work five days a week for the entire school year. The students don’t get paid — the money goes toward tuition — but their high school resumes rival those of college grads.

Nuance Communications CFO Tom Beaudoin, which makes speech recognition software, employs six students. And he had this to say about them: “These kids will do tremendously when they get through college.”

Companies that want to take part in Notre Dame High School’s Corporate Work Study Program can contact Sister Maryalyce Gilfeather at 978-689-8222, Ext. 33 or email her at mgilfeather@ndhslaw.org. The school also accepts donations.

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