

Catholic New York

New High School

Incoming students of Cristo Rey New York take summer business and academic sessions

By JOHN WOODS

By the middle of August, students who will enter the new Cristo Rey New York High School this month had already been hard at work in academic and business training courses for two weeks.

The 99 incoming freshman traveled on rented buses from the site of their school building on East 106th Street in Manhattan to Fordham Preparatory School in the Bronx where they studied from Aug. 2 to 19. They were at Fordham Prep as renovations were being completed on their school facility which stands next to St. Cecilia's Church in East Harlem.

The training in business skills is important because a key component of their education—as well as its financing—puts Cristo Rey students to work in entry-level jobs that they share with their fellow students at an impressive array of New York companies.

“It’s a very important part of the education process of the students. It opens them to new world,” said Father Joseph P. Parkes, S.J., who is president of Cristo Rey New York. Before coming to the new school he had served since 1996 as president of Fordham Prep.

Cristo Rey, Spanish for Christ the King, is the first Catholic high school to open in the archdiocese since the Montfort Academy began operations in Katonah in 2001. St. Joseph by-the-Sea High School on Staten Island, founded in 1963, was the last high school to open in the three New York City boroughs (Manhattan, Bronx, Staten Island) of the archdiocese.

“We welcome Cristo Rey New York High School as partners in the ministry of Catholic education in the Archdiocese of New York,” said Dr. Catherine T. Hickey, secretary for education and superintendent of schools in the archdiocese, in a statement.

“Cristo Rey joins the 30 Catholic high schools in Manhattan and the Bronx who for more than 150 years have enabled the children of immigrants, the poor and the working middle class to be contributing members of the Church and civic communities,” she added.

The new school will be headquartered in a four-story building next door to St. Cecilia's Church. The building, which is being rented from the parish, is now divided into two but plans are to take down an interior wall put in place after the original construction. At one time, the building housed convents of the Sisters of Mercy, who left the parish some years ago, and the Franciscan Sisters of the Atonement, who operated the now-closed St. Cecilia's Day Nursery until June 2003, when they moved.

Father Francis Skelly, C.Ss.R., pastor of St. Cecilia's, told CNY that the new school would have a double benefit in that will provide a great educational service to neighborhood residents while occupying a facility that had been vacant. “It’s a great solution,” he said.

Father Parkes said he has been heartened by the welcome that Cristo Rey has received from St. Cecilia's parish, and from Cardinal Egan whose consent was needed before plans for Cristo Rey New York could move forward. The cardinal was scheduled to celebrate Mass at St. Cecilia's Church on Sept. 1 before the school's official opening on Sept. 7.

The high school also counts three religious communities as sponsors: the Jesuits, the De La Salle Christian Brothers and the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus. Each community has two members on the school's board of trustees. The New York high school is one of six in the Cristo Rey Network scheduled to open in cities around the country this year. Five already were up and running, including the first which started in Chicago in 1996.

Cristo Rey New York will benefit in the start-up phase from \$750,000 in funding from the Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation and \$540,000 from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. By year five, the corporate sponsor and tuition fees are expected to cover about 90 percent of all operating costs of the school and work-study program.

The 99 freshmen entering this fall (a class of approximately 100 students will enter each year) are all from Manhattan and the Bronx, with the exception of one student who lives in Brooklyn. Females slightly outnumber males in the student body. While Father Parkes cited school performance and attendance, a personal interview and recommendations of schools and parishes as some key measures of prospective students, he stressed the school's mission in reaching youths whose families might not have thought a Catholic education possible because of finances. "Cristo Rey provides an affordable option for inner-city families to send their children to a value-laden Catholic school," Father Parkes said.

In the Corporate Work Study Program, the students spend five days per month working at an entry level clerical job, which they share with three classmates. The money they each earn over the course of the 10-month school year - \$6,250 - is assigned to the school and pays more than 70 percent of the cost of their education. The family's share of tuition is \$2,000.

Principal William Ford III, who had previously served as an assistant principal and faculty member at St. Ignatius School in the Bronx, said that Cristo Rey students will be "met with a program that has high expectations of them". He noted that the eight faculty members each have experience in a bilingual or bicultural setting.

The academic program features a dual-language curriculum designed to prepare every student well for college. Each year, students will take a course in the Spanish language and literature, as well as one other course in Spanish. Ford said that the new students are coming to Cristo Rey at a point in their lives when they are being pulled in a lot of directions.

"Our obligation is to know the students as children of God and to call them by name," he said.