

NEW YORK POST

CITY HIGH SCHOOL GIVES STUDENTS THE BUSINESS

By KIERA BUTLER March 12, 2007

JASMINE Wiggins arrives at work at 9:30 a.m. She spends most of the day filing, labeling and organizing information into binders, and leaves at 5:15 p.m. Her boss describes her as trustworthy and smart, and she recently impressed some higher-ups with a PowerPoint presentation she put together for new employees.

What's the next step on her career path? More responsibility? Her own office? Nah, it's 11th grade.

Jasmine is a 15-year-old sophomore at Cristo Rey High School in East Harlem, and her job is part of her school's unique work-study program. Under the program, Cristo Rey students time-share entry-level jobs at companies around the city, with each student working one day a week.

For this, each group shares a yearly salary of \$27,500, which covers about 70 percent of their education at the private school. (The rest is covered by financial aid and a small tuition.)

The program started as a way to finance private education for Cristo Rey's mostly lower-income students, but it's evolved into something bigger, says work-study director James Wilson.

"It's a huge part of their education," he says. "It helps to make their education relevant."

Students get placed at more than 70 companies, from high-powered corporations like Goldman Sachs to nonprofits like the YMCA. They typically do clerical work - filing, making spreadsheets, answering phones - but a few who prove themselves capable work on more sophisticated projects, like helping with research.

To prepare them for the working world, students attend a monthlong summer "business boot camp," where they learn "hard skills," like how to use Microsoft Office, and "soft skills," like time management and organization. ("The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens" serves as the text.)

The East Harlem school, which opened in 2004, is one of 12 Cristo Rey Network schools nationwide, modeled after a Chicago school founded by a Jesuit priest in 1996. Last year more than 95 percent of seniors at Cristo Rey schools went on to college. And it's not just the college counseling program and the academics that prepare kids for higher education - it's also the jobs, says Wilson. And sometimes in surprising ways.

"They're working alongside people who have gone to college and can give them mentoring," he says. "But also they might realize that clerical tasks are good for now, but they don't want to be doing the same thing when they're 25 or 35. If they come in and say they're tired of data entry, I say, 'Well you'd better pay attention in algebra, or that's all you'll ever be doing.'"

Wilson rarely gets complaints that student are goofing around on the job - a more typical problem is shyness. An office full of adults can be awfully intimidating to even the most poised teenager. At a recent assembly, Wilson set up a role-play about small talk. "Nice day," said one student, giggling. "Awful cold," said another. "Do you think it will snow?" asked a third.

At some companies, having a teen around comes in handy, though. Carrie McIndoe of the National Council on Economic Education is pioneering a summer program to teach entrepreneurship skills to teens. Kimberly Jimenez, a 14-year-old freshman who works with her, recently helped gather information about various existing summer camps.

"She noted things that would be of interest to her," says McIndoe. "It was very useful, because she's the potential market."

Kimberly says her work on the program has led to some revelations.

"Before, I really wanted to be a doctor. But now I know more about entrepreneurship, so I'm having second thoughts."

Although she won't graduate for another two years, Jasmine Wiggins is likewise thinking about the future.

"They placed me at Pfizer Animal Health because they knew I wanted to be a marine veterinarian," she says. "I asked at my work what subject I should major in at college, and they told me biology. So I'm planning ahead."