

## *Cristo Rey's tough-love approach to work, school opens up opportunities*

Look people in the eye. Wear a tie. Show up on time.

We assume everyone knows what's required of them when they step into an office for an interview or a new job. But these so-called "soft skills" don't just appear. They need to be taught. And when you're dealing with teenagers who have had little exposure to offices or businesspeople, there's a steeper learning curve.



EDITOR'S  
NOTEBOOK

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It's what makes Cristo Rey Jesuit High School's mission so impressive. The Fells Point high school is providing both academics and work experience to 300 students, many from the city's poorest neighborhoods.

The students work for T. Rowe Price Group Inc., DLA Piper, Harbor Bank of Maryland, McCormick & Co. Inc. and 81 other employers throughout Greater Baltimore. The companies "sponsor" students by paying \$25,000 to hire a team of four students to work five days a month each.

I had the chance to sit down with the Rev. John W. Swope, president of Cristo Rey's Baltimore school, and Robert Birdsell, CEO of the Cristo Rey Network, last week to discuss how the Cristo Rey schools are bringing this work-study concept to a growing number of U.S. cities. Coincidentally, the *Baltimore Business Journal* staff has been immersed in reporting and writing a three-part series called "Back to Work." The second part is featured in this issue.

The series is exploring both in print and online Greater Baltimore's high unemployment and what training and help may be out there for those out of work. We've been hearing too often

that many people don't know the basics of being a good interviewee or employee. They have to learn the do's and don'ts of the workplace. Some never get a foot in the door because they make the wrong impression from day one.

This is the first thing Cristo Rey tackles before it sends students to work. They know many of the students come in at a disadvantage. They're poor and often attended troubled city schools where their reading and writing skills haven't been developed.

Cristo Rey starts with summer math camp where they receive 55 hours of pre-Algebra. Then comes business boot camp, where they learn the necessary skills of communicating in a workplace. Students are required to dress in uniform, with boys wearing ties, for any day of work. If someone is fired from a workplace, they're put in a re-education class and given another chance.

"If you're fired twice, you have to leave the school," Swope said.

The school's philosophy seems to be working. Of 78 students in the Baltimore's school first graduating class, 76 went to college and two joined the military.

"I'll hold that up against any school," Birdsell said.

It's too early to tell where Cristo Rey's Baltimore graduates might end up, but the student/employer matchmaking makes sense. Companies get someone who is trained in what is needed most — the ability to be a good employee. And the students have the chance to have a life they never thought possible.

"This isn't charity," added Swope. "The students are bringing value to the company."

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