

Cristo Rey opens for business

While many Baltimore-area students were enjoying swims in the pool or other summertime delights during a sweltering early August, the inaugural class at the new Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in Fells Point was getting down to business.

Reporting for a mandatory three-week “business boot camp” that began Aug. 6 at the site of the former Our Lady of the Rosary High School on Chester Street, 120 Cristo Rey freshmen studied communication skills, business etiquette, business ethics and basic office skills. The immersion program was designed to get the teens ready for upcoming assignments in Baltimore’s corporate community.

As part of a national network of schools that incorporate a work-study component in their college-preparatory curriculum, Cristo Rey requires all students to participate in a corporate internship program that finances 65 percent of the cost of their education. In addition to taking academic courses throughout the school year, students will work five full days each month at 29 Baltimore-area corporations including Legg Mason, the National Aquarium, Associated Catholic Charities and several local hospitals.

The unique business component is designed to give students from low-income families a leg up, according to Father John Swope, S.J., president of Cristo Rey.

“It’s a very creative approach to education,” said Father Swope, a former executive director of the Secretariat for the Church in Latin America for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“We think it’s going to provide a lot of motivation for students to be successful,” he said.

The corporate partnerships will allow students to apply academics learned in the classroom, Father Swope said. It’s one thing to learn mathematic formulas from a textbook, he explained, and quite another to apply those formulas in real-life situations.

“It’s going to give them confidence,” he said, noting that Robyn Fleming is Cristo Rey’s director of the corporate internship program. “They’re going to see that in order to be successful they’ll need certain skill sets.”

After reporting to school, students will be transported to and from their corporate work sites. Because Cristo Rey attracts students from throughout the city, school leaders plan to provide morning transportation to the school from two different parts

of the community.

More than 80 percent of Cristo Rey's students qualify for the federal free or reduced lunch program, according to Father Swope. About 80 percent are black, 10 percent are white and 10 percent are Hispanic, he said. While virtually all are Christian, only about 35 percent are Catholic.

Tuition at Cristo Rey is \$2,500, which is the balance of tuition costs not covered by income from work-study positions, Father Swope said.

The new high school has already raised \$11 million and is raising more money to cover the cost of renovating a closed public school, Mildred Monroe Elementary School in Greenmount West - Cristo Rey's eventual permanent home.

Cristo Rey, Spanish for "Christ the King," will add a new class in each of the coming school years with the first class graduating in 2011.

Father Swope said Christian values will be emphasized at Cristo Rey and the Jesuit tradition of creating men and women for others will be key. Anne Price, former principal of Sacred Heart School in Glyndon, will be responsible for educating faculty and staff about the Jesuit tradition and the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola.

After only a few days of classes, Arthur Williams said he knows his first year at his new school isn't going to be a cakewalk.

"It's going to benefit me," said the 14-year-old freshman, who described his teachers and administrators as "very strict and organized."

"I might not always like it, but it's going to help me in the long run," he said.

After his father died and his mother could no longer care for him, Arthur recently moved into Boys Hope/Girls Hope in Baltimore - a group home for at-risk children. A non-Catholic who sometimes worships at St. Michael the Archangel in Overlea, Arthur learned about Cristo Rey from his former principal at St. William of York School in Baltimore. He believes Cristo Rey will prepare him to achieve his goal of one day working for the FBI.

Once regular classes get underway Aug. 27, Cristo Rey students will have extended days of instruction as well as academic support programs in the form of an extra reading class and math tutoring, according to Tom Malone, principal.

With numerous signs posted in hallways and classrooms extolling virtues like compassion, determination and discipline, high expectations seemed to loom large throughout the school.

As students watched him intently and took notes during an Aug. 9 class based on the book, "Seven Habits of Highly Successful Teens," Guido Van Hemelryck enjoined them to be accountable for their actions and to tackle big challenges first. Studying should come before watching television, he insisted.

"We're not asking you guys not to have fun," said Mr. Van Hemelryck, a native of Belgium who came to the U.S. as an adult after growing up in Peru, "but you need to do the important things first."

Bishop Denis J. Madden, urban vicar, will celebrate an opening liturgy Sept. 14 at 10:30 a.m.