A Model School: (from left) Joseph Parkes, S.J., JES '68, president of Cristo Rey New York; Leeza Tirado, a Cristo Rey senior; and the school's principal, Bill Ford, GSAS '98.

Education That Works

A new paradigm for Catholic education thrives at Cristo Rey New York High School in Spanish Harlem, where low-income and predominantly minority students join the workforce freshman year, and 100 percent of the school's seniors are accepted into college.

Founded in 2004, the school is part of the 25-school Cristo Rey Network, headquartered in Chicago. That's the site of the first Cristo Rey school, established in 1996 under the leadership of John Foley, S.J.

In the Cristo Rey model, low-income students in grades 9 to 12 work one day a week at a local business, sharing that job with four other students. The students each earn $6,000 a year, which goes directly to the school to cover part of their tuition costs.

What was designed as a way to make a college-preparatory Catholic education available to low-income students has grown into a character-building program that develops mature teens who converse readily with adults and shake hands with confidence upon greeting a visitor.

"The work-study program is far more important for these students' maturation process," said Joseph Parkes, S.J., JES '68, president of Cristo Rey New York, and a member of Fordham University's Board of Trustees. "When you treat them as adults, they start responding like adults."

Father Parkes and fellow Fordham alumnus Bill Ford, GSAS '98, played a central role in bringing the Cristo Rey model to New York. Ford, the school's founding principal, was the architect of the feasibility study that led to its establishment in 2004. He recruited Father Parkes, who became the school's founding president.

Joseph M. McShane, S.J., president of Fordham, attended the school's opening Mass. He visits Cristo Rey each spring for his annual pizza party, at which time he hands out Fordham caps and encourages Cristo Rey students to pursue their college dreams. Since 2004, 13 Cristo Rey graduates have matriculated at Fordham, including seven in the Class of 2015.

"We take our students to games and lectures at Fordham, and many of our faculty and volunteers are Fordham alumni," said Father Parkes. "Fordham has been outstanding for us."

The work-study program sends students to jobs at top New York firms such as JP Morgan Chase, McKinsey & Co., Skaaden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom, and MetLife. HSBC underwrites the cost of job teams at City Parks Foundation and Common Ground.

The students' income from the workplace—about $2 million in 2010–2011—covers nearly 45 percent of Cristo Rey's annual budget, said Father Parkes. Fundraising brings in another $2 million, and tuition payments from families—whose average annual income is $31,000—covers the rest. Few parents pay the full tuition of $2,000, but every family makes a financial contribution.

Each July, freshmen arrive for a three-week summer academy. They receive English and math instruction in the morning, and take part in a Business Boot Camp in the afternoon, where they learn the hard and soft skills needed for success in the workplace.

At the school's renovated brick-faced building at East 106th Street near Park Avenue—once a tenement house, and later a convent—college banners line the hallways, representing the schools Cristo Rey graduates have attended.

Jacqueline Acero, a senior who has worked at the Jones Day brokerage firm and St. Vincent's Hospital, recalls being intimidated on her first work assignment. But she stuck with it.

"As the months went by," she said, "I got accustomed to the workplace and felt just like one of them."

Ariel Gonzalez, a senior, said he'd be the first in his family to attend college. His mother is semi-retired and his father works as a custodian on Wall Street. He wants to study communications and said he feels well prepared for what comes next.

"The teachers here really want us to succeed," he said. "They want you to do something really good with your life."

—*David McKay Wilson*