

Early on, pilot program's looking good

Boot Camp is just the start for Catholic High's Education That Works initiative

The Commercial Appeal

So far, so good, say Memphis Catholic High School leaders about their Education That Works program, which kicked off Aug. 1.

The innovative plan offers students a chance to earn about 70 percent of their tuition by working at least one day a week at a partnering business.

More than two dozen corporations and organizations signed on for the pilot program, which is mandatory for every Memphis Catholic student.

The money they "earn" — \$5,000 — is paid directly to the school and is deducted from the annual \$7,000 tuition.

All the jobs are entry-level administrative or

OPEN HOUSE

Memphis Catholic High School will have two open houses for prospective students and their parents:

■ 6 p.m., Nov. 7

■ 10 a.m., Nov. 11

For more information: Call 276-1221 or go online to memphiscatholic.org

clerical positions in corporate settings. Four students hold down one job and each works one day a week, Mondays through Thursdays.

They also work one Friday a month, alternating by grade level.

The school compensates for the lost instruc-

tion time with longer daily class periods and an extended yearly calendar.

Transportation to and from work is provided by the school and students are required to be at work every day they're scheduled, even if school isn't in session. On the flip side, if the office is closed for any reason, students also get the day off.

Because the initiative depends on corporate sponsors, the number of openings may fluctuate. This year enrollment dropped to 106 high schoolers, compared to 140 last year, but officials hope to boost enrollment to 400 in the next five years.

Because of the competitive nature of the program, even current students must reapply every year. While previous enrollment may

help, it doesn't guarantee admission. To be considered, a student must be tested, undergo an interview and agree to abide by the rules.

Newcomers also must attend Boot Camp, a three-week summer program that prepares them to enter the workforce. Students who have already been in the program get refresher courses.

Students who get "fired" are re-evaluated and must work at the school before being reassigned. A second infraction results in permanent expulsion.

This semester, two students were removed from their initial jobs. Both transferred to other positions and school officials say both are now performing above average.

— James Dowd

"The kids really seem to enjoy the challenge and respect the fact that they're in an adult world. I've already seen an increase in their maturity levels."

EILEEN HUEY, Memphis Catholic High School teacher

"I'm better at my job than I was when I started and I feel more comfortable being around adults. I think I'm learning how to be a lot more responsible."

ELONDRIA HAMPTON, student

EDUCATION, Continued from page A1

This is the inaugural session of "Boot Camp," an immersion course in business etiquette and corporate correctness that's mandatory for every student at Catholic High.

It's a prerequisite for Education That Works, a newly implemented program in which students earn tuition assistance in exchange for at least eight hours a week spent performing mostly clerical duties at local businesses.

The money — \$5,000 per student — is paid by participating sponsors directly to the school and is deducted from the annual tuition of \$7,000.

Pohlman leads the students through a manual of rules and regulations, answering questions before they're asked:

"Do not get sick on a work day — and yes, that means some of you are going to have to be a little tougher."

"Do not schedule a doctor's appointment on a work day."

"Tardiness is not acceptable and that means no excuses — no bus problems, no car trouble, no excuses. The only exception is if inclement weather closes diocesan schools, otherwise you better be here and be here on time."

At a table in the middle of the room, Elondria Hampton hangs on every word. The day's barely started and already high school is strange and intimidating and more than a little scary.

The freshman wonders when she'll fit in, and hopes it'll be soon.

Across the room, practically in another universe, Cornelius Thomas "C.T." O'Donnell IV is respectfully attentive, but not visibly concerned. Sure, this is unfamiliar territory, but it's also a chance to master new skills. He hopes.

As boot camp marches on, both realize there's a lot to learn and no time to waste. The program is packed from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. with regimented doses of practical training.

There are courses on operating office equipment and basic computer programs, as well as filing and proofreading, and even how to make casual conversation at the water cooler.

Students are also schooled in personal hygiene and appropriate office attire.

For young men, that means long-sleeved shirts, ties, belts and dress pants with a visible crease. No facial hair, no visible jewelry and shoes must be shined. Socks are not optional.

For young women, dress shirts and dress pants, although skirts and dresses are fine if worn with hosiery or tights. One discreet necklace is allowed and one pair of earrings, which must be worn in the earlobe. Makeup must be conservative.

For both, no tongue piercings, no visible tattoos and no sunglasses. Period.

To drive the point home, students are evaluated and graded on their appearance.

Education That Works is an idea that more than two dozen businesses have agreed to sponsor. Most sponsor one job, but some will fund multiple positions.

Gene Bastedo at FedEx is an enthusiastic supporter. The company is sponsoring the most jobs this year — five positions rotated among 20 students — and considers it an investment in the future.

"This program improves education in Memphis and that improves the quality of life here and that attracts talented people to the area," Bastedo said. "And as a result of working for us, some of these students may come back after school and decide they want a career at FedEx."

For the most part, boot camp goes smoothly. There are a few bumps along the way — Elondria is bored by filing and C.T. is uncomfortable practicing small talk — but every day is a little easier.

After the first week both feel more comfortable, and at the end of the second, they're starting to feel like pros.

By the time camp draws to a close, however, some of that first-day nervousness returns as the theory of what they're undertaking becomes reality.

Life lessons

Elondria loves children and dreams



C.T. O'Donnell (center) learns how to study body language and about business etiquette during a Memphis Catholic High School "boot camp." Students learned real life skills this summer, which they can bring into the job market.

It's 5 a.m. Get ready, stay ready

of a career where she's surrounded by kids.

But not like her mom, who works in a day care center owned by a family member. Elondria helped out last summer at the facility, but she doesn't want to spend her life in the industry.

Her mother doesn't want that for Elondria, either. She often works 12-hour days to support Elondria and her fraternal twin sister, Roshundria and even then it's a struggle.

"It's hard work with long hours and low pay," Anna Hampton says. "I don't want that for my girls. I want them to be something. I want them to have a better life than me."

So does Elondria. She believes Memphis Catholic's new program is a pivotal step on the road to achieving her goal of becoming a pediatrician.

The experience will help develop good work habits and the job should look impressive on college applications.

That's in addition to being a National Junior Honor Society member, a cheerleader and freshman class president. Elondria also is contemplating trying out for the school's volleyball team, because it might be fun, and it may impress prospective admission recruiters.

"It's competitive out there and I know I have to work hard to make it," Elondria says. "But if you're going to dream, you might as well dream big. I believe my dreams will come true."

One of her immediate dreams is to land a work-study position at a

"These kids are getting a glimpse of the future. When you think about it, that's a great education."

JAMES POHLMAN
Memphis Catholic High School president

"I'm excited about Education That Works because of the long-term benefits to the community. We're looking at the big picture."

GENE BASTEDO
FedEx

hospital. It makes sense and would be a perfect fit, she imagines.

It doesn't happen.

On the day assignments are announced, Elondria learns she'll spend the next 10 months working in an office at the East Memphis headquarters of Mid-America Apartment Communities.

It's not a hospital and she's never heard of it, and suddenly the prospect of this work-study program seems more like, well, work.

The real world

C.T. is level-headed and always has been, explains his dad, Neil O'Donnell. As a youngster, he displayed a knack for multitasking and a remarkable amount of maturity. And he's always been good with finances.

With two older brothers and an older sister, C.T. grew up wanting to prove he was just as capable and responsible as his siblings. Early on, he learned to work hard for what he wanted.

"He's determined. Some kids can't handle money, but if there's something he wants to buy, he'll save up until he has enough to get it," the elder O'Donnell says. "He's very responsible. He's willing to put in the effort to be successful."

For C.T., success means graduating from college with a degree in engineering. He hasn't decided on a field, but figures there's plenty of time.

"I like math and science and I think engineering is the best way for me to

use those skills in a career I'll enjoy," C.T. says. "I'm trying to keep my grades up because I know it's going to be expensive, and I need to get a scholarship."

Academics have been a strong suit for C.T., a National Honor Society member and member of the school's Knowledge Bowl team, but he also has other interests.

He's involved in judo, bowling and baseball and was a member of the school's former wrestling team. He's active in campus ministry and involved in the drama club and landed a role in an upcoming school production of "A Christmas Carol."

An outdoors lover, he enjoys golf and often spends summer days and weekends during the school year mowing yards to help finance his hobby. His parents are confident C.T. will have a solid future and they're grateful for the advantages offered by Education That Works.

"This is a great opportunity for him to learn, inside and outside of the classroom," says mom Edie O'Donnell. "It gives him an idea of what the real world is like and a chance to get ready for it. I wish they'd had this when I was in school."

C.T. hopes his real world, at least for the next year, includes a spot at FedEx or AutoZone.

It doesn't. Like Elondria, C.T. is headed to Mid-America, and like Elondria, he's never heard of it.

On the job

Shortly before 9 a.m. on Aug. 16, a



Elondria Hampton (left) was nervous on the way to her first day of work at Mid-America Apartment Communities. Memphis Catholic High School provides the transportation, but students who are late and miss work have to pay a fine as part of the program.

Memphis Catholic bus pulls up outside the Mid-America offices at 6584 Poplar, dropping off Elondria, C.T. and a couple of classmates. They'll spend the next two hours in orientation, learning about the company and their jobs.

During a tour of the facility, Frank McRae, the company's director of community outreach, tries to put them at ease.

"You'll make mistakes, we'll make mistakes, but that's OK," McRae says. "When you get to next spring you'll have a pretty good idea of what corporate life is like. During the time between now and then, we have things to learn from one another."

"That's the story of life."

By the time orientation's over, the students have a better understanding of the company where they'll each work nearly 50 days over the course of this academic year. They'll report to eight different supervisors, depending on the days they're scheduled, with varying responsibilities.

Most days, the teens will perform basic clerical duties, include faxing, filing and making copies, and assist with other projects as needed.

And while the job doesn't involve medicine or engineering, Elondria and C.T. don't appear to mind.

"It seems like a nice place and everybody's friendly, so that's a good sign," Elondria says.

"Yeah, it's a lot more laid-back than I thought it would be and I like that," C.T. adds.

That's encouraging news for Mid-America CEO Eric Bolton. The program's corporate focus convinced him to sign on as a sponsor, and the idea of giving back to the community provided another incentive.

"I have a vested interest in Memphis, and it's important for us to get behind this and make a commitment to the future," explains Bolton, who grew up here. "If we can convince kids to stay in school and get a good education, then we all benefit. We'll make a positive impact on this city."

Progress report

A couple of months into the program, Elondria and C.T. give Education That Works passing marks. With the first grading period behind them, both have scored well at school and on the job.

Elondria maintained A's in all of her six classes, despite some tough assignments in Algebra and Spanish. She still plans to be a pediatrician and figures the long hours she's logging are good preparation.

"I definitely think it's been a worthwhile experience because it's helped me to be more structured," says Elondria, although she admits she's not crazy about getting up at 5 a.m. on workdays. "This is a whole lot more responsibility than I had in eighth grade, but I like it. I guess responsibility's not that bad."

C.T. has enjoyed similar success. He earned A's in five classes, and got a borderline A/B in English, which he plans to improve over the next grading period.

"If you find a way to manage your time, you can do anything," C.T. says. "You just have to be committed to getting it done and then work hard to do it."

As for the folks at Mid-America, they're more than pleased, McRae says. There was some initial concern there might not always be enough work for students, but that proved unfounded.

"It's worked amazingly well and the students are remarkably bright, well-mannered and capable," McRae says. "They're in constant demand. Every department wants to use them."

— James Dowd: 529-2737

ON THE WEB

The Commercial Appeal is following students Elondria Hampton and C.T. O'Donnell through their first year in Memphis Catholic High School's innovative program, Education That Works. To view a photographic slide show of the students' journey, visit commercialappeal.com and click on the link with this story.

Photography by Karen Puffer Focht
The Commercial Appeal