

## **Guest column: Students will respond to high expectations**

### **Ambition and dreams know no religion, color or price tag in Memphis Catholic High School's Education That Works program.**

By James J. Pohlman, Special to Viewpoint

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A recent guest column in The Commercial Appeal about the local high school dropout rate noted that while standards should be set high for teachers, students, too, should be expected to do well.

"The plague of minimal expectations that simply writes off broad swaths of students must come to an end," wrote Michael T.S. Wotorson, executive director of the Campaign for High School Equity. He would be interested to know that it has come to an end, with the Education That Works program at Memphis Catholic High School.

Now completing its fourth year, the Education That Works curriculum requires that high school students take a full load of college preparatory classes during a longer-than-average school day (which is part of a longer-than-average school year), perform 20 hours of community service per school year, wear a school uniform and work a full five days a month for an employer who subsidizes some 70 percent of their tuition. Think there aren't many teens who would sign on for that challenge? You would be wrong. Freshman applications at Memphis Catholic are up some 80 percent for the 2010-2011 school year.

Students whose educational opportunities are limited by financial concerns see our program as a viable means to a college education and a successful career. The word is out that the 2009 and 2010 senior classes at Memphis Catholic had 100 percent graduation rates, and more than 60 percent of those graduates received college scholarships.

Eighty percent of the Education That Works students are non-Catholic, 79 percent are African-American and 40 percent of their families meet the federal standards for poverty. Ambition and dreams know no religion, color or price tag. Our students want to improve their lives, and they are willing to work hard to do so.

In response, we honor their desire with a demanding academic program that prepares them for college, and a real-world business internship that gives them a working relationship with the workplace. Our students hold white-collar, entry-level clerical positions at AutoZone, Baptist Healthcare, Morgan Keegan, Kroger Delta Marketing Area and other forward-looking companies in the Memphis metropolitan area. They

work a full workday one day per week and one additional Friday per month. They are compensated by their sponsor companies, or a donor if working for a nonprofit organization, with a partial subsidy of their tuition.

And Education That Works is working. Elondria Hampton, the 2010 class valedictorian, just became one of only 1,000 students nationwide who won the Gates Millennium Scholarship. Raquel Martin, who graduated in 2009, just completed her freshman year at Vanderbilt, where she is on scholarship and on the Dean's List.

But perhaps the best example is Spencer Moore, another 2009 graduate, who is an engineering major at Georgia Tech. His interest in engineering was cultivated during his Education That Works internship in the Memphis Light, Gas and Water Division engineering department. His interest in Georgia Tech was piqued at another of his Education That Works job assignments at Mid-America Apartment Communities, where he met the company's retired chairman, a Georgia Tech alumnus.

As all adults know, success depends on a mixture of what you know, who you know and how hard you are willing to work to achieve your goals. The faculty, staff, corporate and individual sponsors of Education That Works emphasize the importance of all three, and provide students with ample opportunities to improve in each category.

More important, our students are not hampered by the soft bigotry of low expectations. Their parents, their teachers, their corporate sponsors expect them to work hard and do their best. They eagerly accept that challenge, and are succeeding as a result.

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