



Photographs courtesy of Verbum Dei High School

VERBUM DEI HIGH SCHOOL: WORK STUDY PROGRAM

VERBUM DEI HIGH SCHOOL SITS AT THE EPICENTER of a war zone. Bordering the rear of its campus is the notoriously violent Nickerson Gardens housing project, hovering like an unwelcome sentry. On the other side – both literally and figuratively – the similarly plagued Jordan Downs complex is but a block away, poised as if to use the school as a battle shield against its enemy to the east. In the sixty days following Christmas of 2005, there were twenty five shootings in the area between the two housing blocks, several of which resulted in death. The neighborhood is one in which drugs can be purchased and lives threatened on each of the four corners just outside Verbum Dei's gates. Yet each day amidst it all, 340 young men, many of whom live in or around these infamously gang- and crime-infested flashpoints, arrive safely on campus with shirts tucked in, trousers pressed, ties squared and prayers said, to take another step on the path that will lead all of them to a high school diploma and beyond.

Only five years ago, it appeared that Verbum Dei would fall prey to the sheer desperation of the ravaged Watts neighborhood in which it sits. Despite its most noble vision of providing an excellent college prep education to boys from some of the lowest income and most troubled households in Los Angeles, the school found that its mission alone was not enough to transcend the challenges of a community steeped in poverty, crime and lack of a school-going culture. Enrollment was at an all-time low, staff turnover was high, and the families of those who attended the school simply could not afford the relatively modest tuition. With an undying belief however, that this school not only should survive but even thrive, the Los Angeles Archdiocese entered an innovative partnership with six Jesuits, whose charge was to innovate a model by which Verbum Dei could

be brought back to life and sustained as a model for urban Catholic education.

Today's Verbum Dei High School exceeds both the mandates of the Archdiocese's charge, and community expectations – and all thanks are due to an ambitious and hard working team of priests with a great awareness of and sensitivity to the needs of the community served. With finances being a major concern both for the school and the families of the students, the Jesuits sought a model that would promote both academic rigor for and job readiness in its students, while facilitating the generation of sorely needed earned income for the school. The answer was the *Corporate Work Study Program*, the local take on an ambitious and innovative model developed by a similar school in Chicago.

CWSP works this way: Each Verbum Dei student is enrolled in school four days a week, and on the fifth day, he goes to work at the office of a corporate partner. There is one corporate job for every four students, who rotate in classic job-sharing fashion; the total \$25,000 salary for each job is paid directly to Verbum Dei which, much like a temporary employment agency, handles all matters of taxes accounting and health insurance. The salary is pro-rated per each student, and paid into an account that covers \$6,250 of his total \$11,000 tuition (a maximum of \$2,500 is paid by the student's family, so the school relies on contributed income for the balance). The boys experience an intensive, cohort-based college-prep education, while gaining important life skills such as work ethics, understanding of workplace culture, scheduling, interpersonal relations and perhaps most importantly, access to new ideas, stimuli and workplace mentors who help them envision an exciting future of boundless possibilities, toward which each will be well-equipped to strive.

The "machine" that keeps CWSP ticking is complex, and requires the cooperation of several hundred students, numerous open-minded and generous employers, and a remarkably gifted Verbum Dei staff that includes eight coordinators, administrators and managers, two Jesuit volunteers, and ten drivers. Each morning at 7 am, the 80 young men whose turn it is to work that day gather in the work room, and take attendance. Together, they pray for the gifts of learning, inspiration, safety and meaning, as they do for the capacity to contribute and make

a difference to the organizations and communities impacted by their work. By 7:30, the young men are boarding one of the ten geographically-coordinated vans that take them to work, safely and on time, only to repeat the drill in reverse at day's end.

This year witnessed the first senior class to have gone through the CWSP for their entire four-year high school career. Inarguably, these are unusually impressive young men; poised, respectful, thoughtful, and ready for the world. Alongside their rigorous studies in advanced mathematics, language arts, science and a renowned athletic program, they will have worked in the fields of law, financing, social service, and philanthropy – to name a few. And each one of them will be going to college.

