

BUSINESS

Firms Offering Students the Benefit of Experience

By JAMES FLANIGAN, LA Times Columnist

In a speech to educators a few months ago, Melinda Gates (wife of Bill) quoted a line by the poet William Butler Yeats: "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."

At Verbum Dei High School in Watts, thanks to a number of businesses in Los Angeles, things are beginning to blaze for the better.

All 225 students at the school earn \$6,250 a year — three-quarters of their tuition — by working a day a week at any one of 48 companies, including insurer Aon Corp., Spanish-language TV giant Univision Communications Inc., money manager Payden & Rygel and 18 law firms.

But their real education goes beyond the arcana of law or finance or television production. Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds learn important interpersonal skills. They learn how to be responsible. They learn about the wider world that awaits them.

"The people are very friendly, and the work can be real interesting at times," says Omari Howard, who before graduating from Verbum Dei this month was employed by Los Angeles law firm Lightfoot, Vandavelde, Sadowsky, Medvene & Levine. Howard, who is headed to Humboldt State, spent much of his time looking up cases and helping to make determinations on the meaning of legal phrasing.

Enrique Rosas, a freshman who can speak Spanish, has a job at Univision's studios, where he files audience reports, makes labels and performs other chores. The 14-year-old went to Verbum Dei, he says, because he was hungry for job experience.

And though he landed at a media company, he isn't star-struck — at least not yet. "I'm going to study psychology in college," Rosas says, "and become a child psychologist."

Before entering the workplace, program participants are taught computing skills and business etiquette. School vans transport the students to their jobs starting at 7:45 a.m. and

return them to campus after 4:30 p.m. Company paychecks go directly to Verbum Dei — not to the kids.

What they do get, though, is plenty of nurturing. "People in the firm come around and help you if you need it," says Mitchell Rogers, a sophomore who filed documents, delivered mail and did other chores last year at Trust Co. of the West in Los Angeles.

The businesses insist that the lessons flow both ways.

"I find them very eager to learn, and I learn another perspective from them," says Joan Payden, president of Payden & Rygel, which employs eight Verbum Dei students.

Of course, by participating in the program, businesses such as Payden's are doing more than demonstrating their altruism. They are also helping to ensure that their workforce of the future is up to snuff. After all, 80% of the fastest-growing occupations in the U.S. require some education after high school.

For the students, reaching for a higher education is likewise an economic imperative. College graduates, on average, earn 70% more over their lifetimes than those who don't matriculate.

Given these harsh realities, it's no wonder that the Verbum Dei work-study program is being called a model by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Set up by the Microsoft Corp. founder and his wife, the foundation has committed \$2 billion to increase the number of low-income and minority students who

graduate from high school and attend college.

"All students should graduate high school ready to go to college," Melinda Gates declared in her speech, rather than the barely one-third of today's graduates who go on to higher education. Her reasoning is simple: The economy has changed, "as we have seen vividly in Seattle," where good manufacturing jobs have given way to service, knowledge and information work — notably at the Redmond, Wash.-based software giant itself.

The Gates Foundation has spent \$630 million in the last three years to help high school students upgrade their skills — and broaden their visions. And it is not alone. Many philanthropies are focused on assisting high school pupils. The Fulfillment Fund, financed partly by Hollywood studios, uses a \$6-million-a-year budget to mentor low-income students and prepare them for college.

The Cassin Educational Initiative Foundation, named for Silicon Valley venture capitalist B.J. Cassin, has joined Gates in donating \$19 million to help Cristo Rey High School and 10 other schools in a nationwide network. Eight years ago, Cristo Rey, on Chicago's heavily Mexican American Southwest Side, pioneered the work-study program being used at Verbum Dei.

Verbum Dei adopted the program in 2000 as one pillar in a broader rebuilding. The high school was founded in 1962 and named for a religious teaching order, Missionaries of the Divine Word (Verbum Dei). For many years, it stood as a beacon of academic and athletic excellence. But the religious order faded for lack of members, and the school declined along with its surrounding neighborhood.

Rather than see Verbum Dei close, Cardinal Roger M. Mahony asked the Jesuit order to revive it. The school now is on course to double its student body to 450 within a few years.

The work-study program pays part of a student's tuition, and charitable foundations help parents pay the remaining \$2,200 a year.

At the school's graduation ceremony, held at Loyola Marymount University, 25 Verbum Dei seniors picked up their diplomas. Of them, 23 are going on to college. As for the remaining two, one is starting his own business and the other is pursuing an acting career.

For the Rev. John B. Welington, president of Verbum Dei, there's no great mystery about this high rate of success: "I show the students the corporate work program and tell them, 'That's your ticket.'"