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Saint Louis University's **Billiken Teacher Corps** is celebrating five years of serving local Catholic schools.

The Billiken Teacher Corps (BTC) was developed by faculty and staff in the SLU School of Education in 2014-15 to pursue the University mission by serving local Catholic schools. The BTC is a two-year graduate program that provides an opportunity for faith-driven college graduates to pursue a teaching career in under-resourced Catholic schools in the St. Louis area. The BTC combines the service and compassion promoted by the Jesuit mission with the academic rigor and professional preparation offered by **Saint Louis University's School of Education** to offer a transformative teaching and learning experience for aspiring teachers. Each year, BTC places approximately six new students as teachers in local Catholic schools.



This August, 12 BTC teachers (both first and second year) will begin their school years in Catholic schools in Missouri and Illinois. As of Spring 2019, three “classes” of BTC teachers have graduated the SLU School of Education with a Master of Arts in Teaching. Most of these 18 graduates are still teaching in Catholic schools today.

The program consists of three pillars: service learning, graduate education, and personal and spiritual formation. For BTC members, those translate to teaching in urban, Catholic schools in the St. Louis area, earning a Master of Arts in Teaching degree with full tuition remission from Saint Louis University, and living together with other BTC teachers in an intentional faith community.

Ronny O’Dwyer, S.J., the program director, explained that the program is designed for individuals who have discerned that they want to be a Catholic school educator and serve those in need, describing BTC teachers as, “people with a big heart, clear purpose, and the ability to laugh at themselves.”

The BTC is a member of a large network of programs, the University Consortium for Catholic Education (UCCE), which is joined by a common mission to recruit and train teachers for Catholic schools in urban communities around the United States. All BTC members hold teaching positions in under-resourced Catholic schools in either the Archdiocese of St. Louis or the Diocese of Belleville, IL.

Since the program's conception in 2015, BTC has expanded to serve in 18 local schools. In addition to teaching, all BTC members complete 38 credit hours of graduate coursework through Saint Louis University's School of Education, wherein classes focus on the fundamentals of teaching and both Catholic and urban education.

Beyond the opportunities to serve and learn through teaching and coursework, the third facet of the BTC—the intentional faith community—is what makes the program highly unique. Both the first- and second-year BTC members live together at St. John the Baptist, a former convent in South City. Ronny O'Dwyer, S.J. explained that the community emphasizes living simply and encourages the teachers to live in solidarity with those they are serving. He also described the communal living as, “a space that allows [BTC members] to know and be known by others.”

The BTC teachers share their responsibilities and experiences with one another and receive emotional and spiritual support through the various challenges that are presented to novice teachers. BTC members also gather multiple nights each week to spend intentional time with one another and to reflect on their purpose in the program.

Ronny O'Dwyer, S.J., wants the program to continue growing in depth and adding support for new teachers. In line with these goals, the BTC has added an instructional coaching feature wherein the teachers receive bi-weekly training from urban education experts, Gaileen Hoenig, Ph.D., and Cara Lytle, Ph.D. In addition, the BTC aims to hire an assistant director who will focus primarily on recruitment, deepening spirituality in the program, and supporting first-year teachers.

Prior to the beginning of the new school year, both new and returning BTC teachers prepare for upcoming classroom blessings, during which they travel to each school that BTC members are placed in and bless their students. Ronny

O'Dwyer, S.J., and the rest of the BTC team look forward to mentoring these new teachers as they navigate their first years in the classroom, both as teachers and graduate students. He sums up the program by saying, "we're better than our worst moments and we're the sum of all our successes," as he watches the progress of the new cohort.