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## Inaugural Participants of Billiken Teacher Corps Kick Off the Program

Saint Louis University's School of Education and the Archdiocese of St. Louis have established a unique new program for students pursuing graduate degrees in education -- the Billiken Teacher Corps. The program combines service and teaching to offer a unique opportunity for faith-driven college graduates to have a transformative impact on Catholic schools in the St. Louis Metro area and live out SLU's mission of serving a higher purpose for a greater good.

Program leaders held a new teacher orientation for the graduate students and their mentors, who will guide their teaching at local schools.



Joy Voss, Ph.D., interim director of field experiences in the Department of Educational Studies, discussed the origins of the Billiken Teacher Corps during the orientation, and Chris Collins S.J., assistant to the president for Mission and Identity, offered a prayer for the new school year as well as the new program.

Voss explained that John James, Ed.D., assistant professor in educational leadership in the School of Education, had spent several years developing the idea for the program. Three years ago, he formed a Catholic Education Committee to investigate the possibilities of a "Master's + Service Catholic Education Degree."

During a student mission trip to Belize last year, Collins listened as Voss and her group discussed James' proposal.

Voss noted that while it is valuable to send altruistic people out into the world, it is equally important to be men and women for others at home.

"We said if you want us to go help in Belize, you have to let us help here at home," Voss said.

James and Collins finalized and presented the blueprint for the Billiken Teacher Corps to University President Fred P. Pestello, Ph.D., who gave his support greenlighting the program's debut in the summer of 2015.

Many other individuals, including Ann Rule, Ph.D., interim dean of the School of Education, have also provided necessary support in getting the program off the ground. Voss, Karen Tichy, Ph.D., and Chris Luebbert spent numerous hours developing the field work component, and several professors worked to train the BTC teachers for their classroom experience this past summer.

The initiative aims to attract graduates who possess the compassion to serve those with the greatest needs and the willingness to commit to a program that enables them to carry out those convictions. The inaugural class of seven students report that they were drawn to the program's ability to help them cultivate their talents while giving back to those in need. Elise Earley, a student-teacher of science at St. Cecilia School, said the program appealed to her because it had all the right components.

"It was a master's program that would give me teaching experience," Earley said. "It was a service program, which meant that I wouldn't be accruing more loans. It was a Catholic program, which intrigued me both in the formational aspect of the program and the opportunity to teach in archdiocesan schools. It was in St. Louis, which is my home. There is a lot of support from both the school and SLU that really helps and encourages. It hit all the right points."

Mitch McCurren, who is teaching biology and theology at St. Mary's High School, agreed.

"Going to SLU for my undergrad and learning from the Jesuits about being others-focused and being an agent of change in an unjust society drew me to this program," he said.

The seven students will receive two years of tuition for a master's level degree in education and teacher certification, a monthly stipend and nominal rent to live in the old convent of St. John the Baptist parish in south St. Louis. So far, they say they've enjoyed living in this unique space.

"St. John's has been so welcoming!" said Michelle Ehrhard, a third- and fourth-grade teacher at Holy Trinity School. "It's quite a story-starter to tell people you live in an old convent, but I love having everyone there to bounce ideas off of and share life with."

The Billiken Teacher Corps moved into the St. John the Baptist Parish this past summer, where they received their first lesson in community living.

"I have learned a lot about how to live with different personalities. Living in the Parish has taught me patience and tolerance," said Sarah Staten, a math and religion teacher at St. Louis the King Cathedral School. "Community life overall, though, has been such a blessing. It is so comforting to know that you are not the only one frantically planning or grading papers. I also love coming home from school and sharing stories of our students with each other."

While the launch of this new program has been exciting, it has not been without its own learning curve.

"My biggest challenge so far is the same as any other new teacher - trying to fit in, learning the lingo and getting to know the kids while being new to an already established community," McCurren added.

Despite these challenges, the Billiken Teacher Corps is already savoring moments of joy from their first week in the classroom.

"There have been so many great moments so far, but my favorite would have to be the first day of school at Christ the Light of the Nations," said Jennifer Bruns, a science teacher at the school. "We had a prayer service the first day with the students and the staff to celebrate the new school year. Together we prayed and embraced the school theme of 'We Believe, We Achieve and We Shine.' It was during that moment that I knew it was going to be an incredible two years."

These graduate students say they are thrilled to be part of the Billiken Teacher Corps' inaugural class and look forward to paving the way for future student-teachers.

"I hope to set a good foundation for this program and to help it become an even better program for future teachers," Staten said. "I hope to provide a good, holistic education for my students and to above all help them become holier people. I hope to become a better teacher and a better person. I hope to learn more about different cultures and to learn more about myself."

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