

Education

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Answering the call to teach in urban Catholic schools

By Jessica Bock St. Louis Post-Dispatch Feb 1, 2016



Jenny Bruns, 23, teaches 4th graders Talor Williams, 9, of Bellefontaine Neighbors, Tyson Moore, 10, of Florissant, and Thomas Badalamenti, 10, of St. Louis, about the role of heat in the rock cycle by melting Starburst candies together at Christ, Light of the Nations Catholic School in Spanish Lake on Friday, Jan. 29, 2016. Bruns is a member of the Billiken Te collaboration between the Archdiocese of St. Louis and Saint Louis University to place graduate students in urban Catholic classrooms. Photo by Cristina M. Fletes, cfletes@post-dispatch.com

In her first year working in campus ministry, Elise Earley couldn't shake the call she felt to serve, but in a different way.

She prayed, looking for direction from God about where she could make the most difference.

Teaching, she realized, could be that calling. Earley applied for a teacher certification program, still feeling unsettled about where exactly education would take her. She had just hit submit on the application when her office phone rang with an actual call.

The Archdiocese of St. Louis and St. Louis University were starting a program to place graduate students in education in urban Catholic schools, the caller said. Did Earley, in her work in campus ministry, know anyone who might want to apply?

"I can only attribute it to divine intervention," Earley said last week after a day of teaching science at St. Cecilia School in St. Louis, her placement through the Billiken Teacher Corps program.

Earley, 24, and six others this year make up the inaugural class of the Teacher Corps, which gives college graduates teaching experience while they work toward a master's degree. The two-year program is a first for the Archdiocese of St. Louis, modeled partly after a program that began a decade ago at the University of Notre Dame. It is somewhat similar to the Teach for America program in public schools, attracting top college graduates to urban schools for a two-year commitment.

Today, there are about a dozen teacher corps programs at other Catholic colleges and universities across the country that see the program as a way to help under-resourced Catholic schools.

"At its heart, the Billiken Teacher Corps is about service," said John James, director of the Institute for Catholic Education at SLU. But that service combined with the teaching experience gives faith-driven college graduates an opportunity to serve Catholic schools in our area, he said.

Catholic schools have been experiencing declining enrollment for decades as families struggle with tuition and competition increases from charter schools. In the St. Louis Archdiocese, 39,256 students attend Catholic schools. The demand for seats varies by

school.

Teachers in the corps program receive a stipend to pay for food and other expenses, and live together in the former convent at St. John the Baptist, a south St. Louis parish where the school closed in 2014 after enrollment declines.

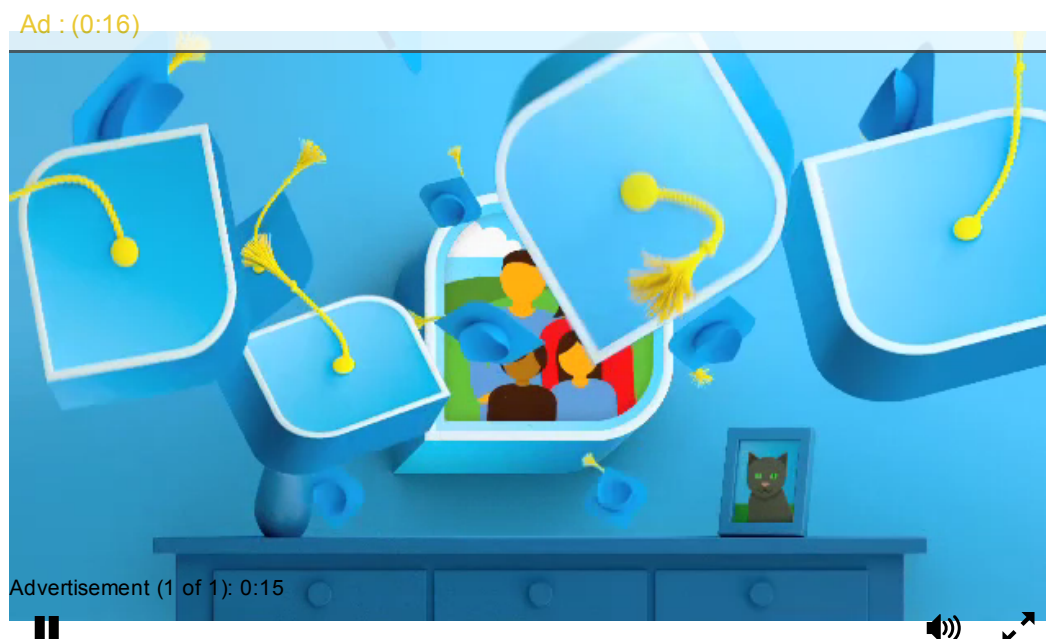
questioning the call

Since the beginning of the school year, there have been moments when Earley questioned her call to teach. She felt like she was failing.

She opened up to her fellow teachers and found they felt the same way. On most nights, they take the day's highs and lows from their classrooms back to their group at St. John the Baptist. They offer advice, encouragement, a similar experience. And prayer.

It can be easy for first-year teachers to dwell on the challenges of classroom management or students who aren't grasping a concept.

"Having that community and someone to say 'it's OK' — it's a feeling of camaraderie and really helps you put it into perspective when the job is not going so well," Earley said. "I really don't know how other teachers do it without this support system."



Mitch McCurren, an Indianapolis native, applied to the program after earning an undergraduate degree at SLU. He felt a similar calling to teach and be a role model for teenage boys, like those who influenced him as he grew up.

He is teaching and helping coach basketball at St. Mary's, an all-boys school in south St. Louis.

"We are all going through this together, and we're all committed to getting in there and making a difference," McCurren said.

The support system also includes a mentor teacher at each school and a professor of education at SLU, available to offer frequent feedback on lesson plans and to answer questions.

At St. Cecilia, the added support is not only helping Earley grow as a teacher, but also to build up the science program at a school where nearly all of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, a marker of poverty. Most also receive at least some financial aid to afford tuition, which is \$3,700 for one child.

Principal Joe Kilmade says Earley is bringing new ideas and energy to the school.

"She's really added a new layer of investigation and critical thinking to our science program, seeking out additional resources because we're not a school that has a lot of resources," he said.

He usually has a pool of applicants for open teaching positions, but finding one with a mindset to work effectively in an urban school can be challenging, Kilmade said.

The Billiken Teacher Corps is designed to create a pool of urban-focused teachers. The program will expand next year and is recruiting those who are mission-oriented, social justice-driven and have the desire to create systemic change through education, said

Maureen DePriest, an associate superintendent in the archdiocese's office of Catholic education.

SLU and the archdiocese interviewed candidates for the inaugural class and tried to find good matches in schools where principals asked that openings be filled through the Billiken Teacher Corps.

St. Cecilia needed a middle-school science teacher. Earley has a degree in biology from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

In addition to her degree, Earley had a crash course in education this summer at SLU before she stood in front of her first class at St. Cecilia's.

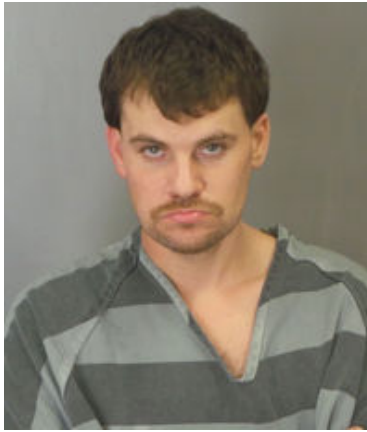
The school's large Hispanic population is a contrast from the suburban parish school in Ballwin that Earley attended as a child. But in many ways, St. Cecilia's has been a perfect fit for what she wanted to do.

"The first semester is hard for any new teacher — feeling like you're diving into the deep end with no pool noodles to get you above water," Earley said. "But it is incredibly rewarding."

Interested in a Catholic elementary school?

Most Catholic elementary schools in the Archdiocese of St. Louis are hosting open houses Sunday for prospective students and families. To see a schedule, go to archstl.org

This year, the Archdiocese has a new unified online scholarship application and more tuition assistance aimed at middle class families.



Short takes: Bullet bunglers, Billikens, plumbers and errant officers

Jessica Bock

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