CALLED TO TEACH

Jenny Bruns teaches fourth-graders Talor Williams (from left), Tyson Moore and Thomas Badalamenti about the role of heat in the rock cycle by melting Starburst candies together Friday at Christ, Light of the Nations Catholic School in Spanish Lake. Bruns, 23, is a member of the Billiken Teacher Corps. This is the first year for the program.

SLU teams with archdiocese to place young educators with right mindset for service in urban Catholic schools

BY JESSICA DOCK
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

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

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Teachers receive food stipend, live together

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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 um...
Elsie Earley, 24, of St. Louis, teaches about rock formations during seventh-grade science Friday at St. Cecilia Catholic School in St. Louis. Earley was working in campus ministry when she felt a call to enter a teaching certification program.

**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.

**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 it 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 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 Cath-

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Jenny Bruns, 23, of Cincinnati, assists eighth-grader Jacoby Combs, 14, with a science assignment on simple machines Friday at Christ, Light of the Nations Catholic School in Spanish Lake. Bruns is a member of the Billiken Teacher Corps, a collaboration between the Archdiocese of St. Louis and SLU to place graduate students in urban Catholic school classrooms.