

# Teach your children

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A new kind of "school choice" agenda is gaining ground as more and more young adults—including Christians concerned about social justice—choose teaching in public schools over more-lucrative and less-challenging careers.

Micah O'Hare teaches at KIPP Diamond Academy and Sarah Delapa teaches at Evans Elementary as part of the Memphis Teacher Residency program. (PHOTOS/Union University)

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan reported 1 million new teachers will be needed over the next four to six years as the Baby Boomer generation retires. For that reason, he is calling on America's "best and brightest" to consider public education not only as a job but as a call to service in a system that currently under-serves the poor.

"This is really the civil rights issue of our generation," Duncan said in a recent video for [Memphis Teacher Residency](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to education reform by improving teacher quality and retention in Memphis, Tenn. "The fight for great public education is a fight for social justice."

Memphis Teacher Residency is part of Urban Teacher Residency United, a nationwide collective effort to launch and support graduate training for teachers modeled after residencies in which future doctors get real-life experience alongside a mentoring physician after they leave medical school.

Formed in partnership with Baptist-affiliated [Union University](#) in nearby Jackson, Tenn., it is an explicitly Christian entry into what is being hailed as

a new movement in teacher preparation.



In 2009, Union launched a master's degree to train teachers committed to working in an urban environment. Students in the program spend one year living in Memphis, where they observe and teach at an urban school four days per week while working with an assigned mentor. Afterward, they spend three years teaching in Memphis city schools or must repay a portion of their stipend if they drop out early.

"The program of study is intense and combines clinical experience with rigorous Christian academic preparation for urban teachers," said Thomas Rosebrough, dean of Union's College of Education and Human Studies. "The challenges that teachers encounter every day in the classroom are real, and we believe that our program must prepare teachers for the realities they will face, and we must do so in a way that sustains learning success."

Memphis Teacher Residency Director David Montague formerly served two years with [Campus Crusade for Christ](#) in East Asia. While the program is unapologetically biblical and faith-based, he says the intent is not to subvert the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state by using the classroom to proselytize.



Union University graduate students Katelyn Woodard (above) and McKee Humphreys (left) gained practical classroom experience during their time in the Memphis Teacher Residency program.

"Public education is a promise by the government to every child in America that you can get a quality and free education at your local school," Montague said in a January article in *Christianity Today*. "For a child to get a great education, they have to do that within a healthy and safe environment. If you're a Christian and you're using your classroom as a means of sharing the gospel, you have just destroyed the healthy and safe learning environment for any child in your class that is Hindu, or Muslim, or Jewish or atheist."

Instead, Memphis Teacher Residency on its website declares urban

education "the single greatest social justice and civil rights issue in America today."

Statistics say half of the 8 million students in urban America never will graduate from high school. The 50 percent who do are on average academically four years behind their suburban peers, and just one in 10 will graduate from college.

Experts say the gap begins in early years of elementary school, and it limits millions of Americans from getting a decent job, perpetuating all sorts of social ills associated with cycles of generational poverty.

"We believe that urban students are in great need," the Memphis Teacher Residency website says. "We believe that educational injustice exists along economic and racial lines for these students. We believe that these students deserve an opportunity for an excellent education, regardless of which school they attend or what neighborhood they call home."

Memphis Teacher Residency believes all students can learn, because they are made in the image of God, and a career of meeting the educational needs of disadvantaged children "is a worthy and noble calling."

Only 20 participants have completed Memphis Teacher Residency, so it's hard to gauge the program's success. But overall retention rates for residency graduates are 85 percent, compared to 50 percent of all urban public school teachers who leave within the first three years.



Studies show having a good teacher for three straight years increases a student's chances of academic success dramatically.

"We know that kids need stability," Anissa Listak, founder and executive director of Chicago-based [Urban Teacher Residency United](#), said at an education conference at Union University last September. "We know that they should be able to return from holiday break or summer and know that their teachers are going to be there."

Despite their early success, Listak said teacher-residency programs still remain a tough sell in many places, in part because the approach doubles both the cost and time needed to prepare a single teacher.

"This is our battle, and this is our movement, and this is what we have to set out to do, because we have a shared vision that all kids can be successful. But it takes a prepared adult standing before them to make that happen," she said.

With so many problems facing public education, Listak acknowledged, residency alone is not a "silver bullet." But she said it is a way for concerned educators "to do our part" to give every child in America the opportunity to learn from a quality teacher.

