

Up
the
trenches

**Public school teachers talk
about the challenges and
fulfillment of living as
Christian role models**





Much has been made of the concept of “separation of church and state” in American public life, and arising controversies often involve Christian teachers in public schools. But despite the guidelines that all teachers must follow within the increasingly diverse public school system, there remain many opportunities to live out one’s faith in Christ. The following first-person perspectives emerged as three public school teachers candidly discussed with Today’s Pentecostal Evangel the growing challenges as well as the growing spiritual opportunities of their careers.

Inner-city mission field

Kirk and Nikki Meier and their 3-year-old daughter live in Topeka, Kan., where Nikki, 29, taught at the Scott Computer Technology Magnet School (K-5) in East Topeka for seven years. In 2003, Nikki was named National Kindergarten Teacher of the Year. She is currently transitioning to work from home in order to spend more time with her daughter.



I applied in the Kansas City area at first because I had a calling to inner-city ministry. I had no idea that in the town I grew up in there was an inner-city school. East Topeka is typical of many “East” cities ... lower income with a higher domestic violence rate.

God placed me at Scott specifically and I’ve loved it.

We have 500-600 students from kindergarten through fifth grade. I usually had 28-30 students a year teaching kindergarten. For the past two years I served as the after-school administrator for the school. With a lot of kids, we’re their parent as well as their teacher, counselor, nurse and everything else. That’s one of the reasons I knew God had called me there.

Scott is designed to give the benefits of technology. We have a broadcast studio. There is one computer to every two students in each classroom. Even with the kindergartners it’s one computer to three students. But so many of the kids who come to this wonderfully equipped new school are coming from horrible home environments.

One of my kindergartners the second year I was teaching kept coming up to me and telling me, “My mom put the hot pot on me.” Come to find out, when he asked for more macaroni at home, his answer was having the hot pot of macaroni on his forehead.

I’ve had students who have been beaten with a belt in the face, who have been tied to a doorknob and beaten with a belt all over. I’ve had students who have gone without meals, without heat and without electricity. I remember one family that lost everything in a house fire because there was trash and

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clothes piled waist-high throughout the home and the furnace caught it on fire. They moved to the Rescue Mission. I've had several students at the mission.

That environment has allowed me to share my faith. Atrayo was in my kindergarten class the first year I taught. His mother once hid in my classroom because she was high on drugs. Eventually, she gave me and my husband permission to pick up her children on Sunday and take them to church.

Atrayo's oldest brother and sister went to the Kansas District's state camp one summer and accepted Christ as their Savior. The next year his other brother went, and the third year he got to go. We don't have as much contact with them now, but I was able to see a huge impact on that family.

As director of the after-school program, I've often had to contact the police on behalf of a child. Those kids are so young and are so frightened by the situations in which they find themselves.

"I'm scared," a student has said to me on many occasions.

"You know what," I'll tell that boy or girl, "I would be scared too. But God is watching out for you."

And I can tell them how when I get scared, I just trust and I know that God is with me. I'm able to share my faith in crisis situations.

Believers who are concerned for their local schools need to pray for teachers to have wisdom in knowing how to meet individual needs. Sometimes you'll have 30 kids at a time. There are a lot of different needs and you need wisdom.

Pray for the safety of our students. I say that from the perspective of someone who's worked in an inner-city school.

Pray for strength. I know, especially in inner-city schools, it takes a lot of stamina emotionally, spiritually and physically to keep going and be what God has called you to be every day.

It is that calling that has energized everything I've done as a teacher. I know that God has truly blessed me as I've followed His direction to teach in an inner city. That has been my mission field and my ministry. If you're called to be a teacher in the public schools, do it with

all your might. God will bless you for your obedience.

Elementary faith

Randy and Kristi Reddin are raising their five children in Cabot, Ark.



Kristi, 40, has taught upper elementary for 16 years and currently teaches fourth grade at Tolleson Elementary in nearby Jacksonville.

We have about 325 students at Tolleson. We start at around 8 and go until 2:40. It's

pretty busy. I rotate some of my classes with my partner next door. But each day is a fairly standard schedule of language arts — which includes reading, spelling and English — followed by math for about an hour. We alternate days on social studies and science. We have a block built into our day for state benchmark testing, and then we have computer time. We have four computers in our room, and the kids are required to be on the computers 20 minutes a day.

We're right beside a military base. We really have a pretty good group of kids, and about 75 percent of our students are from military families. But in the past year we've had kids being bused in. They don't come from disciplined homes. Most of the time there is not a father in the home. It's opened my eyes more to the issues of broken homes and single parents and those kinds of family situations. Our personnel are not really used to seeing that, so it's been an adjustment for our teachers this year.

I think the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have had some impact on our military families, but even then we don't really notice a big change in the kids. They might forget their homework more often or not be as organized as they were. It's harder on the moms. They get pretty worried.

At the beginning of the year when I tell my students about myself, I tell them that I'm a Christian. I have a Bible lying

on my desk. But it's the needs in the kids' lives that usually generate any kind of discussion about faith. If something is going on at home or someone has died or is sick, kids will ask, "Will you pray for my grandmother?" or "Will you pray about this problem?" They know they can ask me those kinds of questions.

At Christmas I put up a nativity scene. I also put up things about Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, to give a feel for Christmastime celebrations around the world. I do let kids share Christmas stories they might want to read. Some will read about Santa Claus, but I let kids know that it's perfectly all right for them to share their beliefs about Christmas.

If I were a secondary teacher, I would probably say that things have changed for the worse when it comes to being able to share your faith as a teacher. I have 9- and 10-year-olds, so a lot of the things that affect secondary teachers really don't affect us.

It's important for teachers to know what their rights are. Every year I try to pull up some information from Focus on the Family or one of the Christian groups to stay updated on what the laws are and what's changed. Gateways to Better Education has some really good cards on the subject. I received one from a student when I taught first grade. Her father was a base chaplain. And it tells what you can do at Christmas or at Easter.

Our five kids have all gone to public school, and our son is getting ready to go to the University of Central Arkansas. If Christians have children in public schools, they should pray that their children will be the light in the darkness. And they should pray for their kids' teachers and the administrators. That should be a daily practice. Every year I've prayed that my children would have favor and have good teachers.



School of hard knocks

Blake and Corinne Harrup live in Temple, Texas, with their five children. Blake, 38, has

'Mr. Harrup, do you drink?' I'll say, 'No.' 'Oh, so you're a Christian, huh?' That opens the door. Some people might see that as a student trying to be offensive. I see that as an opportunity.

taught high school for 12 years, most of them at Killeen Alternative Center in the Killeen Independent School District.

Killeen Alternative Center is designed for high school students who have gotten in serious trouble at their regular campus or have run into problems over the summer and are not allowed to go back to school. They're usually assigned to our campus for around nine weeks.

We teach the regular subjects a normal campus would have, with the exception of some foreign languages and electives. We don't have band or any sporting activities. If students make it through the nine weeks without causing trouble, they should be able to go back to their regular school and be on track.

At the beginning of the school year we'll have about 70-80 students. The number swells as students get into trouble during the year. Our record has been around 150 students. We have a much greater volume of ninth-graders. They want to experiment with so many things. Older students understand that their actions could jeopardize their ability to graduate. We might have 40-50 ninth-graders, 10-15 10th-graders, maybe five to 10 juniors and just three or four seniors.

At 7:45 each morning the buses wait in line while five students at a time off-load and are brought through the metal detector. We search their one notebook. They're not allowed to bring any bags. They're not even allowed to take work home. They should show up to school with a pen or pencil and the paper they will use that day. We have a strict dress code in order to eliminate the distraction of having to dress to represent a style or a gang.

Even when they know they'll be searched, kids will enter our campus with the intention of doing a drug deal and will stash their merchandise in their underwear. We're prohibited from searching them that thoroughly. We have to monitor students' movements if we suspect they're involved in this. We have cameras throughout the school, but sometimes things will still fall through the cracks.

These kids come from environments where they see everyone lying, cheating and stealing, so they think that's OK for them. They think everyone uses vulgar

language. You can't tell a student, "This is how a Christian acts," but you still have to tell them, "This is inappropriate."

Questions about my personal relationship with Christ can come up when kids discuss what they've done over the weekend. They'll say, "Mr. Harrup, do you drink?" I'll say, "No." "Oh, so you're a Christian, huh?" That opens the door. Some people might see that as a student trying to be offensive or disrespectful. I see that as an opportunity.

About six years ago two former students kidnapped a couple who were in town for a Bible conference. They threw them in the trunk of their car, drove around with them in the summer heat all day, then took them out to a secluded road and shot them. They had unwittingly entered the Army's Fort Hood military installation, so it made the crime a federal murder and involved the FBI, Texas Rangers and practically every federal agency.

I remember that day. Even with the heat, it rained like cats and dogs. When the kids tried to get away, their car got stuck in the mud about 100 yards from the murder scene. The weapon was easily found. Now they're sitting on death row.

Four other students I actually taught were involved to a lesser degree. They're serving prison sentences. A cousin from the same gang was back in school the next fall. He started talking to me about what life in prison was like for his cousin.

Somehow we got on the subject of faith, and I ended up telling this student that the only way his cousin was going to get through this was with prayer and the acknowledgement that what he did was wrong. As the discussion got more detailed, I had to stop. "I'm a teacher," I said, "and we're in the middle of a school day. I can't influence you to think a certain way. We really need to stop here."

I'll never forget his response. "Oh, Mr. Harrup, no. You keep on going. I need this."

Because he asked me to, I was able to share with him what Christ had done for him on the cross. We talked about forgiveness and redemption. I may never see him again, but I know a seed was planted. ■

E-mail your comments to pe@ag.org.