

## Young, inexperienced teachers recruited to New Orleans

By Greg Toppo, USA TODAY



By Tim J. Mueller for USA TODAY

*New teacher Devin Meyers, 23, asks students, from left, Monique Boudreaux, 11, Daniela Sherwood, 11, and Monet Boudreaux, 12, which desk layout they prefer as he prepares for the start of classes at the International School of Louisiana in New Orleans.*

NEW ORLEANS — Amid the tag-team commotion of three new teachers prepping a science class for summer school finals one recent morning, one teacher sits alongside a student for what seems an eternity.

The exchange is perfectly ordinary, except that in post-Katrina New Orleans, little is ordinary.

The student, a young mother forced to move four times in the 15 months after the storm, is 20 years old.

Her teacher is 22.

For years, a tough state retention policy led schools to hold back students who didn't measure up. After Katrina, many simply stopped coming to school.

Meanwhile, state officials in 2006 fired virtually the entire city teaching force, paving the way for recruitment organizations such as Teach For America and teachNOLA to bring in hundreds of recent college graduates and twentysomething career changers, an effort intensified this fall.

The result is a teaching force among the youngest of any in the USA, teaching a student body that is most certainly the oldest.

"As long as they're willing to teach me and I'm willing to learn, everything's all right," says 20-year-old Kiera Cheneau, who entered Carver High School in August. She grew up in the hard-hit Lower Ninth Ward and admits that she wasted years "clowning around or not willing to learn."

After the storm flooded her neighborhood, she moved to Atlanta, San Antonio, Houston and Brookhaven, Miss., before returning in December 2006. The mother of a 3-year-old boy born three months before Katrina struck, Kiera says she's "ready to just get it over with and do what I have to do."

### Trying to get involved

Her summer school science teacher, 22-year-old Liz Kraus, also grew up in New Orleans, in the Lakeview section. Her home, like many there, was destroyed, but by 2005, Kraus was studying French and history at Tulane University. The school was badly damaged, and she spent a semester in Michigan, graduating

last spring and starting a neighborhood organization called Beautify Lakeview, which assists families in rebuilding homes and cleaning landscaping areas.

"I just wanted to find ways to get involved," says Kraus.

Likewise for Devin Meyers, 23, a photographer who came to New Orleans to start a non-profit that donates original photos to community groups.

"As many people have, I got stuck here because it's an amazing city," he says.

### **Fresh out of college**

Both found jobs through teachNOLA, an arm of the New York-based New Teacher Project. It has recruited more than 300 teachers so far. Teach For America has recruited 444, including 254 this fall. Most TFA "corps members" are fresh out of college and commit to a two-year assignment. The push has visibly changed the city, says Meyers. "When you go to a bar or meet people your age, odds are they're going to be teaching."

Superintendent Paul Vallas welcomes the new talent, calling them "the best and the brightest." But others, such as United Teachers of New Orleans president Larry Carter Jr., worry the neophytes aren't getting training they need.

"They want to do well, but when the district is providing professional development opportunities that are not relevant to help them cope with the things they're dealing with in the classroom, they get frustrated," he says.

Ana Menezes, teachNOLA's site manager, says her teachers got 180 hours of training this summer. Like Kraus, who will teach high school French and history, many come with "deep content knowledge" and a drive to work hard. "Our goal is to prepare them to be successful on the first day of school," Menezes says.

Meyers, for his part, says he knows he'll learn on the job. "Teaching in general has always been training on the fly," he says.

But Carter says the effort shortchanges veteran teachers who labored for decades with little support — and who are often ignored by the new recruiters in favor of youth.

"It's a good day for the city — don't get me wrong — but the frustration of a lot of veteran teachers ... is that we've experimented enough."