

# Mission in Action

BY EUGENE CURTIN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY NADER ABUSHHAB

Creighton's Magis Catholic Teacher Corps program expands to Phoenix



**F**rom shaping priestly vocations to ushering faith-filled teachers into the wider world, few concepts are as comprehensively present at Creighton University as the idea of “formation.”

This historical commitment to forming teachers in the ways of faith, so intrinsic to a Jesuit, Catholic education, begs the question: Who teaches the teachers? It's a question Creighton answers with its Magis Catholic Teacher Corps program, which, after proving its effectiveness over the past 25 years primarily in the Midwest, has now expanded to Phoenix.

The Magis program provides Catholic elementary and secondary schools with educators eager to continue the centuries-old commitment of the Catholic Church to faith, virtue and caring for others.

Four Magis students are currently volunteer teaching in Phoenix, and Colleen Chiacchere, who directs the overall Magis Catholic Teacher Corps program at Creighton, could not be prouder of them.

“These four Magis teachers represent the Creighton mission in action,” she says. “They are amazing first-year teachers; I can't emphasize that enough.

“They are among the most loving, faith-filled and service-oriented Creighton students. They have said yes to teaching the next generation. They have said yes to a career that requires well-formed, enthusiastic professionals to nurture young minds, hearts and spirits in our elementary and high schools.”

**Photo left:** Elena Simpson teaches fourth and fifth grades at St. Matthew Catholic School.

**Photo above right:** Peter Robles teaches math and computer science at Brophy College Preparatory.



The arrival of the Magis teacher program is further evidence of Creighton's commitment to serving Phoenix and the Southwest, Chiacchere says, a commitment most powerfully expressed by the opening in 2021 of a \$100 million, 195,000-square-foot Creighton health sciences campus in midtown Phoenix.

“All four Phoenix Magis teachers began the program in May 2025, spending a formative and fun summer in Omaha, before beginning their teaching in Phoenix Catholic schools,” she says. “They are a good mix of those coming to Phoenix, which means brain gain, and those from Arizona wanting to stay in Phoenix to teach.”

The two-year Magis experience is communal. Enrolled students live together, usually in campus housing or local community houses. They eat together and pray together while practicing the Ignatian concept of “seeking God in all things,” all while working full time as volunteer teachers and earning full scholarships to pursue one of five master's degrees in education: secondary teaching, elementary teaching, school counseling, educational leadership or educational specialist.

They are part of an expanding story. Founded 25 years ago, when the late Creighton graduate and philanthropist John Micek, BS'50, suggested creating a program similar to the University of Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education, Creighton's Magis program now impacts between 1,500 and 2,000 grade school and high school students every year

in 20 to 25 schools. The program's 224 alumni currently serve 20 schools and nearly 2,000 students in Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas, Milwaukee, Phoenix, Omaha and Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Currently, 28 students are advancing through the program.

Emeline Whaley, a graduate of Northern Arizona University and currently teaching second grade at St. Francis Xavier School, says the Magis program deepened her commitment to Catholic education and provided her with an early jump on earning her master's degree.

“Being a part of the Magis Catholic Teacher Corps in Phoenix has been an incredible experience that has equipped me spiritually, professionally and academically for the world of Catholic education,” she says.

“I work alongside faithful and dedicated colleagues while teaching God's most precious creation — my second graders. This community has deeply shaped both my identity as an educator and my vocation as a Catholic teacher.”

Jim Bopp, currently principal at Brophy College Preparatory, a Jesuit high school in Phoenix, knew the Magis program from his six years as principal at Omaha's Creighton Preparatory School.

“I saw in Omaha how the program fosters a deep commitment to Jesuit educational principles,” he says. “I appreciated the care and commitment they brought to the classroom — something that can only come from seeing teaching as a vocation.



© Sam Wells teaches religion and social studies at St. Matthew Catholic School.

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CHRISTINE TAX  
Principal, St. Matthew Catholic School  
Phoenix

“When I became principal at Brophy, it was a priority of mine to start a Magis community here. I hope that with this first year of proof-of-concept in place, many other Catholic schools across Phoenix will recognize the value of Magis teachers, and the program will grow to meet the tremendous need we have here for quality Catholic educators,” Bopp says.

The arrival of Magis-trained teachers has been “a tremendous blessing” for her school, says Christine Tax, principal at St. Matthew Catholic School in Phoenix. Tax’s husband, Christopher, BSBA’01, is a Creighton alumnus, while their daughter, Kate, is a recent Creighton graduate and current student, and their son, Connor, will attend in the fall of this year.

“Our Magis teachers arrived exceptionally well-prepared for the classroom – grounded not only in strong instructional practices, but also in a deep commitment to mission-driven education,” she says.

“They bring a unique perspective, shaped by Jesuit values, which aligns beautifully with our call to ‘Encounter, Educate and Empower.’ Their presence enriches our students’ daily experiences, reminding us all of the importance of service, reflection and *cura personalis* – care for the whole person.”

The formation of teachers, Tax says, like the formation of students, is a responsibility she does not take lightly.

“Nothing brings me more joy than taking part in the formation of teachers,” she says.

“Because I believed so strongly in the Magis program, I went out on a limb nearly two years ago and reached out to see if we could bring this partnership to Phoenix.

“Today, I am incredibly proud to see that dream become a reality and to play a part in supporting these remarkable teachers as they begin their journey with us at St. Matthew.”

Although the 2025-2026 school year is the first for the Magis program in Phoenix, planning has been ongoing for two years. The impetus, says Chiacchere, came from Catholic educators in the Phoenix metropolitan area, where Creighton’s Department of Education found strong support for the program not just among Catholic principals but also from the Diocese of Phoenix.

The Phoenix Magis teachers live on Brophy Prep’s campus where they work closely with Brophy’s Alumni Service Corps program, engage in shared formation activities and participate in community formation meetings.

Chiacchere, together with Jill Harman, associate director of the Magis program, visits several times a year to provide guidance. Three University field supervisors in Phoenix coach Magis teachers in the classroom while a fourth supports community and spirituality formation.

“In addition to the four current teachers who will serve for two years at Brophy College Prep, St. Matthew School and St. Francis Xavier School, we are in close contact with

other Catholic schools in central Phoenix,” Chiacchere says. “We are planning to have several more Magis teachers in Phoenix for 2026-2027.”

Magis accepts applications from all students seeking to deepen their understanding of Catholic education. Students need not be Catholic, or even have an undergraduate degree in education. Indeed, the program originally was designed for students who did not possess an undergraduate degree in education. The passage of years, however, has seen the program embrace those who have studied education as undergraduates and, through Magis, wish to pursue an advanced master’s degree in either school counseling, educational leadership or education specialist areas.

It was during Elena Simpson’s junior year at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where the Omaha native earned a bachelor’s degree in elementary education, that she encountered Magis.

“I walked up to the Magis booth at a career fair and instantly knew this program was the place for me,” Simpson says. “Since then, it has been a whirlwind of saying yes to God’s invitations and realizing all that Magis has to offer, from forming me into an educator who centers her work around Jesuit and Catholic values of *cura personalis*, to giving me an amazing circle of friends I can lean on and learn from, to deepening my faith life in ways I never even thought possible.”

Today, she teaches fourth and fifth grades at St. Matthew School and is studying for a master’s degree in school counseling.

Both the students and the principals who benefit from their young teachers’ immersion in Magis training express a common appreciation for the program’s ability to promote reflection and growth beyond routine mastery of facts.

“As a school, we are intentional about cultivating an Ignatian spirit that emphasizes discernment, care for the whole person and a commitment to forming kids for and with

others,” says Ryan Watson, principal at St. Francis Xavier School.

Watson looks no further for evidence of these qualities than to Whaley.

“Emeline’s faith-filled presence, passion for students and professionalism were evident from the very beginning,” he says. “She brings not only strong instructional practices, but a deep understanding of vocation, reflection and service that aligns incredibly well with our Catholic identity.”

Peter Robles, a graduate of Macalester College in Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Sam Wells, a graduate of Regis University in Denver, round out the Phoenix Magis community for 2025-2026. Robles teaches math and computer science at Brophy, while Wells teaches religion and social studies at St. Matthew.

“Through Magis, I learned to see teaching not simply as the delivery of content, but as an act of accompaniment – meeting students

where they are, academically, emotionally and spiritually,” Robles says.

“The program’s emphasis on Ignatian pedagogy pushed me to design lessons that value reflection, discernment and growth, while holding students to high standards. That formation has been especially meaningful in my work teaching mathematics and computer science, where I strive to help students see problem-solving as a way of developing perseverance, curiosity and confidence.”

Wells says he finds special meaning in the spirituality component of the program.

“I love being able to pull from the wisdom of Jesuit spirituality to help my students develop their relationship with God,” he says.

“I also love that the Jesuit tradition gives me the tools to grow in my own spirituality. It has allowed me to find God and see the good in each of my students.”



© Emeline Whaley greets one of her second-grade students at St. Francis Xavier School.