Making an **impact**

Meet three North Texas private-school teachers with unique, student-centered approaches to education.

By **Helen Riney**

Dallas-area private schools are brimming with dedicated teachers passionate about transforming the educational experience for students in innovative ways. Below, we spotlight three educators going above and beyond to shape the future.

Evan McGarvey

Alcuin School

At a time when social media sameness occupies the minds of so many, Evan McGarvey is paving a path for Alcuin School students to flex their individuality by cultivating a love for writing. The 39-year-old father of two was a parent at Alcuin before he joined the faculty in 2022. He quickly made his mark at the North Dallas private school, which offers a unique combination of Montessori and International Baccalaureate (IB) education for preschool through 12th grade.

Along with teaching upper school language and literature courses, McGarvey recently launched a peer editing program inspired by the writing center at Penn State University, where he earned a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing. (He also holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Michigan and a master's degree in education from Harvard University.)

Through the supportive peer-to-peer editing program, a select group of seniors trained by McGarvey make themselves available to any Alcuin high schooler looking to revise and improve an essay. In the IB curriculum, that could be an English assignment or a requirement for math, laboratory science or another class. McGarvey's approach highlights the magic that can come with a collaborative, recursive and planned writing process.

Writing, like math, can seem intimidating for some people — but it shouldn't and doesn't have to be, he emphasizes. "It's seen as this barometer of 'are you smart or not,' which is obviously not true," says McGarvey, who has taught in university, parochial and independent school settings. "One of the powerful things I've seen is that writing is not just about building skills for communication, but it also has a lot to do with democracy and the involvement of what we expect citizens to be able to do.



Courtesy Alcuin School

Alcuin School's Evan McGarvey seeks to empower students in their writing and demonstrate the power of collaboration.

"Helping someone construct an argument … is a way of bringing to the page their value system and bringing to the page their culture, their background and what they might want out of their life. If you can approach writing from a holistic perspective, it can actually be a great force in the classroom for personal liberation."

With the explosive arrival of artificial intelligence, or AI, McGarvey aims to help his students reap the rewards that come from developing a passion for the art and useful skill of writing. The best writing, notes McGarvey, comes across like a thumbprint — unpredictable and unique — and is clearly written by a human.

"It's helping students understand that creating patterns of language … is actually a deeply edifying experience," McGarvey says.

> “Listening to students reflect on where they started versus where they are now have been some of the most memorable moments for me.”
>
> — *Shannon Byrne*

Shannon Byrne

Bishop Lynch High School

Shannon Byrne believes teaching is a “work of heart,” so it’s only natural that the 29-year-old learning specialist pours her heart into everything she does at Bishop Lynch High School.

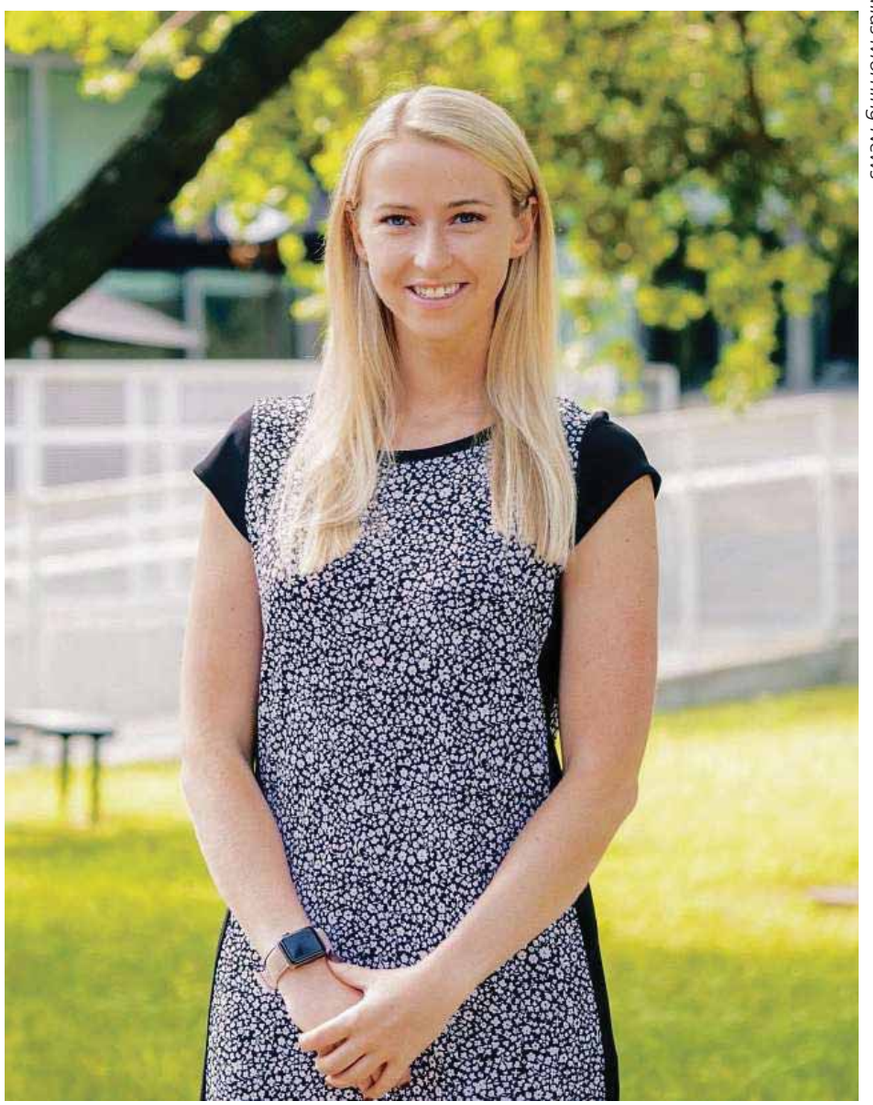
Byrne fell in love with teaching during her freshman year at Carthage College, when she volunteered to help kids ages 5-14 with their homework as part of an after-school program in nearby Racine, Wisconsin.

“I realized I had a knack for making learning fun and explaining concepts to students in a way that made sense to them,” says Byrne, who was born and raised in Chicago. She spent five years teaching fourth and fifth graders at St. Giles School in Oak Park, Illinois, before moving to Dallas in 2021.

In her third year at Bishop Lynch, Byrne works one-on-one with students to create and manage accommodation plans and address classroom challenges such as time management, organization and accountability. She also provides professional development for new and existing teachers to ensure the Catholic high school in East Dallas is supportive and accessible for all types of learners.

The ease with which Byrne makes her students feel seen and heard hasn’t gone unnoticed. She received Bishop Lynch’s 2023 John F. Kennedy Award for Caring, an annual honor to a faculty or staff member who exemplifies the ideals of caring for the community’s common good and a heightened sense of service within the school and beyond.

Her students’ successes — both big and small — keep Byrne motivated and inspired. “Listening to students reflect on where they started versus where they are now have been some of the most memorable moments for me as an educator,” shares Byrne, who will go by the last name Howrey after her recent marriage. “As a teacher, my goal has always been to help students progress and thrive academically, emotionally and spiritually.”



Courtesy Bishop Lynch High School

Shannon Byrne (who will now use her married name, Howrey) feels inspired by the growth she sees in her students at Bishop Lynch High School.

Pam Merryman

Prestonwood Christian Academy

In her 39th year of teaching high school English, Pam Merryman still looks to the personalities and perspectives of her students to keep the classroom fresh. Merryman heads up the English department at the Plano campus of Prestonwood Christian Academy (PCA), one of the largest private schools in the area serving students from pre-K through 12th grade.

"My teaching is borne out of a blending of my passion for literature and my calling to teach high school students," explains Merryman. "Both of these are rooted in my God-given talents and my commitment to Christ."

Growing up in the White Rock Lake area of Forest Hills in Dallas, Merryman was an avid reader. She credits her high school English teachers at First Baptist Academy for instilling in her a love of literature — a kindness she would repay generously, returning to the downtown Dallas private Christian school to teach for 28 years. She joined PCA in 2013 and was instrumental in launching the school's rigorous senior capstone program.

The interdisciplinary project (weaving together components of English, history and the Bible) includes a literary, historical and philosophical analysis of a chosen work and a reflection by the senior as it relates to the five pillars of the school's Portrait of a Graduate: critical thinking, scholastic excellence, reverence for God, eternal perspective and Christ-like humility. An oral presentation serves as the cap to the capstone.

A lifelong learner, Merryman earned a doctorate in liberal studies at Southern Methodist University in 2023 and continues to be a difference-maker at PCA.

What makes a good day at school?

"An inspiring class discussion, both for my students and for me — those can't really be separated," Merryman says. "No matter what order it happens in, if one transpires, the other will follow." ■



Courtesy Prestonwood Christian Academy

Prestonwood Christian Academy teacher Pam Merryman enjoys an engaging discussion in her English classes as much as her students do.