Zach Lehnus started at OSU in business management. But something about it didn’t click. “Then, I got into tutoring kids, and I just loved it,” Lehnus says. “I thought education would be a good field for me to get into. I like the willingness and the eagerness of the kids to learn.”

Lehnus, with a wife and two children of his own at home in Cleveland, Okla., decided he wanted to teach history. That’s because, he says, no matter what happens, history repeats itself one way or another.

In January, Lehnus and his classmates began their student teaching experiences at Nathan Hale High School, thanks to an innovative partnership between OSU’s Urban Teaching Institute and Tulsa Public Schools. It allows OSU students interested in urban education to complete their field experiences (similar to being a teacher’s assistant) in inner-city Tulsa schools. They work alongside the best teachers the schools have. They teach in the schools, too, and once they graduate, they’ll be extremely good candidates for teaching positions in the 40,000-student district and any other urban district’s schools.

Ten OSU students participate in the program, which is expected to expand in coming years. “The Urban Institute partnership with Oklahoma State University is an unprecedented revolutionary initiative,” Tulsa Public Schools Superintendent Keith Ballard says. “It is bringing the considerable talent of OSU to TPS and assuring there is an effective teacher in every classroom. In order for a teacher to be prepared to teach in the urban setting, they must understand the challenge. The Urban Teaching Institute prepares teachers in a new and thorough way. We are fortunate to have this partnership.”

OSU students begin their teaching experiences during their junior year. After that, they take their certification exams and begin their careers as educators.

Research has shown the importance of those first teaching experiences before graduation, says the partnership’s chief architect, Christine Ormsbee, interim director of the university’s Institute for Teaching and Learning Excellence. “They’re pivotal,” Ormsbee says. “We pick very carefully what our student teaching experiences are going to be.”

The program came out of an unfunded grant proposal of Ormsbee’s to the U.S. Department of Education. Undaunted by the department’s rejection, Ormsbee, looking for new ways to give her students the latest in field experience options, approached Ballard about the project. Ballard accepted, and they began working with the Urban Teaching Institute to create a pipeline of effective teachers for the Tulsa area.

Ormsbee is excited about the project’s future. “Our students are really interested in working with communities that have high poverty,” she says. “They’re interested in diversity and the challenges that environment presents.”

Teaching future teachers, the skills they need to work with inner-city students is critically important.

In addition to the skills all teachers need, urban teachers...
need their own special blend of persistence, energy and patience. When confronted with students who don’t do their homework, teachers in inner-city schools can’t throw up their hands and admit failure.

“You don’t give up,” Ormsbee says. “You think, ‘I’ve got to find a way to motivate that child to learn.’ You have to keep on them, keep finding ways to get them interested. You have to recognize your job as a teacher is not just in the four walls of that classroom. You have to be engaged in that child’s community. You have to understand that community. You have to bring the family into that process. You have to realize they’re going to give what they can give, and you have to help them do that.”

Lehnus, who began his field experience last fall, is up for the challenge. Urban schools have high teacher turnover, he says. That makes it easier for students to try out their ideas. He starts student teaching in the spring at the same school. Around 70 percent of his students are black, and he tries to make his history courses relevant to their experiences.

He says the program has given him skills to work with students in the classroom. He has gotten to know many of the kids through his field experience.

“The fact that I know a lot of their backgrounds, whether they come from a poor background, helps,” Lehnus says. “I grew up with that in the same way. I know what they’re going through. I can relate to them. But it also shows me how to interact with them in an educational setting, as opposed to outside the school, and I can incorporate it all into one approach.”