

## EDUCATION

### ‘Breaking the cycle of poverty through education’

A conversation with Mary Elizabeth Grimes of Marian Middle School

Chris King for The St. Louis American Jan 1, 2024 Updated Jan 3, 2024

Mary Elizabeth Grimes is president of Marian Middle School, located in the Tower Grove South neighborhood. Founded by seven communities of Catholic sisters and several women in 1999, it is the only all-girls private middle school in the region serving urban adolescent youth in a faith-based environment.

“ We’ve also added a multitude of other resources at Marian to ensure the mental wellness of our students ... and a new screening tool that helps us identify students who might be struggling and need support but are masking their challenges and would ordinarily go unnoticed. ”

According to Grimes, last year 100% of Marian’s alumnae in high school graduated, and 93% went on to post-secondary programs. All of its most recent graduates got into the first-choice high schools last year, and they have an average GPA of 3.175.

*The American* talked to Grimes about the challenges of teaching adolescents, how education breaks the cycle of poverty, and how they avoid student and staff burnout in a curriculum where students attend school 10 hours a day, 10 months a year.



Mary Elizabeth Grimes

Screenshot of 2019 St. Louis American Foundation Salute to Excellence in Education video interview with Kenya Vaughn | St. Louis American

#### St. Louis American: What’s new and what’s next for Marian Middle School?

**Mary Elizabeth Grimes:** We’re proud to be thriving after 23 years at Marian Middle School, and we’re off to a truly vibrant school year. After years of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, its ripple effects, our faculty and staff entered our building this [school] year feeling renewed and refreshed. That feeling of vibrance has continued as each month has unfolded.



For instance, we just celebrated Marian’s role in the global launch of **Lean In Girls**, a leadership program that helps girls see themselves as leaders in a world that often tells them they’re not.

Marian’s **Lean In** program, which has been running for five years, sparked the development of new curriculum that is now free for educators, parents, and anyone who works with young women, to help them grow into self-assured, resilient, and bold leaders.

We have a lot to look forward to as the next year unfolds. We’re also looking forward to the next 5-10 years. In fact, just prior to the pandemic, Marian underwent the development of a 10-year-impact statement and plan. This plan serves as our roadmap for the next 10 years at Marian and ultimately helps to ensure the long-term sustainability and vibrancy of our school for our students, families, and community.

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**St. Louis American:** What's new and what's next for Marian Middle School? [CONTINUED]

This plan includes two major pillars that we've already begun integrating, and our students and families are already seeing immense value out of.

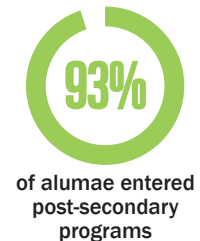
*mental*  
**HEALTH**

Marian is creating a village of mental wellness through our expanded expert **CARE Trio**. At Marian, our on-site school counselor anticipates and meets the daily mental and social emotional needs of students; a school-based licensed therapist enables students and alumnae to access licensed therapy to address and process severe trauma and emotional distress; and our family-resource advocate meets directly with the families of our students and alumnae to connect them to urgent resources in times of crisis, like loss of housing, utilities, employment, and transportation. This team is one of many shining stars at Marian — our students and families have developed incredible relationships with everyone on this team. In fact, students have to take turns sitting by our school counselor because they love her so much.



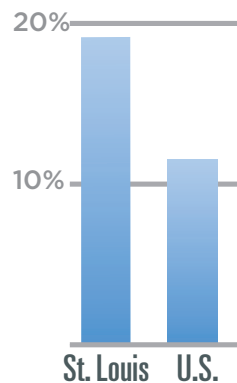
**GRADUATE**  
*support*

Marian is also enhancing the **Graduate Support Program** with even greater career and workforce readiness, including partnerships at local universities that our graduates will benefit from. In addition, we arrange internships with forward-thinking employers and global leaders for our alums in high school and college.



Through our whole continuum of academic and graduate support, our girls are graduating high school and entering college at rates that vastly exceed their peers. By the numbers, last year 100% of Marian's alumnae in high school graduated, and 93% went on to post-secondary programs — both rates vastly exceed their national peers. Seventy-three alumnae have earned college degrees, eight have secured advanced degrees, and six are currently working on advanced degrees as well. Marian educates girls for life, and our **Graduate Support Program** assists and follows our girls in high school, college, and beyond, so we celebrate them at each and every graduation.

We incorporated these two main pillars (mental health and graduate support) because poverty is a serious deep-rooted issue in our community — and Marian Girls are no strangers to its effects. In 2022 in the City of St. Louis, the poverty rate stood at 19.6%, compared to 11.5% overall in the U.S. (according to the US Census for St. Louis and the US). In 2021, the rate of poverty for those without a high school diploma was 25.2%, and dropouts are more likely to live in poverty than college graduates.



Add to that a couple of extremely important stats: on average, there is an 11-year gap between when a young person seeks treatment for a mental health concern and the original crisis, and less than 15% of children experiencing poverty and in need of mental health services receive support.

**Less than 15% of children experiencing poverty and in need of mental health services receive support.**



We've also added a multitude of other resources at Marian to ensure the mental wellness of our students — such as yoga, community partners that focus on wellness, and a new screening tool that helps us identify students who might be struggling and need support but are masking their challenges and would ordinarily go unnoticed. When they need extra social-emotional support outside of school, this program helps us work with the family to find additional resources customized for their needs.

# OUR MISSION

Marian Middle School, a Catholic school welcoming adolescent girls of all backgrounds, is committed to breaking the cycle of poverty through education. Marian fosters each student's spiritual, academic, social, moral, emotional, and physical development from middle school through post-secondary education as a foundation for career success.



**St. Louis American:** What's new and what's next for you?

**Mary Elizabeth Grimes:** It's more important than ever for women to make their mark in their respective industries and create a lasting impact. It takes hard work, dedication, and a commitment to excellence. At this point in my career, I am thinking about a legacy that is more than just success in the present.

As an example, in the last 10 years I have led the development efforts at Marian and raised over \$20 million to support the annual operations and the financial reserve to ensure Marian's sustainability for students who will attend Marian in the future. No one accomplishes their goals alone.

I have the privilege of working with a skillful and accomplished team in addition to mission-focused supporters.

I have also been blessed to have a role model who exemplified what it takes to make a difference in a child's life. My mother was an educator and counselor, and her legacy was helping students and others considered too difficult to reach. I carry her mantle and passion to make a difference in the lives of children through education.

I'm sure I will continue to mentor young people and other professionals to help them reach their potential. I will also use my platform to advocate for policies that promote equity and diversity.



**St. Louis American:** We've heard reports of Catholic schools being consolidated locally. Does that affect your school directly? Or is your school responding to similar pressures?

**Mary Elizabeth Grimes:** We have remained an independent private school without direct governance of the archdiocese, and as a result we are not impacted by consolidations. In fact, we've intentionally remained small by design — that means that we're attuned to the needs of every single student and family who walks through our doors, and we stay nimble and agile to innovate to meet their needs.

Our strategies are based on looking toward the future. During the pandemic we anticipated school closings and the needs of our students and their families. We developed a remote learning curriculum, we provided our students with needed technology, and their families with food and household supplies.

**St. Louis American:** Your school is committed to breaking the cycle of poverty through education. That's a daunting goal. How do you do it? What evidence do you have of success toward this goal?

**Mary Elizabeth Grimes:** What is taught in middle school directly corresponds to a student's success in high school, and therefore, their ability to graduate with a post-secondary education and go on to a sustainable career, offering a sustainable income.

“What's at the core of our mission is helping to transform the student to enable them to positively change their condition. Systemic change goes beyond providing food, clothing, shelter, and alleviating immediate needs. It enables people themselves to engage in the identification of the root causes of their poverty and create strategies, including advocacy, to change those structures which keep them in the cycle of poverty.”

Marian's **Academic Program** combines multidisciplinary and hands-on learning to prepare girls for STEM careers and to prepare them to attend high-performing high schools. Our **Enrichment Program** provides opportunities for girls to engage in leadership development, empowerment, soft-skill building, and character growth. And, through the **Graduate Support Program**, Marian's advisors connect girls to extracurricular activities, internships, scholarships, college resources, and career opportunities. We want them to avoid as much college debt as possible. Most importantly, Graduate Support staff build strong, lasting relationships — acting as mentors and models throughout their young adult lives.

In May, Marian alumnae Paola Beltran earned her MBA from Webster University and Niya Tandy earned her law degree from Howard University. Today, Paola is a successful leader at Ascension, and Niya is putting her Juris Doctorate to use at one of our region's largest law firms, Bryan Cave. Freba Amin is the first Marian alumnae and first person in her family to attend medical school! And Faith Clarke recently got a job at Google.



Niya Tandy, Marian Alumna  
Attorney at Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner

**St. Louis American:** I think most people have the sense that middle school is a pivotal, volatile time and that middle schoolers are challenging to teach. Are these impressions accurate?

**Mary Elizabeth Grimes:** Middle school is a pivotal time in which girls find their voice, learning what a leader is, learning how to advocate for themselves and others, and learning the value of hard work. Because we're so closely attuned to our students, we're able to immediately see if a student is struggling, or conversely, excelling beyond her peers.

For example, when students came back from being sheltered in place due to the pandemic, we were able to quickly see that they were having trouble excelling in math and science, their behavior had changed because they weren't used to the rigors of school, and their mental health and at-home struggles had been greatly impacted. Because we're able to be nimble, we put in several front-line supports for them — for example, we immediately expanded our counseling department to provide greater in-school licensed therapy, counseling, and even wrap-around support for families in crisis, such as a free medication program,

thanks to our partners at Ascension, to ensure families who lost their jobs didn't have to choose between paying for life-saving medication over rent. We also partnered with Affinia Health, The Little Bit Foundation, and CHADS to enhance the resources available to Marian students and families.

On the academic side, we added extra math classes and a summer academy to ensure they were able to catch up. We also provided in-depth training for teachers to assist them in tailoring curriculum to help each student stretch and grow academically.

All of our Marian Girls got into their first-choice high schools last year, and they are thriving, with an average GPA of 3.175. The future success of our region depends on our collective ability to light the way for our young people today, and at Marian, we're helping families ensure their daughter becomes a leader for tomorrow.

**St. Louis American:** Your students are in school 10 hours a day from August until June and participate in weekend and summer educational activities. How do you avoid burnout in students and staff with that schedule?

**Mary Elizabeth Grimes:** Students attend school 10 hours a day, 10 months a year. We find that this rigorous schedule actually helps to ensure they stay on track academically over the summer. Our program also includes Independent Reading, Study Hall, and a new program called "What I Need" or WIN, which provides time within the school day to ensure students learn time management skills while giving them the ability to seek out specific teachers on subjects or homework they might need help with. Our Enrichment Program includes things like sports, bead making, service club, Lean In Club, Robotics, and even activities

that have helped them learn to swim and play golf. Our girls have fun, build a sisterhood that they depend on after they graduate, and learn how to make a difference in our community.

In fact, one of our alumnae, Ronnesha Wingo, just signed on to be our part-time recruitment specialist because she considers it her personal mission to ensure that more young girls in our community benefit from Marian's life-altering education. She recently graduated from Dillard University and is working full time as a chemist.

**St. Louis American:** I saw that to honor Women's History Month, Schnucks brought its robot that does inventory to your school to teach the girls about STEM education and robotics training. How did that go?

**Mary Elizabeth Grimes:** Last year, Marian achieved the highest level of performance and earned the Platinum Banner at the Clavius Robotics Jamboree. Nearly 500 students from 35 schools in the metro and surrounding areas competed. Among them, Marian was the only all-girls team. Our students were thrilled to get to see the Schnucks' robot Tally and ask all the questions they could about how it works.

