CATALYST

ST. MARCUS SCHOOL MAGAZINE • FALL 2026



Letter from Superintendent Henry Tyson

ISSUE 61 • Fall 2026



Dear Friends,

When you've been working at a school for longer than many of the parents have been alive, you know you're OLD - or should I say "experienced"?!?! Unbelievably, this is my twenty-fifth year serving at St. Marcus as assistant principal, principal, and now superintendent.

As I reflect back on those twenty-five years, the overriding sentiment is simply gratitude. Certainly, there have been long days and challenging times but I would never describe the work as "a grind" or "tiresome." I am as enthusiastic and energized by the work as I was twenty-five years ago. I get to work with the most incredible staff, an ultra-talented and committed senior leadership team, and with children who love Jesus and are just looking for the chance to thrive (despite the occasional misbehavior!). Beyond that there are the scholars' parents who are amazing and have inspiring stories, congregation members who are radically committed to our school community and donors and friends who motivate me by being so generous.

What a thrill it has been to watch our school grow from barely surviving in an outdated 1894 school building to bursting at the seams on three beautiful new campuses with 1,391 scholars. Later in this edition you will read about this year's record enrollment and waiting lists. This year, in every month, May through August, we had over 100% more students apply for admission than average enrollments over the previous 4 years. As this issue went to print, 177 students remain on the waiting list for admission. What an amazing blessing that so many parents desire a St. Marcus education for their children!

In September, I had the opportunity to meet and welcome new parents at the Karl J. Schlueter Campus during a "Coffee with the Superintendent" event. As we talked, I heard the same themes again and again. Most families hear about St. Marcus through word of mouth. They value its faith-based education, where children come home singing worship songs and reciting Bible verses. They appreciate the disciplined environment, one they often refer to as "strict and loving", the strong sense of community and belonging that can notably be absent in the broader community, and, perhaps most of all, seeing their children "love school" and happily run into the building each day.

All of this continues to give me an immense amount of joy, gratitude and fulfillment.

That being said, I'm glad I have some time left (Lord willing!) because there's more work to be done. Our vision statement reads, "We are a national model of Biblical living, individual and community transformation, and exceptional education outcomes. We are salt and light to the glory of God." It is my hope and prayer that by the time that I retire (no time soon!) we will be living up to that vision. Not only will thousands of young lives have been transformed by access to a high-quality, faith-focused education, but Milwaukee will be a thriving city - much better off as a whole because we did our part. **We proclaimed the Gospel, we discipled children, we equipped them for excellence, and we led the way in expecting more, demanding more, and providing more for all of our kids, in every school in this city.**

I have no doubt that together we can do this.

Thank you for your friendship and your partnership over these past twenty-five years.

Let's keep going.

God Bless,

Henry Tyson, Superintendent

BEYOND THE WAITLIST

Donte was number 12 on the waitlist.

Urban Day School was closing, and his mom, Tiffany, needed a new school for her third grader and a job for herself. Donte's godmother had been telling her about St. Marcus for years, so Tiffany did what any mom does when the stakes are high: she opened 17 tabs, Googled everything, read the reviews, and walked through the doors. She filled out two forms that day: one for Donte to start as soon as possible, and one for herself, just in case St. Marcus was hiring.

Then she prayed, and she got specific. "I said, Lord, if they don't have any positions for me, then let Donte be able to be enrolled in this school."

Two weeks into the school year, the phone rang with what would end up being life changing news: a third grade seat had opened, and number 12 was in. Donte's classroom and special education teachers built on the IEP he arrived with, and Tiffany watched her son settle into a school with, in her words, "so much support and love." Then he met music teacher Mrs. Jeske, and he took off.



The voice had been there all along. In first grade at Urban Day, Donte sang "Tomorrow" from Annie as a solo and "blew everyone away, especially me," Tiffany remembers. He grew up in the gospel choir at his great-grandmother's church, Mt. Vernon Missionary Baptist.

At St. Marcus he signed up for cherub choir, gospel choir, taekwondo and track and field, and Tiffany showed up for all of it. She had a title long before she had a job at St. Marcus: Donte's mom.

The job she prayed for when first visiting St. Marcus finally came in November 2017, when Superintendent Henry Tyson called with five teacher openings and a middle school support position. A K5 support teacher position also happened to be open, so she spent a year alongside Mrs. Oberle at North Avenue and seven more with Mrs. Hanson, and in May 2025 she became front office manager at the Karl J. Schlueter campus. **KSC families are now greeted by someone who once came looking for a school for her own child.**

Her prayers stayed specific, too. When Donte was eight, Tiffany's pastor preached about praying a daughter through college debt-free, and she and Donte began praying for the same thing. For ten years they asked for a college that was tuition-free and close to home.

In Donte's junior year at Milwaukee Lutheran High School, music teacher Mr. Simelton recommended him for Lutheran Summer Music, a 30-day program in Indianapolis. It was there he was introduced to Lawrence University. The family toured in October, and a month later the award letter arrived: the four-year Founders Scholarship, covering the full cost of his education.



"Donte and I stared at the paper in awe," Tiffany says. "God did it!"

Lawrence is in Appleton, which by any reasonable Wisconsin standard counts as close to home.

Now in his second year, Donte is double majoring in vocal performance and music education, with a minor in vocal pedagogy, the study of how singing is taught. His goal is "positively impacting future generations through music." **The boy who once joined cherub choir is preparing to lead a choir room of his own.**

On July 31, Donte returned home to give his second summer recital in the church sanctuary at St. Marcus, Echoes of Memory & Longing, a program of art songs, Broadway, spirituals and worship music inspired by Psalm 42:1-2. He describes it as "creating space to listen to ourselves, one another, and ultimately God's voice speaking through our deepest longings."



Fitting, for a family whose story began with a prayer and a waitlist.

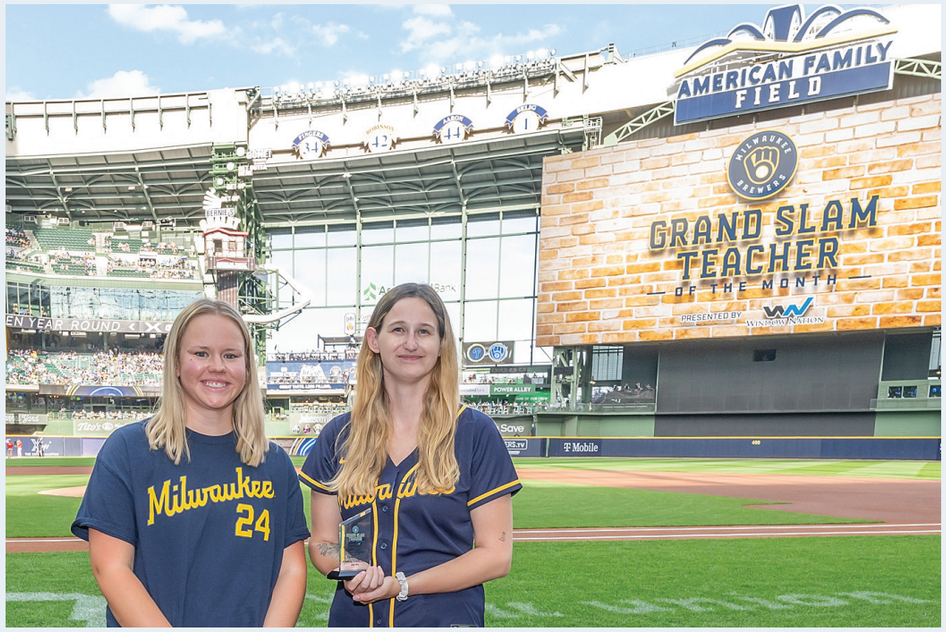
Donte credits St. Marcus with teaching him humility, self-control and leadership, and preparing him "to serve God's purpose." Years ago, Tiffany walked in with two applications and one very specific prayer: a place for her son, and maybe one for herself. She found both.



"The work, the prayers, and the ministry that is done at St. Marcus is blessed," she says. **"It's an answered prayer for many."**

GRAND SLAM TEACHER

St. Marcus special education teacher **Courtney Bliese** was named a Brewers Grand Slam Teacher of the Month.



The Milwaukee Brewers choose one Wisconsin educator a month across the season, looking for teachers who raise student achievement and bring new strategies into the classroom.

Courtney was recognized at American Family Field on June 13.



Director of Student Services Rebecca Hannemann, who nominated her, wrote that **Courtney's belief in her students and her ability to bring people together make her a truly outstanding educator.** "Her positive influence extends far beyond her classroom."

We are grateful to the Northwestern Mutual Foundation for creating this opportunity for its pipeline schools and to the Milwaukee Brewers for celebrating Milwaukee educators and shining a light on teachers who make a difference in the lives of students every day.

THE DIRTY LAUNDRY LADY

What "beyond" looks like when it's done in a basement laundry room

Ask a dozen people at St. Marcus what "beyond" means and you will get a dozen different stories. Paula Ries's story starts twelve years ago, in a basement, in front of a wardrobe nobody had time to sort. Bins overflowing with pants, skirts, blazers and ties. Dozens of stained shirts hanging on bent metal hangers in no particular order.

"I remember thinking, 'You love challenges, you can do this!'" Paula says. "I had not yet met the reality of the task at hand."



Paula & her husband John, with granddaughters & St. Marcus scholars, Colette & Cora

She said yes anyway. **A dozen years, an additional 650 scholars, and three campuses later, that basement wardrobe has become a working inventory system that gets scholars back into uniform within minutes of a need arising, and Paula is still the one running it.**

Here is what most do not know: every uniform piece St. Marcus recirculates to a family in need, has been washed, and often mended and pressed, by hand, by Paula, in the basement laundry room.

At St. Marcus, uniforms are part of creating a shared learning environment, so scholars can focus on learning and not what they are wearing. But children grow, shirts stain, blazers tear, and families sometimes need help with keeping up with the cost to replace them.

Paula's work makes sure a scholar's uniform never has to become a barrier to coming to school ready to learn.

The scale of it is hard to picture until you hear the numbers. Each spring and fall, St. Marcus asks families to pass along uniform pieces their own kids have outgrown, and hundreds of pounds of them arrive at all three campuses. Paula picks up and drops off at each campus at least three times a week, tracking what each location has on hand so she can move items between campuses as needs come up.

This year she bought a small folding wagon to help haul it all.

The washing alone is its own discipline. A stained white shirt gets a pre-scrub on the collar, an overnight soak, a wash, and a double rinse before it earns a second life. Mending ranges from a missing button to a full blazer repair, ripped shoulder or back seams stitched back together by hand. "That can take an hour and lots of calming music," Paula says. A cuff too far gone to save becomes a short sleeve uniform instead, "which the kiddos like better anyway."

She does not do it alone, though she is rightfully quick to point out that she is the constant. Her husband John hauls loads between the car and their basement and helps with deliveries to the campuses. Their daughter Holly often picks up laundry on the same days she picks up her own two kids, Cora and Colette, from North Avenue. A rotating group of women from St. Marcus' church congregation, including her sister-in-law, take home an armful of shirts to iron most weekends and return them pressed the following week. Marva, whose late husband was Karl Schlueter, a longtime supporter, once spent a summer ironing alongside them. "It's a bit of a dying art," Paula says, "and most of us doing it are in the 'upper age group'."

Thrivent Action Team grants have covered a surprising amount of the operation: the shelving and rods for uniform rooms, the storage bins and hangers, ongoing laundry and mending supplies, and new underwear and socks, since used ones cannot be donated. Paula, John, and their children each use their own Thrivent membership to apply for a couple of these grants a year.



Ask Paula about the ties scholars earn at the quarterly honors ceremonies and she lights up in a different way. Just last week, a middle schooler brought his honor roll tie to the office, worn through and unrepairable on his own, worried he had no way to replace it. Paula took it home and returned it the same day. **He got to keep the tie he had earned instead of switching back to a plain navy one.**

Moments like that are what stay with her.

She recalls wistfully tales of a staff member running in mid-crisis for a spare shirt after a kindergartner's nap went sideways, of a family enrolling several kids at once, outfitted head to toe with no funds of their own. And her favorite: the afternoon a group of boys spotted her delivering laundry at Center Street and one of them shouted, "Hey, this is the dirty laundry lady, thank her!" The rest chimed in. "I laughed so hard I almost dropped the clean clothes," Paula says. "I am honored to just be 'the dirty laundry lady.'"



Paula describes herself as more of a stay under the radar kind of person, and agreeing to this article did not come naturally to her. What changed her mind was the idea that someone, someday, will need to take this on after her. "My hope is I have it down to an organized, smooth-running system," she says, "that can be tweaked to meet any changing needs and easily picked up by a willing soul or souls."

This year's gala theme asks what it looks like to go beyond. Paula Ries has been answering that question for twelve years, three times a week, in a basement laundry room, where the mumbling hum of the washer starts again.

"Hey, this is the dirty laundry lady, thank her!"



BEYOND CAPACITY

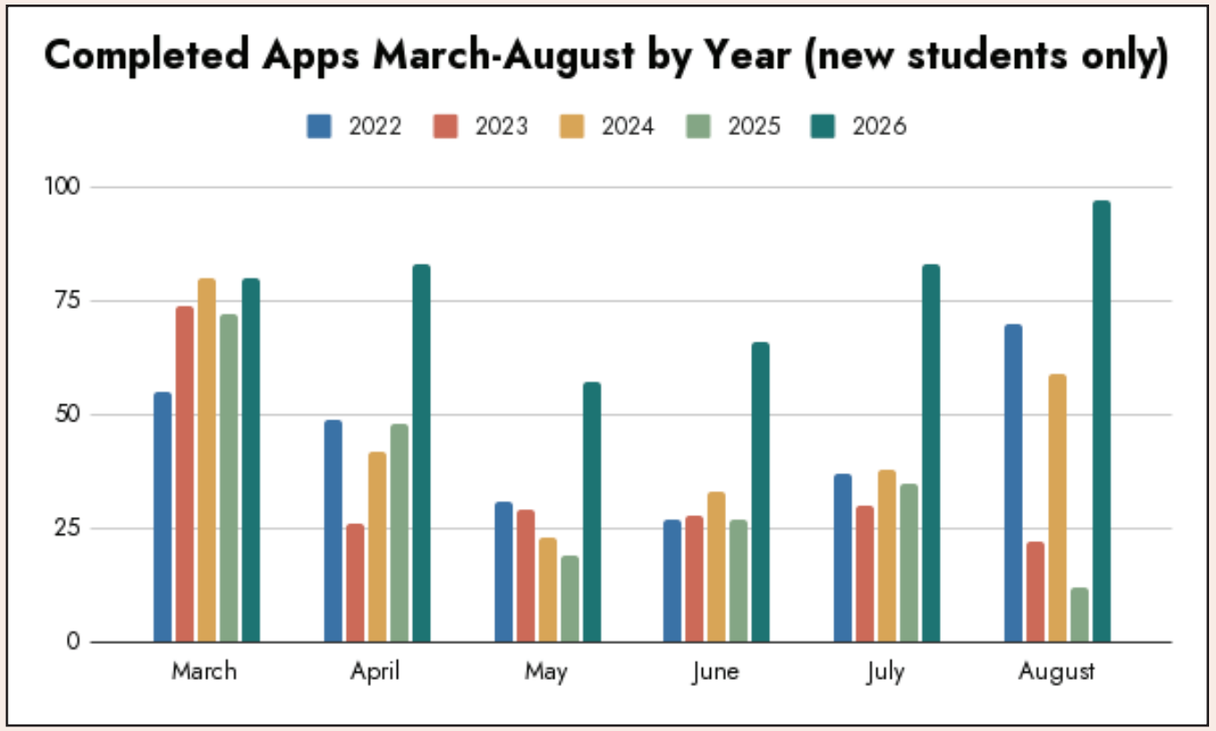
There is a rhythm to school enrollment. Applications through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program open every February 1, and the surge that follows peaks in March before falling.

Typically, April is slower than March, May is slower than April, and by the summer things slow down considerably.

This year, the falloff never came.

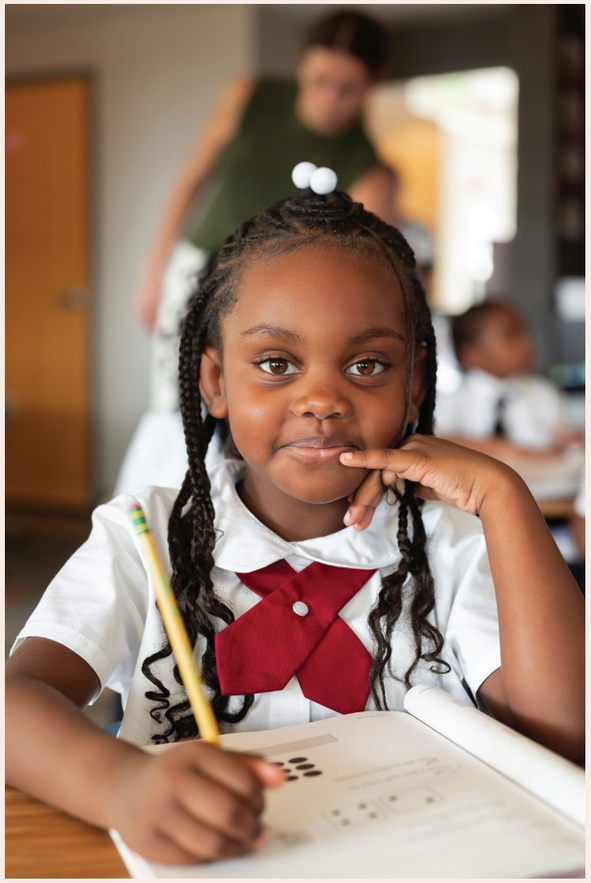
By the time we realized this was not a particularly busy month but something genuinely unusual, the applications were still coming.

What those families are walking into is a school that has been at this since 1872 and has grown stubbornly good at it. St. Marcus now serves just shy of 1,400 scholars from K3 through eighth grade on three campuses across Milwaukee's North Side, with 96 percent of scholars attending through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.



April set a record. So did May, then June, then July. From March through August, 466 families completed applications to St. Marcus. The four years before that averaged closer to 200.

During the 2024-2025 school year, (most recent public data available) the school earned a five-star rating from the state, the highest of five possible ratings, but the reasons families choose a school rarely fit onto a report card.



Sometimes the decision comes down to things you only notice after spending real time in a building: a teacher who senses something is off with a scholar before the scholar can put it into words, or the ties earned at quarterly honors ceremonies and worn home with a pride that does not fade by the walk to the car. **A school can tell you what it believes about children. Families need to see what those beliefs look like on an ordinary Tuesday.**

For generations, families have come to St. Marcus looking for that. This summer, more of them found their way here than ever before, mostly the old way: one family telling another, one friend telling a friend, until word had traveled further than any newsletter or ad campaign could reach.

This kind of unprecedented demand is the kind of news a school hopes for.

It is also the kind of growth that forces some immediate questions, because schools cannot simply absorb hundreds of additional applications through sheer enthusiasm.

St. Marcus has a finite number of classrooms, teachers and open seats. Even with three campuses, the school is already at capacity, with 177 scholars now sitting on the waiting list. When more families want to enroll than a school has room to serve, the excitement of growth runs into a practical question: how much can a school actually take on?

Part of the answer may be found in what school choice makes possible: families are not limited to the school assigned to them by their address. Through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, they can choose another school, and this summer, many families coming from Milwaukee Public Schools did exactly that. St. Marcus's enrollment team heard the same frustrations repeatedly: messages that went unanswered, paperwork that disappeared into the fray, and applications that were never completed or processed.

Whatever the larger political debate over school choice, the experience of these families is concrete. They had another option, they exercised it, **and they chose St. Marcus.**

There is a cost to this kind of growth.

The state does not fully fund a St. Marcus education, and every new scholar arrives with a **$3,000 funding gap** the school has to raise through philanthropy.



That math deserves its own space elsewhere in this issue.

Here, the more immediate fact is simpler: more families want in than St. Marcus can currently seat.

Every family St. Marcus cannot admit this fall applied on purpose. These are parents who researched their options, filled out an application and decided this is where they wanted their child to spend the next year.

The theme of this issue is Beyond, a word about going somewhere unfamiliar. Every family in that summer surge went beyond what was familiar to them, which is harder than it sounds when the school you are leaving is the one your child already knows, three blocks from home.

This summer, more families went beyond what was familiar than ever before, and chose St. Marcus.

CAUGHT UP & GONE BEYOND

Tiffiany came to St. Marcus in seventh grade behind in math and reading, and left for high school proficient in both. Beyond, it turns out, can look a lot like a seventh grader stressing over her homework.

Latasha, Tiffiany's sister and guardian, had a system. Every evening she called her sister to the table, and every evening Tiffiany sat down with her homework. Some nights Tiffiany did the homework, some nights Tiffiany performed the homework, which is a different activity entirely, and Latasha knew the difference.

Then came the night the performance fell apart.

"She burst into tears, and when I asked her what was wrong, she told me the homework was hard and she didn't understand it," said Latasha.

Most of us would file that under bad night; Latasha filed it under progress.

"It showed me that she was struggling, but she was also trying," she said. "I think that was the beginning of her learning that it was okay to ask for help."

Before St. Marcus, Tiffiany attended Central Cyber Middle School alongside about six of her relatives, which Latasha describes as a fair amount of built-in distraction. Focus was hard to come by, as was structure. What Latasha wanted for her was a school that would hold her to something.

There is no single program at St. Marcus called Getting Tiffiany Ready.

What she got instead was a pile-on: one on one math tutoring with Grace Flatau, even though she did not qualify for special education services; **title intervention, through which she grew six grade levels on the school's assessments;** counseling with Jess Tellier.

"By eighth grade, she had a math tutor at school, and she would stay after school to get help," she said. **"She went from being afraid to ask for help to becoming more comfortable with it."**



Tiffiany with her 8th grade class

Micah Ricke, who taught Tiffiany in Word of God, saw the transformation from his classroom doorway. As a new seventh grader, he notes that some days she wouldn't look up when he greeted her in the morning. By eighth grade her hand was the first one up in his class, and she laughed at his dad jokes, generously.

"She was quick to pick up a piece of trash on the floor, even if it wasn't hers," he said.

On April 27, she was baptized at the middle school chapel service. That afternoon a thunderstorm knocked out power across the city.

"Who needs a LED light bulb when you've got the fire of the Holy Spirit?" Micah said.



That spring of eighth grade, in the closing weeks of her time at St. Marcus, the numbers had caught up with the effort. After making massive gains in both subjects, Tiffiany finished the year with a combined math and reading score at the proficient level and one of the highest ELA scores on the Q4 interim assessment.

The academics are the part we can measure. Ask her family and you get a different transcript.

Her nephew Ryan is six, in his third year as a St. Marcus scholar, and he holds the firm position that his auntie is the best auntie currently working. This summer she helped run Latasha's in-home daycare, learning inventory, schedules, and the unglamorous reality of running your own thing. She reads, cooks, plays basketball, and gives whatever hours are left to her friends.

She started her freshman year at Milwaukee Lutheran this fall. At orientation she told Latasha she was scared, and Latasha gave her a line she liked well enough to use twice, once out loud and once by text on the first morning of school: "You got this. Just breathe. It's not going to be as bad as you think."

Tiffiany came home that afternoon smiling and reported that she was, in fact, no longer scared.

She wants to be a registered nurse. Latasha thinks the job suits her for reasons that have nothing to do with test scores. "Caring for others comes naturally to her," she said.

Anna Vomhoff, the 8th grade teacher who brought us this story, has watched a lot of scholars come through this building. “It is the most beautiful transformation that I have seen in my eight years here,” she said.

Here is what Latasha hopes for her now: “I hope she learns how to advocate for herself, ask questions when she needs help, and never be afraid to speak up for herself.”

She already did it once, at a kitchen table, in seventh grade, over a worksheet she could not crack. Everything after that is beyond.

”It is the most beautiful transformation that I have seen in my eight years here.”







BEYOND THE PRICE TAG

Every fall, families across Milwaukee choose a school for their children. They tour buildings, ask about reading and class size, measure the walk in February weather, and decide. Few of them see the price tag attached to that choice, because in public education, the price is real and itemized, and it is paid somewhere else, by all of us, through local, state and federal taxes.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction publishes the arithmetic. Its 2024-25 most recent audited, public data counts every funding source (local, state & federal) and assigns each school its share of district overhead, which makes it the closest public record we have of what one seat actually costs. **At the ten Milwaukee Public Schools in the 6th district, where St. Marcus’ campuses are located, spending ran from $18,665 per student to nearly $29,000. The average across all ten topped $23,000.**

Some of that variation has ordinary causes. One school carries more staff, another serves more children with special needs. **But the largest driver is the one you cannot see on a tour: empty seats.**

A building is a fixed cost. The boiler, the roof, the custodial contract, the front office and the principal run to roughly the same figure whether three hundred children fill the halls or six hundred. When enrollment falls and the doors stay open, the denominator shrinks while the expense holds, and the cost per child climbs for reasons that have nothing to do with any particular child. Taxpayers, then, end up funding hallways.

St. Marcus serves scholars from those same blocks and families.

The government funding that follow each of them through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, Special Needs Scholarship Program and Title funding cover only part of what it costs to educate them. That average number was $11,718 in ‘24-25, the rest, about $3,000 per scholar, comes from donors. **That is our funding gap.**

Put the numbers side by side and the difference is nearly $10,000 per child, every year. Across a single classroom, it adds up to a quarter of a million dollars.



What the difference buys on our side of it is instruction. Our teachers are trained in the science of reading, which is to say they treat reading as a skill the brain has to be taught rather than one it picks up on its own. Our youngest scholars are screened early, and the ones who need help get it while the gap is still small enough to close. Our classrooms are full, so the money moves toward teaching instead of square footage.

During the 2024-2025 school year, (most recent public data available) St. Marcus earned a five-star rating from the state, Significantly Exceeds Expectations, one of only 11 in Milwaukee. Scholars who arrive behind catch up, and many keep going.

Every accounting system is a decision about what counts. A per-pupil figure counts dollars and seats, because dollars and seats are what it was built to count. It has no column for the high school she walks into ready, or the scholarship letter, or the career no one on her block has had yet.

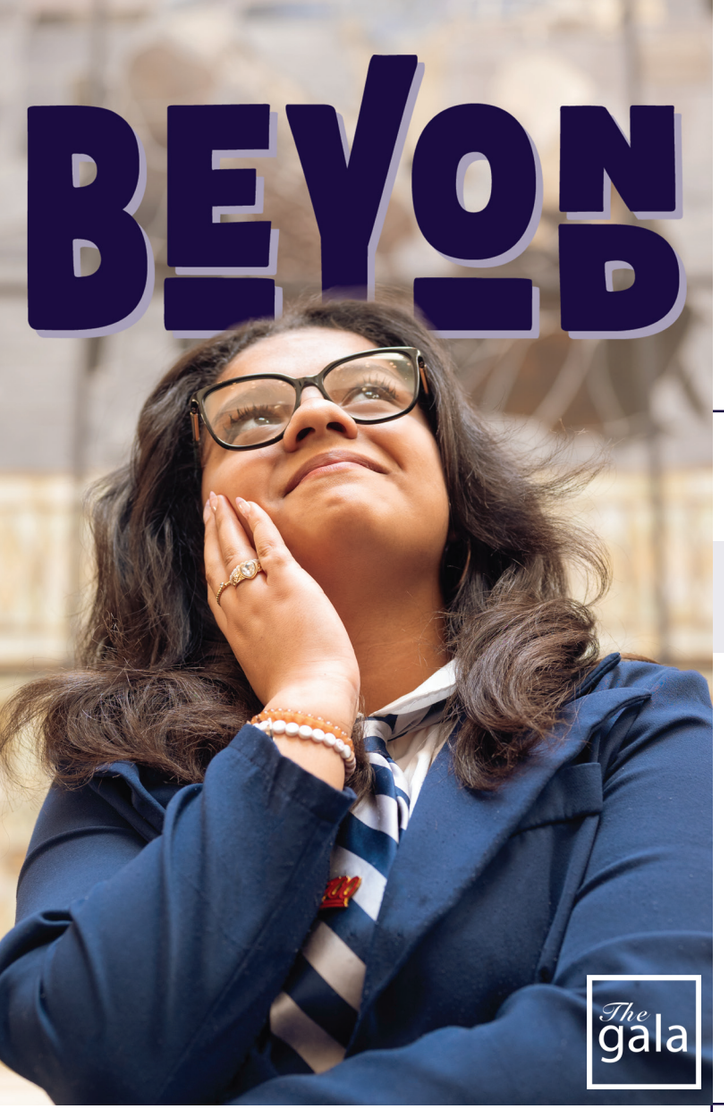
That part is what donors make possible.

A gift of $3,000 closes the gap for one scholar and sends her somewhere the numbers cannot follow.

Funding for St. Marcus & Neighboring Schools (2024-2025 audited data)

SCHOOL & STAR RATING	GOVERNMENT FUNDING
St. Marcus ★★★★★	$11,718
Elm Creative Arts School ★	$18,665
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. School ★★	$20,322
George Washington Carver Academy ★	$20,547
Benjamin Franklin School ★	$21,857
LaFollette Public School ★★	$22,481
Keefe Avenue Elementary School ★★	$22,493
Oliver Wendell Holmes School ★★	$23,641
Roosevelt Middle School ★★	$24,016
Andrew S Douglas Middle School ★	$28,122
Rufus King International Middle School ★	$28,987





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Celebrating Those Who Shape Milwaukee

When High Stakes by The Bartolotta Restaurants opened its doors on September 17, it unveiled a unique tribute to the people who have helped shape Milwaukee: the Milwaukee Players Room, featuring more than 270 revolving caricatures of civic leaders, educators, nonprofit and business leaders, media personalities, historical figures and others who have elevated the social fabric of our city.

We're honored that Superintendent Tyson is among those featured. Chef Paul Bartolotta wanted to recognize Henry for the impact he has made through St. Marcus and his commitment to the Milwaukee community.

The recognition is also a wonderful reflection of a longstanding partnership between the Bartolotta family and St. Marcus. For 10 years, from 2010-2019, Bartolotta's sponsored and catered the food for the St. Marcus Gala, helping make those special evenings possible and supporting the work of the school.

We are deeply grateful for a partnership that continues to celebrate the people and organizations making a difference in Milwaukee.



HENRY TYSON

Caricature by local artist who wishes to remain anonymous

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St. Marcus is a Christian, high-expectations choice school serving students from grades K3 to 8th.

Using a proven urban education model, St. Marcus seeks to instigate change and provide a community of learning where children and families live, grow, and thrive.

St. Marcus' driving vision is that every family has access to excellent education in the city of Milwaukee.

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