

## Miriam to open high school for students with learning disabilities



13 HOURS AGO • BY JESSICA BOCK

**WEBSTER GROVES** • When Laurie Caro and her daughter started looking at possibilities for high school next year, she found herself revisiting a familiar gap.

No school was a good fit for her daughter, who has learning disabilities.

When they looked at public high schools, the sheer size of the buildings overwhelmed Molly, who also has sensory issues, making large crowds and lots of noise uncomfortable.

And the right private school didn't seem to exist — at least not nearby.

Laurie Caro had been here before. Her older daughter — who also has learning disabilities — eventually went to a boarding school two hours away from her family.

“We couldn't find anything,” Laurie Caro said. “I really felt like things hadn't changed in the last four or five years.”

Now there is a new option for students like Molly Caro.

Miriam School, which serves learning disabled elementary and middle school students with average intelligence or above, publicly announced Monday it will open a private, nondenominational high school this fall.

School leaders say the high school will fulfill an unmet need in the region.

“Parents have been clamoring for this,” said Andrew Thorp, Miriam's executive director. “Some of our kids go on and do just fine, but there is this whole other group that still really need us.”

Miriam started 60 years ago serving elementary students, later growing to include a middle school, which has speech/language and occupational therapy programs. In 2007, Miriam Learning Center started to provide specialized services to children with learning disabilities in other school districts, including charter schools in St. Louis. Both entities serve about 1,000 students each year.

But high school continues to be an area of concern for parents of children with learning disabilities or autism.

St. Louis' private school market is dominated by schools that mostly serve general-population students. A few schools focus on children with learning disabilities, but during the early years. Churchill School, for example, will enroll through 10th grade, but with the goal of moving students back into a traditional setting. The average length of stay for students there is a little more than three years.

Logos School is an exception, serving a niche of children who have struggles with mental health through its therapeutic middle and high school.

Nationwide, there is more demand than supply for schools specifically for students with learning disabilities, said James Wendorf, executive director of National Center for Learning Disabilities.

He said schools like Miriam are rare — the kind of schools that sometimes lure families to relocate.

A 2014 report from his organization said that between 12 percent to 26 percent of secondary students with learning disabilities received average or above-average scores on math and reading assessments, compared with 50 percent of students in the general population. One in every two students with learning disabilities faced a school disciplinary action such as suspension or expulsion in 2011.

Sixty-eight percent of students with learning disabilities leave high school with a regular diploma, while 19 percent drop out and 12 percent receive a certificate of completion.

The new high school, Miriam Academy, will enroll 10 students in its first academic year. Administrators plan to add one grade each year and ultimately serve students in grades 9 to 12. Enrollment is open to current Miriam families as well as to other area students.

Like Miriam's elementary and middle school, the high school is meant for students with learning challenges in language, reading and math, and for sensory issues and social skill development. The school will offer personalized education, including curriculum modifications to accommodate different learning styles and individual abilities.

Tuition will be \$28,000, though some assistance is available.

Molly Caro said she is relieved that Miriam Academy has become an option. She has attended Miriam School since she was in second grade. She likes the smaller size and teachers who understand what she needs.

On a recent day, Molly started out with reading, and then spent time in the school garden before going into occupational therapy, where students do different activities to move their bodies, in addition to recess. She also had a separate hand therapy session to work on fine motor skills. The schedule is built so that students are not sitting for long periods, keeping them moving and changing things up to keep them engaged.

“The schools I saw that were really big and a bunch of people — I got, like, a little anxious,” Molly said. “Totally overwhelming.”

One of the challenges of the smaller school will be extracurricular programs.

Thorp said they are looking for partners, either another private school or public school, so that Miriam Academy students will have the opportunities for sports or other activities.

“We know that's an important component, that social interaction with peers,” he said.

So far, \$3.5 million has been raised for the launch of the high school and also for enhancement of existing middle school facilities.

The high school site has yet to be determined.



Eighth grader Molly Caro, 13, take part in a an occupational therapy session during class time at Miriam School in Webster Groves on Monday, Feb. 22, 2016. The Miriam School plans start a high school next year and Molly will be one of the students in the first freshman class. Photo By David Carson, dcarson@post-dispatch.com

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## **About Miriam Academy**

- Miriam Academy will serve high school students with average to above average intelligence with learning challenges in the areas of language, reading, math, sensory and social skill development.
- The private high school will start this fall with a goal of enrolling 10 students in its first academic year. Miriam Academy plans to add one grade each year and ultimately serve students in grades 9-12.
- Enrollment is open to both current Miriam families as well as other students in the area. Tuition is \$28,000. Registration will open up on March 1. Those interested can call 314-962-6059 or go to [miriamacademy.org](http://miriamacademy.org).