



# A Homegrown Charter School: Lafayette Preparatory Academy

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Have you ever wished your local school would be a little more responsive to your family's needs? Or have you been searching for a high-quality free school in your area? Those were the concerns of several families in Saint Louis, but instead of hoping and wishing, they are trying to make this dream a reality. Through a true homegrown effort, a new school will be opening in the downtown Saint Louis area next fall: Lafayette Preparatory Academy. I had the opportunity to sit down with Susan Marino, the head of school for this new free, public charter school. Below you will find a transcript of our conversation.

## School Quick Facts

School name:	Lafayette Preparatory Academy
Type of school:	Free Public Charter School
School sponsor:	University of Missouri Saint Louis
Head of school:	Susan Marino
Website:	<a href="http://www.lafayetteprep.org">www.lafayetteprep.org</a>
Opening:	Fall 2013

Area: Serving Downtown, Downtown West, Soulard, LaSalle Park, King Louis, Peabody, and Lafayette Square  
Grades: K-1 (with plans to expand)

**James V. Shuls (JVS):** Susan, thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me. Tell me a little about Lafayette Preparatory Academy. What makes this school unique or innovative?

**Susan Marino (SM):** Well, we get this question a lot. 'What is your innovation?' For us, our innovation is not that we are radically different, but that we are looking to do what is most effective. We'll have a heavy focus on math, literacy, and science and we will have an extended day. So it's not that we are doing anything incredibly innovative, rather it's almost like we're going back to the basics. What will make us different is our constant pursuit of effectiveness, not trying to do something fancy, or new, or untried, just focusing on the things that we are trying to get done.

**JVS:** So, when you say "back to the basics," what does that mean exactly? Walk me through a standard day at your school.

**SM:** When I say, "back to the basics," I don't want to people to envision this old school house where students are sitting at their desks quietly and accepting knowledge as it is given out. That's not what I mean. What I mean is focusing on the core content areas, strongly. School will go from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and that is a long day for a kindergartner, but I know it is doable. We will have at least 2 ½ hours dedicated to literacy. We'll have an hour every day for science and an hour for math. We will have large blocks of time for each of the focus areas.

Again, back to the basics does not mean sitting at desks. When you walk into my school, there will be some noise. It will be very structured and everything will have a plan, but our students will be moving around and actively engaging with what they are learning.

**JVS:** Do you already have curriculum lined up for the school?

**SM:** No, I don't have everything picked out, and here's why. I have researched so many different curriculums and I find so many great ideas in each of them that are very effective and have been tried in other schools. But because we are a small school and we are committed to being responsive to our students and allowing our teachers to really build around the needs of the students, I don't want us to get trapped into a model that someone else has designed for another school. So we are going to take the bits and pieces that work from other programs and mold them to fit our school. This will be developed by our teachers for our students. But of course, we will be looking at curriculums, which will help us lay a foundation which we can build upon.

**JVS:** You know, I have heard another school leader say that he didn't know how he could really hold a teacher accountable if he picked out their curriculum and told them exactly how they were supposed to teach. Because when the results came in, if they were not what was expected and he had dictated how everything should be done, then part of the blame was his and not just the teachers. It sounds like you're saying something similar. You want to really bring the teachers into this planning process and let them be flexible to students' needs and be innovators in their

classroom. Is that about right?

**SM:** Yes, so our innovation is not that we have something all new that we will be using, but our innovation is on that day-to-day basis when we are able to be responsive to our students' needs. For example, my two kindergarten teachers will have the same standards which they must meet, so their students will understand the same concepts at the end of the year, but they don't have to do it the same way, because they won't have the same classrooms and they won't have the same styles.

One of the best lessons I learned my first year teaching was when an administrator came to observe me teaching. During my lesson, I was just not connecting with the kids. I noticed my administrator over in the corner just laughing. So I went over and asked, "Are you laughing at me?" And she said, "Why are you trying to be like me?" I had walked in and tried to be her, but I was completely different from her. So when I tried to be something I wasn't, I seemed like a complete phony. It didn't suit my style and it didn't suit the kids. I want my teachers to say, "this is who I am as a teacher and this is how I'm most effective," instead of giving them something and trying to make them fit into something that is unnatural for them and unnatural for their students, and ultimately will be ineffective. **JVS:** You were a teacher and you worked in the public schools, right?

**SM:** I worked with an alternative program and in the public schools, so I have been in both.

**JVS:** So what made you want to take this on? It sounds like your job was pretty stable and now you are taking on a big challenge. What made you go this route?

**SM:** It was a tough choice between safety and pursuing something I really believe in so deeply. I am a believer that without a little bit of risk, great things can't happen and somebody has to take that risk. This was a tough question in our house. Was that risk best to fall on us? In the end, we decided it was. I was in a safe situation, it was very comfortable, I was on the right path, but I didn't live in the community where I was working. My daughter is 4 and will be 5 next year. We don't want her to have a sub-standard education and we didn't really feel like we could pay the tuition for her to go to a private school. So, we have our own personal motivation, for our family, for our friends' families, for our neighborhood.

When I met the original group who had the idea for Lafayette Prep I knew it was just right. I actually met them through happenstance, but right away I knew they had the right mission in mind and their beliefs really matched mine; the focus on a rigorous education, the focus on community, the focus on keeping it small. A lot of charter schools have a bigger plan in mind than we do. We are intentionally small. We want to keep it small, so we can really cultivate that community. We want to always be responsive to our communities' needs. I liked that about this idea; that we would be so focused on the needs of our community. What I mean by our community is Downtown, Downtown West, Soulard, LaSalle Park, King Louis, Peabody, and Lafayette Square. All of these areas are close together, but very disconnected as neighborhoods. We want to draw these neighborhoods together.

**JVS:** It sounds like this was really a grassroots idea.

**SM:** That's right. The first three individuals who got on board with this idea live in Lafayette Square. Like all of us who live in the city, when we go to the park and our kids start playing, the adults start talking. The conversation always goes to, "where does yours go to school?" Because we are all looking for that magic ticket, that is a great free public school that is near us, that suits our family's values and our hopes for our kids. As they had that conversation, they didn't have an answer because our community lacks a free, high-quality option. So they started thinking about opening a charter school and gathering people who had a similar vision to make this happen. People just started coming on board and it built into what we have today.

I got really lucky, because I met them all this past January in one of those playground conversations. I fell in love with the idea. They live in Lafayette Square, I live in Souldard, others in the group live in Downtown West and Downtown. We are working to get others from the area involved, so we can build this homegrown school; built by us, for us, responding to us, accountable to each other.

**JVS:** What grades do you plan to serve when you open the doors in the fall?

**SM:** The first year we will have kindergarten and first grade. We will have a year over year plan, where we add a grade annually.

**JVS:** And the goal is to eventually add all the way up to 12th grade?

**SM:** Yes, our initial charter is K-5. In 2018, we plan to expand to sixth-eighth and in 2021, we plan to expand to a high school. We really have a backwards design mentality. We are starting with the end goal in mind, thinking, "What do I want my daughter to be able to do when she graduates?" And then building back from there to think about what our students need to know when they leave kindergarten and first grade.

**JVS:** If someone is interested in the school, they live in your area and want to know more, or possibly enroll their kid, what do they do?

**SM:** First off, I'm really accessible. They can reach me at [Susan.marino@lafayetteprep.org](mailto:Susan.marino@lafayetteprep.org) or they can call me on the phone directly. On our website, at [www.lafayetteprep.org](http://www.lafayetteprep.org) you can go to the enrollment tab and fill out the registration form. That will go directly to my email. Once I receive that, I'll contact them to schedule a family tour. Once they've toured the building then I'll give them the application materials and we'll schedule a home visit.

**JVS:** Great. Susan, thank you so much for your time.

## About the Author



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[2] <http://www.lafayetteprep.org>

[3] <mailto:Susan.marino@lafayetteprep.org>

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