

Educating New Bedford's Future Leaders at Our Sisters' School

by Gabrielle G. LaFavre

It is impossible to leave Our Sisters' School (OSS) in New Bedford, without a smile on your face. OSS is the kind of school educators and parents only dream about: it is a school where girls learn not only to empower themselves, but also to improve the lives of all around them. OSS is an independently-run middle school for economically disadvantaged girls. OSS is not religiously affiliated, and the school is ineligible for state aid because Massachusetts does not fund same-sex schools. Therefore, OSS relies heavily upon community partnerships, donations, and volunteers. Without community support, OSS would not be as robust and successful as it is today.

"The origin of the name Our Sisters' School comes from the brave, ground-breaking, bold young women who followed their hearts and went to sea on whaling ships, even when that was not considered a woman's world," says Sarah Herman, Head of School. OSS strives to cultivate the next generation of New Bedford women.

Science Department Head Jocelyn Mitchell, explains that OSS seeks to create ties to the world beyond the school walls. "In science class, we apply our studies to local and marine sciences," says Mitchell. "We learn about ecosystems and adaptation, and then go out on the water or to the Buttonwood Park Zoo to see these concepts in action". Students at OSS take an additional science course once a week, which takes them all over New Bedford. Students learn to sail in the warmer months, and spend the winter learning at the Zoo.



For more information on purchasing tickets, please contact Darlene Spencer at 508-994-9625 ext. 21

Mitchell began her career teaching in public school, and soon realized that OSS is unique. “Our curriculum seamlessly blends academics with community-building, leadership, and classroom enrichment excursions in and around New Bedford. OSS is more hands-on than any other school. Students get to experience way more than theory.

Because we have longer class periods than public school, we have time to go on a walk in the surrounding woods, or use local resources like community sailing”. Sixth grade student Taileigh loves learning at OSS. “We get better learning opportunities and one-on-one attention,” says Taileigh. “I think one of the coolest things we have done is go downtown and learn about history of New Bedford and City Hall. We met with councillors and went to local shops and restaurants.”

The world students and staff create within the school is as important as our links to the world around us. “The thing that sets OSS apart,” says Mitchell, “is our sense of community, beyond academics. Yes, academics are important, but the girls need emotional support first, before they can understand and engage with academics”. “At OSS, we are community-core based,”

says Ava, another eighth grader. "This means we learn how to act and how to treat a person, not just academics". Ava maintains that OSS is "a really positive environment. Everyone is nice to each other, which is not always the case in public school".

Additionally, OSS gives students a place to ask questions and discuss issues safely. Students learn to articulate high-level concepts like social justice and food security, concepts which many students will not discuss until college. OSS Students engage in open discussions about their behavior and generate their own assessment about their actions. Classrooms at OSS are structured to emphasize respect, self-reflection, and maturity.

At OSS, students take a wide range of classes. In addition to traditional core subjects such as math and science, the school offers a maker studio, career planning, music lessons, and Habits of Mind, where students learn five successful habits to succeed in their academic and extra-curricular lives, ultimately creating and presenting a portfolio at the end of the year to assess their progress through this framework. OSS is special; students don't just receive answers to problems. Instead, they must explore the problem, oftentimes blending seemingly opposite subjects like science and art, in order to look at an issue in a new way.

Students at OSS are bright, confident, and they appreciate the opportunities that they have been given. Eighth grade student Kailani says that at OSS, "we all have the same goal, to get a good education". The students feel challenged here, unlike at some of their former schools, where they were not expected to go above and beyond the curriculum.

"Today, OSS celebrates our graduates, 100% of whom are not only in school, but thriving," says Herman. "Our school maintains a 100% high school graduation rate, which is much higher than the current 60% at local public schools. Our high

school graduates are earning acceptances and scholarships to colleges ranging from Amherst College and University of Southern California (USC), to UMass Dartmouth”.

At a time when girls at home and around the world still face numerous obstacles because of their gender, OSS makes one feel hopeful about the future of education. Mariah, a student at OSS, expresses just how important OSS is for the students: “Now that I am in eighth grade, I realize I wouldn’t want to be in any other school. Here at OSS we’ve grown up together and we are more than friends, we are sisters”.