

DISCOVER NEW BEDFORD: OUR SISTERS' SCHOOL RUNS ON DEDICATION

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It's a small school with a big plan: Provide girls with the tools they need to succeed in life.

“In many ways, this is just as much a family as it is a school. Whether you're a student or a teacher, you don't forget about this place at the end of the day,” said Lisa Yates, executive director at Our Sisters' School, an independent middle school dedicated to educating and inspiring young women from disadvantaged backgrounds. “It's taken a lot of different people coming together to make this possible.”

OSS opened its doors to 30 fifth-and sixth-grade students from Greater New Bedford in 2008 after years of hard work on the part of local volunteers who envisioned an educational institution that would provide young women with a safe, supportive learning environment.

Today, there are more than 50 students in Grades 5 through 8 with admissions becoming increasingly competitive each year.

“As word has begun to spread, more and more families are realizing what an amazing opportunity we're offering here,” Yates said of the tuition-free school that sustains itself entirely through private funds. “We rely on donations from across the community.”

When you take a minute to look at the model, it quickly becomes apparent OSS works. Students are taught a rigorous curriculum in small, supportive classes. School days are longer and family involvement is expected.

“There isn't any single factor, but a lot of different things that go into making this school work,” Yates said.

“No 1 is accountability from everyone involved, students, parents, teachers – everyone.”

The school day at OSS begins promptly at 7:15 a.m. when students start day with an exercise routine such as walking or yoga.

“We feel it's important that they wake their minds up for the day,” Yates said.

The entire school also gathers each morning to discuss topics of interest with speakers from the community stopping by to discuss their lives and careers twice a week. Students then break off into classes taught by volunteer educators from the AmeriCorps program.

In fact, all of OSS's faculty and the vast majority of its staff are volunteers.

“We wouldn’t be in existence if it weren’t for volunteers and support from the community,” said Yates, noting that every student participates in a variety of art, music, physical education and extracurricular enrichment activities also facilitated by volunteers - no easy feat when you consider that the school day wraps up at 6:30 p.m. when their evening study time ends.

“The schedule certainly isn’t for every student. We ask a lot, but they receive a lot in return.”

OSS accepts students entering the fifth and sixth grades with applications for admission encouraged well in advance because of the competitive nature of admissions.

Our Sisters’ School is located at 145 Brownell Ave. on the Dartmouth line in the West end. For more information, call (508)994-1255 or visit www.oursistersschool.org.