

Steve Urbon: Advocate for girls stepping into public school role

June 03, 2013

Here's a fun fact: The woman chosen to replace the legendary Marcia Faucher as principal of the Carlos Pacheco Elementary School in New Bedford was herself a principal at the age of 29.

Now she's 35, and saying her goodbyes to Our Sisters' School, the all-girl middle school you probably haven't heard much about, the one she's been at the head of for five years.

Lisa Yates was one of the founders of OSS, as they call it. It formed after some like-minded educators began to collaborate on forming an all-girls school in the style of Nativity Prep, which works only with boys.

"We're not a charter. We are independent and tuition-free. We raise our entire operating budget every year," she said.

Last week, the school, which leases the Tifereth Israel Synagogue's Hebrew school, was festooned with student art for an evening art show (and, of course, fundraiser).

The 60 students in Grades 5-7 get an hour of art virtually every day, made possible partly by the length of the school day, from 7:15 a.m. to beyond 6 p.m.

All of the students, said Yates, are from families below the fuel assistance guidelines.

She got to know New Bedford as a Boston-based consultant to the Global Learning Charter Public School. "I commuted 60 miles each way every day six days a week," she said.

"I fell in love with New Bedford," she said. "And I decided that I needed to be here. I love the families, I love the community, I love the history, and I loved that there were so many people who wanted a great education for their children and were willing to do whatever — paint walls, clean floors."

Yates is clear on what role well-educated women will have in the community. "Educate women if you want economic development in the community. Educate women and women raise the village. New Bedford has economic needs. It needs to continue to grow. Investing in girls is not only about the girls but also about the community."

Yes, it's about educating girls as individuals, she said. When people are better educated, "they are healthier. They have more productive lives economically. There are so many benefits beyond just the difference it makes to that girl and it makes a profound difference to that girl," she said.



Lisa Yates chats with some of her students during lunch at Our Sisters' School. Yates is leaving at the end of this school year to become principal of the Carlos Pacheco Elementary School in New Bedford. PHOTO JOHN SLADEWSKI/The Standard-Times

Steve Urbon: Advocate for girls stepping into public school role

The mission of OSS, she said, is to produce girls who will be “lifelong learners and advocates for themselves and others.”

So far, it’s working, but the outside world can be a jolt. Some students who have gone on to private high schools find that even with tuition paid along with all the other essentials, they’re not going to become like the children of wealthy families.

Yates said that one girl, now a sophomore in high school, was studying a poverty report called “Tale of Three Cities: Lawrence, Springfield, New Bedford.”

“It was all about my family. Being homeless, living with relatives, what it’s like not to have food,” Yates quoted the girl as saying.

She said the girl said, “OSS looked like a good way to get to college. But I didn’t understand you were trying to end poverty at the same time.”

Yates said that now is a good time to leave, with the school firmly established, and with legions of volunteers, Americorps teachers and fundraisers. The new head of school, as the job is called, will be able to start her own fresh initiatives on what’s been built so far.

The same, I think, is happening at Carlos Pacheco, Yates’ first public school job. This ought to be something to watch.

Steve Urbon’s column appears in [The Standard-Times](#) and [SouthCoastToday.com](#)