



## TUESDAY FOCUS - EDUCATION

# Shaping a new academy

## Our Sisters' School will provide a rigorous, all-girl education

By JENNIFER LADE

Standard-Times staff writer

Lisa Alvord remembers the first time she visited Nativity Preparatory School in New Bedford. With a demanding schedule, challenging academics, hard-working students and dedicated volunteer teachers, there was little to criticize.

"It was just so inspiring," she said. "Except there was one huge problem. Where were the girls?"

Nativity Prep, an all-boys school for Grades 5 to 8, now in its eighth year, is sticking to its philosophy that single-sex education provides fewer distractions for its 60 students. But soon, the city's girls won't be left out. Ms. Alvord and other members of a board of directors are preparing to launch Our Sisters' School, an all-girls middle school based on Nativity's successful model.

"This is an opportunity for New Bedford to get these girls at a young age to value education," said Doreen Lopes, executive director of Nativity and a board member for Our Sisters' School.

Ms. Alvord, Ms. Lopes and Joann Clarke, executive director of Trips for Kids, came up with the idea for the school in the summer of 2006. By that fall, they were having weekly meetings about how to make their dream of a small, personal school a reality. Their group grew into a steering committee and finally a board of directors.

With the know-how of educators and other experts, the school's goal is to open in September 2008 as a 30-student fifth- and sixth-grade school serving primarily low-income girls. It will eventually expand to 60 students in fifth through eighth grade. Final negotiations on a lease are under way and an announcement on the school's location is expected soon.

Lisa Yates, executive director of Our Sisters' School, helped start the New Bedford Global Learning Charter School in 2002 and stayed on until last August to teach, conduct professional development work-shops and organize a reading program. She jumped at the chance to get in on the ground floor of Our Sisters' School.

"It's very exciting and there's a lot going on," she said.

Like Nativity, Our Sisters' School will have free tuition, as its operating budget is funded solely by private donations.

To keep parents involved and control costs, Nativity parents provide lunch for teachers on a rotating basis and are required to attend monthly meetings.

Our Sisters' School will also seek parental involvement, to ensure success not only for the individual students but for the school as a whole.

"We're trying to be open to all of the different ways that families can help support our school and organization," Ms. Yates said. Parents could do anything from building maintenance to providing free dental screenings for the students, she said.

Following the example of Nativity, Our Sisters' School will follow certain practices that have paved the way for student success. The first is obvious in the school's name: single-sex education will eliminate distractions and form a sisterhood among the girls, Ms. Lopes said. At a YMCA camp she has run for 10 years, separating boys and girls has made the girls more focused and confident.

"It encouraged girls to take risks," she said.

Several studies have shown that both boys and girls do better in single-sex classrooms. According to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education, a six-year study of 270,000 students by the Australian Council for Educational Research found students in single-sex classrooms performed 15 percent to 22 percent better than students in co-ed classrooms.

A May 2007 study at Stetson University in DeLand, Fla., found that fourth-graders at the same elementary school were more likely to score proficient on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test when they were placed in a single-sex classroom. The differences were astounding: Only 37 percent of boys and 59 percent of girls scored proficient in co-ed classes versus 86 percent of boys and 75 percent of girls in single-sex classrooms.

Just as important in building camaraderie and academic success is the length of the school day. At Nativity, students attend classes from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. and participate in mandatory extracurricular activities until 5:30 p.m. They are encouraged to return for an evening study period from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m., and are invited to Friday "fun nights" and Saturday morning field trips. In July, any student returning to the school for the following year is required to attend camp, which includes an hour of classroom teaching in the morning and traditional camp activities for the rest of the day.

Our Sisters' School will involve the same full schedule. Besides the obvious benefits of instilling work ethic and minimizing potentially mischievous free time, the girls, spending so much time with a close-knit class, form tight relationships.

"You're providing a community right here in their own school for them," Ms. Lopes said.

"This becomes their community where their friends are, where they're safe and where they feel safe."

Each class, containing no more than 15 students, will be taught by a team of two volunteer teachers from Americorps, giving students plenty of individual attention from enthusiastic young adults. In lieu of a salary, recent college graduates who work at Our Sisters' School will receive room and board, health insurance, a small stipend and Americorps credits that can pay for student loans or future education.

At Nativity, using volunteer teachers helps keep costs down so much that the school itself receives no state or federal funding. Our Sisters' School will use the same approach.

Beyond finances, students benefit from the young teachers, many of whom have just graduated from prestigious colleges. This inspires students to think about secondary education and broadens their scope as they interact with people outside the area.

"It provides a great opportunity for the kids here in New Bedford because they are all of a sudden involved with someone who's from another part of the country," Ms. Lopes said.

Our Sisters' School is currently seeking applications for both teachers and students. Prospective students can attend an information session at 5 p.m. March 3 at the YWCA Kids on Merrimack Street or at 6 p.m. March 4 at the Boys and Girls Club on Jenney Street.

Ms. Alvord said Our Sisters' School can reach beyond the students at the school, as they share their knowledge with others.

"I guess the most compelling thing about educating a girl is ... you educate her family and you educate the community," she said.

"It has a ripple effect and it spreads throughout the community."