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Dartmouth High School
Fairhaven High School
Greater New Bedford Vocational-Technical High School
JobCorps: Chicopee Campus
New Bedford High School**
Old Rochester Regional High School
Taunton High School
Westport High School

Independent Secondary Schools:
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Dana Hall School
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The Hotchkiss School
Lincoln School
Loomis Chaffee School
Marianapolis School
Masters Regional Academy*
Milton Academy
Noble and Greenough School
Phillips Academy Andover
Providence Country Day School
Rosary High School
St. Andrew’s School
St. George’s School
Tabor Academy
Westover School
The Wheeler School

Colleges:
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Awakening Leadership Center
Barry University
Bates College
Brandeis University
Bridgewater State University
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Bunker Hill Community College
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*This school has now closed.
**Including the Academy of Honors at New Bedford High School
The year 2020 really tested our mettle. A favorite word of Shakespeare’s, mettle refers to the quality and composition of a person’s character, the strength of their spirit, courage and resilience. It’s a word that beautifully captures what our school, staff, students and families all share and value. It describes skill sets that underlie and inform our Community Core values and tools, and shape our day-to-day interactions. Above all, mettle defines what has helped us carry on, and even thrive, in this year of years.

On a cold and rainy Friday last March, we learned that schools would be closing and our mettle was put to the test. We dove into a pandemic-driven retooling of our OSS program from stem to stern, and had only one long weekend to craft the foundation of our Distance Learning platform. First and foremost, we ensured that everyone had basics like food and secure housing, internet and technology for classes, and appropriate expectations around school work. Students needed enough of a challenge to maintain engagement and learning, while recognizing the distractions and complications of learning remotely during a pandemic.

It was a tricky balance. Figuring it all out felt like choreographing a modern dance, and our steps were careful, thoughtful, and grounded in care for one another. Our performance was strong because all of our stakeholders—staff, students, families and volunteers—demonstrated their courage, strength of spirit and character, their mettle. And they proved their mettle again when, in spite of our exhaustion from the pandemic, it was time to engage fully with the other defining struggle of 2020—our nation’s ongoing battle against racism. This long overdue awakening was especially relevant given the constituency of our student body and the very diverse city that we live in, New Bedford. And we tried, and continue to try, to face it head on, engaging in conversations about the state of our nation and what it could one day be.

We hope that this report gives you a sense of our work this past year. It certainly hasn’t been simple, and we are proud of all we have accomplished. It was a true test of our mettle and, working together, we at OSS—every one of us—more than made the grade.

Sincerely,

Sarah Herman
Head of School

Alison Coolidge Boreiko
Co-president
Board of Trustees

Martha Sullivan
Co-president
Board of Trustees
Social justice has always been at the heart of our work at OSS. Central to our purpose is teaching and learning for freedom of opportunity and growth. Over the last year, the urgency of our mission was magnified by events that showed how deeply racism is embedded in our society. These events increased public awareness, intensifying our collective commitment to uproot injustice that shapes our school’s culture, methods, and curriculum.

Culture
Caring for and loving our girls—the majority of whom identify as Black, Latinx, and multiracial—is our greatest responsibility and the foundation of the OSS culture. Adults here work tirelessly to model what it means to
attend to each community member’s humanity, make sure that all students feel truly seen and heard, and celebrate where they come from and who they want to become.

Our Community Core framework provides a shared language and tool box for social and emotional skills like Value Identity and Step Up, Step Back. Students and staff maintain a learner’s mindset—essential to seeing and “unlearning” biases. We constantly listen to and learn from our community. We practice naming racism and white supremacy when we see it and acting to dismantle it. OSS staff challenge ourselves to know more and do better, so critical given that our staff is predominantly White. Do we get it right every time? Nope. Do we try really hard? Oh, yes. Recently, we have grappled in new ways that have been uncomfortable and growthful. We try, we learn, we keep trying. That is the essence of our culture and commitment.

Methods
Sharing power and joy, both fundamental tenets of social justice, underpin our teaching methods. We do this by embracing and teaching to our students’ strengths and interests, harnessing their desire to create and discuss, question and investigate, perform and reflect.

For example, students design science experiments on topics they care about, select diverse authors for independent reading, engage in open studio art practice, unearth their own family roots, and more. This year, eighth-graders chose, as a group, to read aloud This Book is Antiracist by Tiffany Jewell, to question teachers and school policy, and some to march against police brutality. Our fifth-graders initiated “Feminist Friday” discussions at lunch. Other students and graduates participate in the local NAACP Youth Council and have advocated for immigrant rights. When students trust in their own brilliant power to learn and lead, they gain autonomy, competence, and confidence. They learn they can change the world.

Curriculum
The humanities include a deep exploration of identity, critically examining representation in literature and media, and probing the impact of both racism and activism on our nation’s history and culture. Students analyze oppression through the lens of the “4 I’s” (ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internal) and Circles of Oppression/Resistance.

This, and other explicit study and dialogue in humanities, dovetails with teaching for racial literacy and critical consciousness across our other content areas. In science, students learn about environmental justice and some Indigenous ways of understanding the natural world. In math, they explore how bias can affect the ways people display and interpret statistical data. In health, the pandemic provides a case study for students researching disparities across racial and class identities. In art, the Powerful Women Artists project elevates local women of color as artistic role models, and the “SHE” portrait series encourages Sister Sailors to see themselves as changemakers.

Girls learn how to lift their voices in public speaking, writing, and soon podcasting. They log Active Civic Engagement (ACE) actions driven by their own passions to serve others and advocate for justice.

OSS equips students with knowledge and practice in social analysis, a sense of personal and political agency, and skills for social action. A transformative place of learning involves constant reflection and iteration, requiring us all to be both teachers and learners. The work we do with each other, within ourselves, and with community partners is more imperative than ever. OSS students are powerful and courageous, and they know that the future is theirs. Soon they will assume institutional roles of power. I believe they will be ready, and we will all be more free.

To read a more detailed description of our racial justice work, please visit www.oursistersschool.org.
Creativity and Resilience

They have been the lifeblood of OSS since its founding. Over the past 10 months, their relevance and efficacy have been tested as never before. And never have they been so urgently present in the day-to-day life of our school community.

“We were flummoxed,” says Head of School Sarah Herman, recalling the Friday in March when the governor issued a stay-at-home order and the Covid-19 pandemic upended our world. “During our remaining hours in the building we had lunch as a staff, made a spirited music video to appreciate our volunteers, and then everyone went home. We had three days to come up with a plan.” So began a “constant conversation” about
how to meet the needs of students and families while balancing the capacity of the staff. A detailed plan unfurled in phases, shifting with the unpredictable course of the virus. The challenges of distance learning and ensuring the health of all OSS households were huge, and in perpetual flux. But Ms. Herman says there was “always an eagerness to figure out how to make it work with joy and positive results.”

Through a difficult spring, the community adapted to an evolving system of remote learning, frequent one-on-one check-ins, and vigorous family engagement and support on multiple levels—physical, emotional and cognitive. Graduation festivities took place in the School parking lot with spectators viewing from their cars. Still, the mood was ebullient.

The warm weather brought a newly invigorated summer program—a tent was added and a new greenhouse was constructed in the Outdoor Classroom. Students, staff and volunteers perfected social distancing and masking. The thrill of being together was palpable and a Covid Response Planning Committee kicked into high gear. A critical decision loomed: Would it be safe to reopen the building for the new school year? After many hours of research, debate and problem-solving, the answer was a cautious yes. “We all took an informed, carefully constructed, thoughtfully planned risk,” Ms. Herman says. “Teachers put themselves on the line, families entrusted us with their children, and we offered the OSS@HomePathway for students who simply couldn’t join us in the building.”

Throughout the fall and winter, the School has been prepared to shut down and re-open to preserve the in-person experience, which students continue to prefer. “They’re so overwhelmingly happy to be back together,” according to Ariana Wohl, Academic Dean and Humanities Chair. “They are valuing their education. They are adapting. That’s what Sister Sailors do.”

Families remain intimate partners in keeping the school community safe—responding to numerous surveys on needs and preferences, holding their children home even with mild cold symptoms, getting tested and sharing details with the School. Gale Beaton, volunteer supervising nurse, stays in close touch with families, providing medical guidance and serving as a go-between with students’ pediatricians. If or when there are cases that force a building shutdown, the School is ready. “If we need to go fully remote, that’s not failure,” Ms. Herman says. “It’s part of our plan.”
A PIONEER RETURNS

Confident: Samya ’22; OSS students chose a word with which they identify most in the "SHE" portrait series.

As a member of the pioneer fifth-grade class in 2008, Ronni Mak ’12 returned to OSS in 2020 with a freshly-minted degree from Bates College. She volunteered as an OSS academic tutor when she was in high school, and this past summer became the first OSS graduate to return as a teacher.

Staff member Margaret McSweeny, Ronni’s former teacher and advisor, comments, “Ronni was—and continues to be—hardworking, inquisitive, collaborative and kind. It brings me such joy to see her as a grown woman, and to work with her at the School we both love.”

Ronni is grateful for the support, connections, and experiences that OSS provides, and credits the School with helping her develop courage, confidence, and empathy. Combined with her natural curiosity and wide-ranging talents, these qualities propelled Ronni’s academic success through the Wheeler School (‘16) and Bates College (‘20). Having earned a degree in biology with minors in math and chemistry, and with her eyes set on graduate school, Ronni is spending this most unusual year assisting Jocelyn Mitchell in the science classroom. It is a win-win scenario because her time is meaningfully invested as she applies to advanced degree programs in Marine Science and Technology.

“As a student I couldn’t have known all the work that goes into teaching and supporting students through the middle school experience. Now that I’m teaching science with Ms. Mitchell, I can see how much it takes and how the School has matured.” Ronni is impressed with how OSS has evolved and progressed from her pioneer days. In her work here, Ronni feels she can relate well to the students and hopes to serve as an example of someone who took full advantage of the OSS experience as a student and a graduate. To us, Ronni is already a shining example of everything that OSS stands for.
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Every effort has been made to ensure accuracy of this report. Please accept our apologies and let us know of any errors at 508.994.1255 or email ggoulding@oursistersschool.org.

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“Ayla is highly engaged in all of her classes even though she is fully remote this week...Thank you for helping her keep her love for learning during her first unique year at OSS.”

Val Silva P’20, ’24

Left to right:
Seated: Helena DaSilva Hughes, Faith Morningstar, Alison Coolidge Boreiko, Beppie Huidekoper, Bill Prescott, Toby Baker
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Not pictured: Per Lofberg, Jocelina Pires
Mission
Our mission, as an independent, tuition-free, non-sectarian middle school, is to educate and inspire economically disadvantaged girls from the New Bedford area. Our Sisters’ School empowers girls to step into the future with valuable life skills and a mindset of achievement and excellence by providing a safe, supportive, and academically challenging environment.

Support The OSS Fund
We are deeply grateful for your generosity—you make it possible for OSS students to receive an extraordinary education and transformative opportunities. We will continue to empower our girls and stay true to our core values of Excellence, Community, Citizenship, and Leadership. Thank you for joining us on this rewarding journey. To discuss how you can help OSS, please contact Georgie Goulding, Director of Advancement, at 508.994.1255 or ggoulding@oursistersschool.org.

Why “Our Sisters”? 
Our school’s name honors the bravery of the women known as “sister sailors” who boldly headed out to sea from New Bedford’s harbor during the city’s whaling days. Like these women, OSS students courageously embark on a voyage in a challenging academic environment carefully crafted to support them as they discover and achieve their greatest potential, while finding true north on their moral compass.

Many thanks to Cela Hobbs for designing this report; Kim Goddard, Virginia Sutherland, and OSS staff for providing the photography.

Our Sisters’ School, Inc. admits girls as students to the School regardless of their race, color, national or ethnic origin, religion, creed, or sexual orientation. The School does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national or ethnic origin, religion, creed, or sexual orientation in administration of its educational policies, admissions policies, scholarship programs, athletic and other school administered programs.

Our Sisters’ School, Inc. employs personnel of any race, color, national or ethnic origin, gender, gender identity, religion, creed, and sexual orientation to all the rights, privileges and activities generally accorded or made available to personnel at the School.

“They’re so overwhelmingly happy to be back together. They are valuing their education. They are adapting. That’s what Sister Sailors do.”

Ariana Wohl, Academic Dean and Humanities Chair