

Developing the Whole Student in a Community of Care

by J.D. Childs, President

Bishop O’Dowd High School is lauded for many things, among them its strong academic programs, its competitive sports teams, and its diverse student body. But O’Dowd’s most distinctive quality is defined by its Catholic values, shared through the prism of charism. Our students see their learning—both in and out of the classroom—as a means to create a more just, joyful, and sustainable world. As they grow and develop, they offer their gifts in service to the common good.

At O’Dowd, we seek to educate the whole student and help each to find their own authentic voice. ***We’ve cultivated a rich, diverse community of learning and faith steeped in Catholic values and a commitment to social justice.*** We know that a culture of many voices and ideas enhances learning, builds emotional intelligence, and broadens perspectives. And because our students engage in intentional dialogue and inquiry, they learn to approach problems in more sophisticated ways.

A Formative Education

A key factor in helping to develop the whole student is by offering a rich array of co-curricular activities, and this is another significant differentiator at O’Dowd. A formative education recognizes that each student comes fully equipped as a whole person—only by exploring their individual interests and passions are they able to reveal all their gifts. We believe that such activities encourage students to reach their fullest expression through values-based formation. They become better at critical thinking, problem solving, and interacting with all types of people. And they grow into more effective, empathetic leaders who are deeply engaged individuals, whether in their professional, civic, social, or faith communities.



Furthermore, longitudinal studies have repeatedly shown that co-curricular involvement improves academic performance, raises GPAs and increases graduation rates. Students participating in co-curricular activities also demonstrated better time-management skills and higher levels of personal satisfaction.

Through O’Dowd’s co-curricular programs, students participate in 25 competitive teams across 15 sports, 45+ student-led clubs, 5 musical groups, a robust theater-arts program, and many campus leadership opportunities. In the fall of 2019, we received applications for 33 new clubs, ranging from aerospace engineering to beekeeping. The school’s schedule is designed to provide regular opportunities for students to meet for clubs, leadership groups, planning sessions for major school events such as Spirit Week and Multicultural Week, or to study or meet with teachers.

Co-curriculars provide additional space for our students to learn, be seen, feel heard, and shine. There’s a direct correlation between community support and higher learning potential.

The second-century bishop and theologian St. Ireneaus wrote, “The glory of God is the human being fully alive!” In that spirit, O’Dowd’s vast range of co-curriculars activates the mind, the heart, the body, the emotions, the imagination, and the will so that each unique student can discover their best self and speak with their own voice.

A Sense of Belonging and Growth

Just as it’s critical to develop the individual, so too is the need to gather in community. Developing a sense of belonging around a shared identity is crucial to our educational enterprise and cuts to the heart of who we are as a Catholic school.

Praying together, reflecting on self-care in health and wellness assemblies, celebrating our history and legacy at Founders Day, coming to a deeper understanding of history through our Black Student Union assemblies, or creating school spirit by cheering at games and rallies—such gatherings give students perspective, formative memories, and a commitment to shared values. There is profound value in such moments, when students frame their aspirations and can say, “I’m a part of something bigger than myself that has meaning and purpose.”

But a strong sense of community provides other benefits as well – it actually helps students learn. When kids feel supported, they’re more inclined to take risks and push



themselves further. “At O’Dowd, I feel welcomed and encouraged to try more” is a sentiment we hear often. A strong sense of community and belonging promotes resiliency, growth, creativity, and self-advocacy.

Research from Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child has identified a common set of factors that predispose children to positive outcomes: facilitating supportive adult-child relationships; building a sense of self-efficacy; providing opportunities to strengthen adaptive skills; and mobilizing sources of faith, hope, and cultural traditions.

O’Dowd’s vital balance of community belonging and co-curricular programming provides a foundational safety that supports risk, discomfort, and problem-solving, leading to growth and development.

A School Separated

Unfortunately, O’Dowd does not currently have a building large enough to serve as a gathering space for our entire student population at such community-wide events as prayer services, assemblies, and rallies. The only place on campus with enough space for everyone to gather is the outdoor quad; most Masses and assemblies take place in the large gym where only half of the community can assemble – thus requiring two events each time.

Assemblies and Masses share messages and blessings that are intended to be received as one community. O’Dowd’s values of community and inclusion are diminished when our school is divided.

The power of receiving together is as important as the message being shared, but we are without a space that captures the spirit, pride points, and experience of our charism values in one place.

We dream of the whole community in fellowship together, celebrating our diversity and faith under one roof.

The O’Dowd Center – Innovative and Dynamic

Institutions must adapt to changing circumstances in order to remain vital and relevant. With the tenets of our charism to guide us toward innovation, we can be true citizens of faith in how we deliver our curriculum and steward the formation of our students. To that end, we envision a new facility in which we can expand the excellence and accessibility of our programming.

The new O’Dowd Center will support the heart and soul of the O’Dowd co-curricular experience. It will be designed to host a wide range of multidisciplinary activities and will provide a new dynamic

space—an open and light-filled gymnasium—in which students, faculty, staff, and alumni can come together to learn and play, practice and celebrate, pray and worship.

When we facilitate authentic engagement for our students in the context of a larger community, they are fully alive... and that's where we find God!

In addition, the new Center will feature two multi-purpose classrooms, a professionally designed music studio, a drama studio with small-scale performance space, and a modern strength-and-conditioning and sports medicine facility.

Advancing Our Strengths and Our Values

Today's business model for Catholic schools comes with enormous financial pressures. Our mission drives us to maintain tuition at a rate that's affordable to the middle class, to provide generous tuition assistance for those who need a financial bridge, and to offer competitive wages to our faculty and staff. Bishop O'Dowd High School is thriving but, in order to continue to maintain a balance of these financial commitments, we must work to remain an attractive option for future families. We must bring our campus into the twenty-first century with facilities that advance our strengths and our values.

The ways in which the O'Dowd Center will transform our campus and enhance our students' experience are still unfolding. But we know that the new facility will be a physical manifestation of our charism, promoting community in diversity, academic excellence, strength of character, kinship with creation, social justice, and joy. **It will create new opportunities for us to develop institutional habits that nurture spirit, engagement, and pride. And it will embrace our school's entire community in new and inclusive ways.**

At Bishop O'Dowd High School, we take seriously our responsibility to steward our remarkable students, daily guiding them to realize their full potential on every level. Building the new O'Dowd Center will fundamentally improve our ability to form and educate future generations of students.

