

## AUTUMN RUN

Española's Jennifer Valdez and Cedar Crest's Stephen Clarke are winners at the Duke City Marathon

SPORTS ■ B1



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## Expectations Do Wonders for Pupils

Joline Gutierrez Krueger

UPFRONT

### THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

*Editor's note: This is the latest in a series of stories and columns on the educational achievement gap between Hispanic and Anglo*

*students in New Mexico. Go to [ABQjournal.com](http://ABQjournal.com) and look for "Achievement Gap" for previous stories in the series.*

Sister Marianella Domenici, principal of St. Mary's School and icon of Albuquerque parochial academia, gives me that look perfected by nuns since the rosary was invented that makes me suddenly feel guilty, small, sweaty and slightly fearful that behind her back she wields a ruler to thwack my knuckles.

In seconds, I am reduced to the same shy Catholic schoolgirl I was before graduating from St. Mary's 37 years ago.

This is all in my head, I know. Sister Marianella is a perfectly lovely and loved woman, as witnessed by the spontaneous hugs and polite professions of affection she receives from the uniformed cherubs who march in single file — always single file — down the school halls where she and I are chatting.

For 20 years she has run my alma mater in Downtown Albuquerque with the same devotion to education and spiritual growth that has been the school's hallmark since 1893 — which is just a little before my nine years there.

(Yes, kidding.)

"We have the best school," she says in that way that leaves little room for questioning, if you dared. "That's all."

There's something to that, I think. Just this month, St. Mary's was one of the 16 schools of the

Archdiocese of Santa Fe district accredited by AdvancED, more familiarly known as North Central Association, which is apparently a big deal.

The archdiocese district — praised by AdvancED for its high scores in testing, graduation rates and college prep and admissions — is the sixth in the nation and the only one in New Mexico to be so accredited.

The district boasts a 99 percent graduation rate, and its students consistently rank two or three grade levels higher in standardized testing.

"We definitely have proof that we're a good school," Sister Marianella says.

My personal proof is this: Of the top 10 students from Albuquerque High School's Class of 1975 — my class, in case you couldn't guess — nine were St. Mary's grads.

Most of us, near as I can tell, went on to college and are doing quite well these days, thank you very much.

We were never aware of any achievement gap between Hispanic and Anglo students, because there was no gap at St. Mary's.

The same is true today at St. Mary's, says Kirk Hartom, archdiocese assistant school superintendent.

"There's no differentiation with ethnicity in our standardized test scores," he says. "All our kids do well."

So I returned to St. Mary's hoping to learn how my old school has been able to narrow the achievement



JOURNAL FILE

**Sister Marianella Domenici is principal at St. Mary's School. The school consistently reports above-average test scores.**



JOURNAL FILE

**Sister Marianella Domenici has served as principal at St. Mary's school in Downtown Albuquerque for 20 years. School officials contend there is no ethnic achievement gap there.**

gap, which continues to plague New Mexico public schools.

Recent figures from the state Public Education Department show that Hispanic students receive poorer test scores than their Anglo counterparts.

Hispanics also have a dismal graduation rate of about 56 percent, compared with the slightly less dismal rate of 71 percent among Anglo students.

Although archdiocese schools do not break down statistics according to ethnicity, consider that 65 percent of their students are Hispanic, Hartom says.

At St. Mary's, it's 77 percent.

And lest you think St. Mary's is an elitist school, consider that a majority of its students come from the surrounding low-income neighborhoods.

"Some of our parents work two and three jobs to pay for their kids to come here," teacher Shannon Morgan says. "Quite a few of the kids receive tuition assistance."

So what's St. Mary's secret to success?

Both Morgan and Sister Marianella point to a number of factors, including smaller class size, more focus on basic skills, more homework. There's also a greater emphasis on discipline, order and safety.

"We just don't have the same kinds of issues here that other schools have — the thefts, the gangs, the drugs," Morgan says. "Most of our discipline problems involve being out of uniform or not bringing in homework."

But it's less ruler-thwacking, with more focus on the simple things such as wearing uniforms, walking in single file, turning in papers that are neat and in accordance with school style, learning good old-fashioned manners, respect and reverence.

It's the discipline of pausing precisely at noon on the school playground to recite the Angelus when you'd much rather continue that game of tag or gab with your homegirls.

It's Sister Marianella's way of striking the fear of God into you with that look and those high expectations that you will do your best, be your best, if you know what's good for you.

Teachers, too, are equally committed.

"We're not getting the same sort of pay or benefits as other districts, so for us we truly see this as a vocation," Morgan says. "It is not a job — it's who we are."

Parental support is another key factor.

"If you're going to invest so much in your child's education, you're likely going to be there to make sure you are getting your money's worth," Morgan says.

My mom, who worked a night shift at a hospital to help pay the tuition for me and my four siblings, spent hours drilling us with the spelling and math flash cards she made out of the backs of old cigarette cartons.

I asked her once why we had to go to a school that made us work so darn hard and wear such scratchy uniforms.

"Because it's the best school," she told me. "That's all."

I have often wondered whether we St. Mary's fairies, as we called ourselves then, were successful more because we were lucky enough to attend a school like St. Mary's or because we came from families that believed in the importance of attending a school like St. Mary's.

I suspect it's a little of both.

Having a principal like Sister Marianella in charge probably doesn't hurt, either.

UpFront is a daily front-page opinion column. You can reach Joline at 823-3603, [jkrueger@abqjournal.com](mailto:jkrueger@abqjournal.com) or follow her on Twitter [@jolinegkg](https://twitter.com/jolinegkg).

## About St. Mary's school

**FOUNDED:** 1893

**LOCATED:**  
224 Seventh NW

**ENROLLMENT:** 561,  
pre-K through eighth  
grade, 77 percent  
Hispanic

**TUITION:** \$4,360

**AVERAGE CLASS SIZE:**  
18 students