

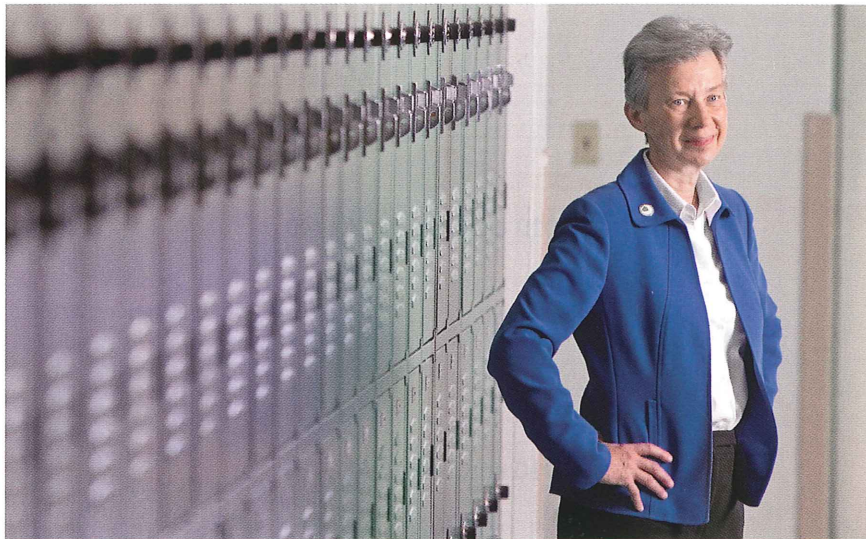
Suzanne Fessler, *St. Mary's High School*

PHOTO BY DAVID WALLACE

## Principal reflects history, tradition of St. Mary's

Few people can question Suzanne Fessler's commitment to her students at St. Mary's Catholic High School in Phoenix.

About 18 years ago, after she'd already been with the school for several years, one of the female students asked about starting a golf program.

Fessler had never played or even watched the game. But Fessler and another staffer soon were taking lessons, learning the game, negotiating with golf courses to allow the students to practice, and forming a team.

Ten years later, she was named the state's coach of the year for golf.

Now serving as principal after 27 years with the school, Fessler no longer coaches but says that her commitment to improving student life remains strong.

"I believe that to serve others is my calling, and I strive to live and model that every day," she says. "I enjoy meeting the students whom I taught mathematics and science to several years ago, now bringing their own children to St. Mary's to continue the family tradition. I enjoy encouraging the students to try harder when they are faced with academic, social and athletic obstacles."

As Arizona prepares to celebrate its 100th anniversary as a state, St. Mary's is planning its own celebration, as it will turn 100 in six years.

Fessler started her career at St. Mary's in 1984, when the school was at Third and Polk streets in downtown Phoenix, before it moved to its current location on Third Street south of Thomas Road.

Fessler says she long wanted to work in a private school.

She was born in Detroit to parents who were bankers, and she attended a Catholic school through eighth grade.

"There was never any doubt in my mind that I would be a teacher in a Catholic school," she says.

She moved to Phoenix during high school, graduating from Arcadia High School in 1972. She earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees at Arizona State University.

During her final semester at ASU, she requested to conduct her student teaching at Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Tempe. She also worked at Most Holy Trinity Catholic School and St. Theresa Catholic School before moving to St. Mary's.

Serving as principal was never in her plans, but she has appreciated the job.

"It is extremely challenging to be the spiritual, academic, social and athletic leader of the school — but it is a good and rewarding challenge," she says.

Fessler says that the school's firm religious foundation remains an important aspect of helping students succeed.

— Ryan Randazzo

### TOP 10: Private schools

- 1 Rancho Solano Private Schools**  
 5656 E. Greenway Road, Scottsdale, 85254 • 602-996-7002 • ranchosolano.com. **Founded:** 1954. **Employees:** 238. **Enrollment:** 1,710. **Ariz. campuses:** 5. **Principal:** Jim Carruthers, president. **Highest-ranking woman:** Jeannine McDonald, headmaster.
- 2 Brophy College Preparatory**  
 4701 N. Central Ave., Phoenix, 85012 • 602-264-5291 • brophyprep.org. **Founded:** 1928. **Employees:** 100. **Enrollment:** 1,250. **Ariz. campuses:** 1. **Principal:** Bob Ryan, principal. **Highest-ranking woman:** Adria Renke, vice president.
- 3 Northwest Christian School**  
 16401 N. 43rd Ave., Phoenix, 85053 • 602-978-5134 • ncsaz.org. **Founded:** 1980. **Employees:** 120. **Enrollment:** 1,225. **Ariz. campuses:** 1. **Principal:** Geoff Brown, superintendent. **Highest-ranking woman:** JoAnn Roberts, elementary principal.
- 4 Xavier College Preparatory**  
 4710 N. Fifth St., Phoenix, 85012 • 602-277-3772 • www.xcp.org. **Founded:** 1943. **Employees:** 174. **Enrollment:** 1,170. **Ariz. campuses:** 1. **Principal:** Sister Joan Fitzgerald, principal. **Highest-ranking woman:** Sister Joan Fitzgerald, principal.
- 5 Scottsdale Christian Academy**  
 14400 N. Tatum Blvd., Phoenix, 85032 • 602-992-5100 • scottsdalechristian.org. **Founded:** 1968. **Employees:** 100. **Enrollment:** 935. **Ariz. campuses:** 2. **Principal:** Tim Hillen, superintendent. **Highest-ranking woman:** Sheri Moy, elementary principal.
- 6 Notre Dame Preparatory**  
 9701 E. Bell Road, Scottsdale, 85260 • 480-634-8200 • notredamepreparatory.org. **Founded:** 2002. **Employees:** 120. **Enrollment:** 930. **Ariz. campuses:** 1. **Principal:** David Gonsalves, principal. **Highest-ranking woman:** Carolyn Rock, development director.
- 7 Phoenix Country Day School**  
 3901 E. Stanford Drive, Paradise Valley, 85253 • 602-955-8200 • pcds.org. **Founded:** 1961. **Employees:** 140. **Enrollment:** 692. **Ariz. campuses:** 1. **Principal:** Lee Pierson, interim principal. **Highest-ranking woman:** Kathy Peters, chief financial officer.
- 8 St. Mary's High School**  
 2525 N. Third St., Phoenix, 85004 • 602-251-2500 • smknights.org. **Founded:** 1917. **Employees:** 63. **Enrollment:** 575. **Ariz. campuses:** 1. **Principal:** Suzanne Fessler, principal. **Highest-ranking woman:** Suzanne Fessler, principal.
- 9 Phoenix Christian Unified Schools**  
 1751 W. Indian School Road, Phoenix, 85015 • 602-265-4707 • phoenixchristian.org. **Founded:** 1949. **Employees:** 91. **Enrollment:** 566. **Ariz. campuses:** 1. **Principal:** Jim Koan, superintendent. **Highest-ranking woman:** Renee Trapp, district business manager.
- 10 Seton Catholic Preparatory High School**  
 1150 N. Dobson Road, Chandler, 85224 • 480-963-1900 • setoncatholic.org. **Founded:** 1954. **Employees:** 70. **Enrollment:** 540. **Ariz. campuses:** 1. **Principal:** Patricia Collins, principal. **Highest-ranking woman:** Patricia Collins, principal.