THE SCHOOL YOUR DAUGHTER NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT

Regina Dominican has been preparing young women for life on the North Shore for over 65 years. What's happening inside 701 Locust Road today — in the classroom, on the campus, and in the community — is a story every North Shore family deserves to hear.

By Paul Clements
All Photos courtesy of Regina Dominican High School

Here is what you might not know about the school at 701 Locust Road in Wilmette.

Regina Dominican's Class of 2026 earned $16.5 million in college scholarships and was accepted to more than 139 colleges and universities. Young women who graduate from here are 10 times more likely to major in a STEM field in college than their peers at co-ed high schools — a national statistic that already runs at six times, but at Regina, it's 10. The school holds AP Platinum status from the College Board — that organization's highest academic distinction — for the third consecutive year. This year, Regina Dominican was also one of only 50 private schools to be named a National Blue Ribbon School. Its student-to-teacher ratio is 8:1. Average class size: 13.

COMMITMENT TO ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE: Our curriculum is aligned to national standards. Our grading and assessment practices are rooted in current educational research. Our selection as one of only 50 private schools nationally to receive Blue Ribbon recognition is a direct result of this commitment.

This school operates on the same North Shore landscape as New Trier, one of the top-ranked public high schools in the country, and North Shore Country Day, one of the highest-ranked independent schools in Illinois. Regina Dominican holds its own. It has for over 65 years. It does it with an enrollment building toward 300 students, an all-girls Catholic Dominican mission, and an uncommon clarity of purpose: to graduate capable, confident, community-minded young women who are ready for whatever comes next.

Eleanor "Ellie" Schmerler-Rich came back to Regina Dominican the way people come back to the places that made them. A Class of '09 alumna, she is now the school's Vice President of Enrollment and Marketing — and its most convinced advocate. "Regina's still here," she says. "We will still be here. We don't want to be a hidden gem anymore."

Not Your Mother's Girls' School

When most North Shore families picture an all-girls Catholic school, a certain image comes to mind. Regina Dominican has quietly and thoroughly outgrown it.

The school's educational philosophy is built around mastery over memorization. "We're not teaching girls to memorize something for a test," Ellie explains. "We're teaching them to understand and grasp those concepts — to master a subject so they can carry it forward." A concept learned freshman year is designed to connect and build across all four years. Cross-disciplinary integration is woven in: what a student learns in chemistry connects to what she'll discuss in Catholic social teaching, or apply in English.

Every Thursday, faculty gather by department in Professional Learning Communities — PLCs — to look at curriculum, teaching methods, and how ideas link across disciplines. The outcomes reflect it. AP Platinum status requires consistently exceptional performance across multiple AP exams. Students face no barriers to that coursework — at Regina, a student can take AP classes beginning freshman year. Seventeen AP courses are available. "We want our girls to feel confident in challenging themselves," Ellie says.

Class sizes make the difference tangible. Level 1 sections — designed for students who benefit from a more hands-on instructional pace — run eight to 12 students. Honors sections, eight to 10. AP classes, six to eight.

"There's nowhere for a student to hide," Ellie says. "They're going to be seen. They're going to be known. They're going to be challenged. And they're going to be supported."

REGINA DOMINICAN — BY THE NUMBERS

8:1 Student-to-teacher ratio
13 Average class size
17 AP courses — open to students beginning freshman year
AP Platinum College Board's highest distinction, 3 consecutive years
$16.5M In scholarships earned by the Class of 2026
139+ Colleges accepting Class of 2026 graduates
10× More likely: Regina graduates majoring in STEM vs. co-ed peers

The college counseling program reinforces that confidence early. Beginning freshman year, college is already part of the conversation, introduced early so it becomes familiar rather than daunting. By sophomore and junior year, students are visiting actual campuses: small, medium, and large.

"The first time they're on a college campus, we want them to know what questions to ask," Ellie says. "We don't want them frozen at the door."

They aren't. Regina alumnae consistently arrive at college and immediately run for things, join things, lead things.

"Colleges know the type of student they're getting when they see a Regina Dominican applicant," Ellie says. "They know she's going to be involved. She's going to bring something to their community."

At Regina, Ellie played soccer and bowling, was active in student council, and found herself drawn to leadership opportunities beyond campus. When she got to college, she wrote for the newspaper, got involved in intramurals, joined clubs, because Regina had already wired her that way. "Being involved here was just second nature — so I thought, why can't I do that in college?"

The momentum carries to the athletic field as well. This spring, the Panthers track and field team captured the IHSA Sectional Championship — the program's first sectional title since 2009 and only the second in school history — with multiple athletes now bound for the IHSA State Finals in Charleston. In 2024, the basketball team reached the IHSA Final Four, the program's first downstate appearance in more than two decades. Eleven varsity sports, and a school that means business in all of them.

Teaching Girls to Lead — and to Fail

Perhaps the least well-known feature of a Regina Dominican education is also its most distinctive: the Leadership Institute — the only academic institute within any high school in the area dedicated to leadership development specifically for young women.

For those who apply in the second semester of freshman year, a Leadership Scholars track offers an intensive experience built around research, group collaboration, and creative problem-solving. Junior year, students present their work at an Innovation Fair — developing apps, designing community solutions, thinking well outside the conventional. It all builds toward a senior capstone project. This year, two students researched oil spill cleanup, discovered that natural human hair absorbs petroleum more effectively than synthetic materials, and organized a campus hair drive to benefit an environmental nonprofit before graduation.

The Leadership Institute extends beyond the classroom and the innovation fair — and once a month, it opens the door to the wider world.

The Institute's Her Story Started Here speaker series brings a Regina alumna back to campus every month. The message, again and again: you don't have to have it figured out at eighteen. "Eight times out of 10," Ellie says, "the speaker will say she wanted to be a doctor, or some other profession, then realized she didn't, changed her major, took a different path — and now she's a professor at Northwestern, for example, or a nurse practitioner, or a judge."

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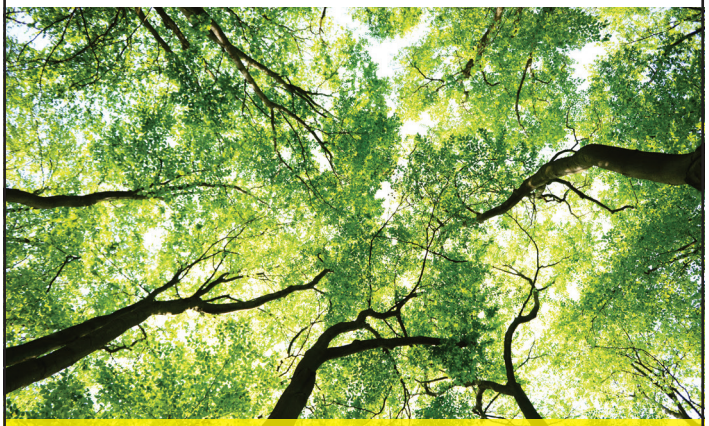
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Critically, the Leadership Institute also teaches students how to fail. How to learn from it. How to try again. "Most schools teach you how to succeed," Ellie says. "But what if you fail? That's a component here. If you fail, how do you learn from it? And how do you get back up and try again?"

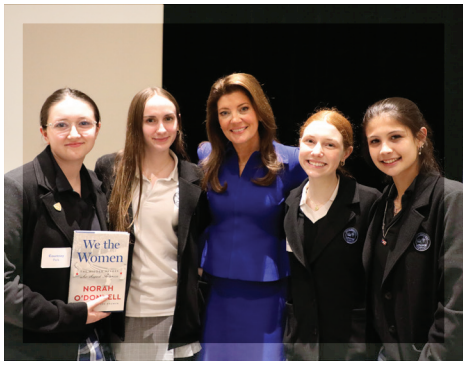
A Hub for the Whole North Shore

Regina Dominican has become something larger than a school. Sixty percent of its students are Catholic; forty percent are not. They come from across the North Shore and the city, from different faiths and different backgrounds, drawn by a common conviction — that an all-girls education still matters, perhaps now more than ever.

"The impacts of COVID on students coming in, what that meant for their education — we see that," Ellie says. "And specializing in educating young women is something we've been doing for over 65 years. Whether a student comes in extremely academically motivated or needs to build her confidence, she flourishes here."

The school has made it its mission to become a gathering place for the wider North Shore community — a venue for women, families, and ideas.

A few months ago, the school hosted CBS News anchor Nora O'Donnell for an evening celebrating her new book We The Women, timed to the nation's 250th anniversary. More than 600 people came. The event was moderated by Marie Saavedra '02, a Regina alumna and CBS 2 Chicago anchor. Sound and lighting were run entirely by Regina students — so seamlessly that O'Donnell told the audience she'd had professional production crews that didn't do as well as the Regina team.



More recently, Regina partnered with The FAN Network to host Dr. Mary Claire Haver for the launch of her book on women's health. The balcony was packed, and the crowd told its own story — a handful of attendees were Regina alumni, women who had learned within these walls as girls and returned decades later to learn about themselves as women.

Among them was Assistant Principal Verna Allworth — Class of '77, a Regina fixture for more than 40 years. When she walked into the room that night, former students spotted her from across the crowd. They made their way to her, calling her name, the way people seek out someone who genuinely shaped them. It was, without anyone planning it that way, a living portrait of what Regina Dominican produces.

A Regina Girl Redesigning Regina

The transformation at Regina Dominican is not only philosophical. It is structural.

In 2018, the school engaged Carol Ross Barney — Class of '66 — to reimagine the campus from the ground up. The founder and design principal of Ross Barney Architects, Barney is the creative mind behind the Chicago Riverwalk, the multimodal transit center at O'Hare International Airport, and the rebuilt Oklahoma City Federal Building — making her one of the first women in U.S. history to design a federal building. In 2023, she became the first living woman to individually receive the AIA Gold Medal, the American Institute of Architects' highest honor. She is also, at her core, a Panther. "A Regina girl redesigning Regina for future Regina girls," Ellie says.

Phase one of the four-phase Campus Master Plan — funded through an $8 million campaign led by VP of Advancement Joan Kitchie, a Class of '77 alumna — is complete. A new secured main entrance anchors the building. At its heart: the learning stairs, a sweeping, stadium-style gathering space where every Wednesday morning the full student body assembles for morning meeting — celebrating each other, marking the week, building the community that is the connective tissue of a Regina education. Phase two is in planning. When all four phases are finished, every corner of this campus — built in 1958 and still fundamentally sound — will have been brought fully into the present.

The Girls Who Don't Freeze

At the most recent Black and White Gala — Regina Dominican's annual fundraiser — three seniors asked to speak. It had never happened before. Three students, so moved by what this school had given them, that the school made room for all three.

The first, Casey, was captain of the inaugural Regina Riveters robotics team, headed to Colorado State on a chancellor's scholarship to study biomedical engineering — a path she says began in a physics class. The second, Abby, was a golfer heading to the University of Alabama, who had leaned on her Regina community through family loss. The third was Kye — not Catholic, heading to Howard University — who sings in the choir, performs in musicals, cantors at mass, and became a Dominican Preacher, leading gospel reflections for a faith tradition she had made her own.

Three entirely different young women, from different backgrounds, with different plans. At a large high school, their paths might never have crossed. At Regina, they are family. At the gala, as the weight of four years rose in each of them, they didn't stay behind their own words. They reached for each other — an arm around a shoulder, hands clasped — the kind of instinctive gesture that needs no rehearsal. The room felt it.

COMMITMENT TO JOYFUL LEARNING: Our girls are happy at school! In the tradition of St. Dominic, known as "the joyful friar", we believe in the power of joy - especially in learning. We know that students and adults learn and teach better when they are happy. At Regina, you will see smiles and joyful interactions throughout the campus.

"That support," Ellie says quietly. "You don't get that everywhere."

These are the graduates Regina Dominican sends into the world: capable, connected, unafraid. Women who know how to walk into a room, ask the right questions, and get to work. Women who do not freeze at the door.

"If they leave here knowing they are capable," Ellie says, "then when they go to college, they know they're capable. And when they become young women in their professional lives, they know they are valued, they have a voice, and what they say matters."

Regina Dominican is not a hidden gem. It never should have been. For over 65 years, it has been turning girls into women who lead, serve, and show up for one another in ways that last a lifetime. The friendships forged here, the confidence built here, the voice found here — they don't end at graduation. They walk out the door and into the world, and they endure.

If you have a daughter who deserves all of that, the door at 701 Locust Road is open. Don't wait to walk through it.

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