

Scholar Athlete spotlight: Hazelwood Central's Hei plots future with her neighborhood in mind



Amanda Hei walks the halls of Hazelwood Central High with confidence and humility. Her classmates know her as an excellent student — one who always completes her assignments days before they are due. But as Hei holds her coveted planner in one hand, few of her classmates realize she also holds almost every high school swimming record in Hawks' history. In its 53rd year, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch Scholar Athlete program honors one student from every area school, a requirement being that they... During her career, Hei shattered long-standing times in nine of the 11 swimming events and stands just hundredths of a second off the all-time mark in a 10th event, the 50-yard butterfly. And Hei is not only a standout athlete in the water. As a member of the cross-country team she ran the ninth-fastest time in school history, and this fall she earned the esteemed Hawk Award, presented to the cross-country athlete who most exemplifies a winning attitude. "Most people don't even know I do a sport, because I don't like to talk about it in school," Hei said. "And if someone tries to tell me how good I am, I say, 'Oh, no, I'm not that good.'" Ranked 26th academically in a senior class of 439, Hei is Hazelwood Central's Post-Dispatch Scholar Athlete. She will continue her schooling and swimming career at the University of Missouri St. Louis, pursuing a degree in elementary and special education. Her mother Cynthia, a fifth-grade teacher at Jamestown Elementary, already sees the qualities of an effective educator in her youngest of five children. "She's got that easy-going personality, and there is just a natural draw that kids have to her," Cynthia Hei said. "She'll hear me talk about a student that I teach that might be in a difficult situation, and she'll send notes for me to put on his desk. She just really has that nature about her." And for Hei, a passion for education is something she tries to relay, even in the athletic arena. "She is committed to bringing up the next generation of swimmers," Hazelwood Central swim coach Erin Roades said. "She makes a point to talk about academics in front of her teammates, and makes it known that, out of the water, her grades are another focus of hers." But it may be Hei's sense of community that sets her apart. After achieving her degree, Hei's goal is to return to teach in North St. Louis County, remaining a positive influence in the lives of the young people growing up in her area. "I love North County. A lot of people think it's scary, but I don't think so at all," Hei said. "I grew up here, and I want to teach at a school where I know how the students grew up. I'll be teaching my generation's kids, so I'd like to give back to them." Hei has participated in more than 200 hours of community service within North County — volunteering during swim events, run/walk races and at the St. Louis Food Pantry. Her level of maturity is noticed, both outside and inside the classroom. "Amanda is an absolute dream to have in class," said English teacher Jana Poos, who teaches Hei in her creative writing course. "She is extremely mature, and her maturity comes out both in her behavior and her writing." Hei's parents met as lifeguards, and swimming was always an important activity for the family. Hei was in the water before she was 6 months old, and by age 4 was swimming competitively on the HEAT swimming team in Hazelwood. "They had never had a 4-year-old on the team before, but she could swim all four strokes," Cynthia Hei said. "The cool part is that she never learned bad habits. Because she was so young, she learned proper technique from the very beginning." Hei advanced to the state meet this season in the 100-yard butterfly and the 100 breaststroke, falling just short of a top-eight finish in each. She recorded her best times ever at state, a sign as the competition gets increasingly stronger in college, so will she. "Knowing Amanda the way I do, she is going to do everything in her power to step up to the challenge," Roades said. Accepting challenges is Hei's forte. During her senior year at Hazelwood Central, she was dual-enrolled at St. Louis Community College—Florissant Valley and at UMSL. She will have 15 college credit hours prior to stepping on campus in the fall. "I always have to plan ahead," Hei said. "I have to make sure I have time for everything I need to do." And next year's planner already has arrived in the mail.

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Suspending suspensions

Area schools show progress with innovations to help kids stay in classrooms.

School officials know suspensions hurt student achievement and can contribute to serious social problems later in life. At the youngest grades, sending a child home punishes working parents along with the students. Yet suspensions have long been seen as a necessary consequence for serious or repeated infractions. Federal data shows this punishment disproportionately affects black students, who are suspended at higher rates than whites.

Since 2016, several local districts have focused on reducing the amount of time the youngest students spend outside of class because of suspensions. More than a dozen districts vowed to reduce out-of-school suspensions for kindergarten to third graders, while three sought to eliminate the practice altogether. Locally, these efforts are paying off, according to a Post-Dispatch analysis of state data from 2016 to 2018.

The encouraging early results suggest districts are serious about finding strategies to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. Principals say no one wants to suspend a 5-year-old. Locally, some schools are putting smarter ideas into practice.

Out-of-school and in-school suspensions for students in early grades declined across the 16 districts within St. Louis city and county with data sets large enough to include in our analysis. Students in kindergarten to third grades typically range between 5 and 9 years old — key years for developing strong foundations in reading and math.

Local districts reported 2,434 out-of-school suspensions in 2018 for this

age group. That's a decline of 13 percent since 2016. The number of in-school suspensions fell 10 percent, to 2,058. The state followed this trend in grades kindergarten to second but backtracked at the third-grade level, where suspensions have risen steadily since 2016.

Districts are justified in continuing to suspend students who pose a threat to themselves or others. Besides, federal requirements under the Safe Schools Act supersede local policies that might call for greater leniency. But many suspensions still result merely from student insubordination — not violence, according to school officials.

Local districts that have reduced early-grade suspension rates, such as St. Louis Public Schools, focused on providing specialized teacher training on de-escalating confrontational situations and changing interactions with students who act out. Through grants and mental health partnerships, they invested earlier in more student services to deal with students' emotional and social needs.

Young children who spend hours idle in "cool down rooms" or the principal's office for in-school suspensions are not learning how to manage their emotions and avoid outbursts. Interventions that teach young children how to regulate their emotions and control behavior should pay off as the child gets older. These initial, modest declines in suspensions should yield improvements in subsequent years.

This progress sheds light on successful programs and funding priorities. Policymakers at the state level should take note.



Kyra Pearson (right), who was Hazelwood West High School senior class president, sits along New Halls Ferry Road during a May 2017 protest outside the Hazelwood School District administration building. Pearson was suspended for taking part in a student walkout, which affected her honors at graduation.

DAVID CARSON,
POST-DISPATCH



First responders called to crash near North County high school

HAZELWOOD, Mo. (KMOV.com) – A vehicle overturned near a North County high school Friday morning.

Around 7 a.m., first responders were called to New Halls Ferry Road near Hazelwood Central High School for a report of a crash. County police told News 4 the crash involved an SUV and an empty school bus.

Skyzoom4 was over the scene and saw one car overturned on its roof as police blocked the road. No major injuries were reported, authorities said.



https://www.kmov.com/news/first-responders-called-to-crash-near-north-county-high-school/article_235aa3c4-731b-11e9-921b-5b84360b811d.html

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