

PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS TYPICALLY HAVE THE DETERMINATION TO APPROPRIATELY SERVE ALL CHILDREN

Another example of the extent to which public school districts will go to serve students with disabilities is symbolized in a November 3 USA Today Network article.

School choice zealots often suggest the traditional public schools don't have the capacity to serve all students. In most cases that is not true.

However, in Ohio, the state has been favoring direct funding of private schools, charters, and vouchers to the detriment of the public common school districts. Districts would have greater capacity to provide options and enhancements if the state would tend to its constitutional responsibility to the common school system.

Flutist not discouraged by her limited sight

Vision impairment can't stop freshman from marching in band

Steve Stein Peoria Journal Star USA TODAY NETWORK

WASHINGTON – Jim Tallman has been the director of the Washington Community High School marching band for 29 years. He's never had a marching band member like freshman flutist Amelia Heinze. 'There hasn't been anyone else in our marching band with as significant a level of vision impairment as Amelia has,' Tallman said.

'When we heard she wanted to join our marching band, we said we'd give it a try. If there were problems, we'd stop it. Amelia has done well. There haven't been any major incidents. 'And she wants to get better. She's been taking private flute lessons since August.'

A 'bright spot' for educators

Nick Pacelli is similarly impressed with the remarkable 15-year-old. He's Amelia's case manager at the high school for special education services, both academic and extracurricular. 'It truly is incredible that Amelia is playing in the marching band,' Pacelli said. 'She amazes me. She's very independent. And an honor student.'

Pacelli said Amelia makes each day better for the high school staff members who interact with her. 'Amelia is a bright spot for those of us in education,' he said. 'This isn't an easy time to be a teacher because of the pandemic, but she brings a smile to me and many others each day because of her spirit and joy.'

Addressing the challenges

So, how bad is her vision? Anyone whose vision is less than 20/200 is considered legally blind. 'My best corrected vision with my glasses is 20/300,' Amelia said.

She has issues with depth perception. She's sensitive to light, so she often wears sunglasses over her regular glasses and a hat on sunny days. Bright sunlight, car headlights and streetlights make it difficult for her to see. Up close, 'I can't make out people's faces until they're about a foot or so away,' she said. 'People may think I'm being rude or ignoring them because I can't tell if someone's talking or waving to me until they're very close. 'Even with enlarged writing on papers, I have to get very close to see. About three-ish inches.' An object that isn't close to her is a blur, Amelia said. 'If there was a black bear in the

distance, I would see a blur of black,' she said. 'I wouldn't know it was a bear. If the bear was farther away, I wouldn't even see a blur.' Pacelli describes her vision impairment another way.

'Amelia can't identify the fruits and vegetables when she goes to the salad bar at school,' he said. 'That's the easiest way for me to explain to others how poor her vision is.'

Amelia has albinism. According to the Mayo Clinic, albinism is a group of inherited disorders that prevent or limit the production of melanin, which determines the color of a person's skin, hair and eyes.

'Melanin also plays a role in the development of optic nerves, so people with albinism have vision problems. Vision impairment is a key feature of all types of albinism,' according to the Mayo Clinic. One of Amelia's vision issues caused by albinism is nystagmus, a rapid, involuntary back-and-forth movement of the eyes.

Mastering marching band performances

So, how is she able to play a role in the 215-member Washington marching band's championship-winning 'Arabian Nights' show? Her music is blown up on 11x17 sheets. She has to memorize the music because those sheets are too big to be used in a flip folder when she performs. Amelia said she can't see signals from the marching band's drum majors, so she relies on what she can see around her to make sure she's making the correct moves. Flute section leaders and high school special education staff members have helped her with logistics like navigating the controlled chaos at competitions, and making sure she was aware of obstacles like potholes and railroad tracks while the marching band performed in the high school's homecoming parade. Amelia said she loves playing the flute for many reasons.

'For one thing, it's not loud,' she said. And she loves being a part of the marching band, even though it's a brand new experience. She wanted to join the Washington Middle School marching band last year as an eighth-grader to prepare her for high school, but there was no marching band season because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

'I love the people I've met in the marching band, the connections I've made, and the competitions,' she said. 'It's not like sports, where you're competing against another team. You're competing against yourself to be better each time you compete.'

Yes, Amelia has competed in sports. She competed in cross country as a sixth- and seventh-grader at Washington Middle School 'with really no help during races,' she said.

New skills and new challenges amid grief

Amelia is performing in the marching band and making the normally challenging adjustment from being a middle school student to a high school student while grieving the loss of her sister, 17-year-old Eliana 'Ana' Heinze, who was killed in July in a traffic accident on Interstate 55 just south of Lincoln. Ana was one of three Washington high school seniors who died in the accident on their way home from a trip to Six Flags St. Louis. A Washington high school band parent also was killed in the accident. 'Being in the marching band has been a good distraction,' Amelia said. 'Ana would have loved our show.'

Ana loved being a part of the Washington robotics team. Amelia joined that team this year. 'It's cool,' she said. 'I want to be a programmer, so it's great experience.'

'Don't be afraid to try things'

Amelia has some words of advice for other students with a physical disability who are hesitant about doing something out of their comfort zone.

'I've learned from my experience that if you want to try something, there are people who will help you,' she said. 'You can do things like everyone else, just a little differently. 'Don't be afraid to try things. If you don't try something, you'll never know if you like it or not.' It's been a successful and emotional competitive season for the Washington marching band, which lost band member Hannah Phillips and her father, Seth Phillips, in the July traffic accident. The Panthers finished third among 20 bands at Dunlap last weekend and had the top color guard score. Earlier, Washington was the grand champion at Pontiac among nine bands, with the top winds and percussion scores, and the grand champion among 29 bands at Metamora, with the top winds score.

Washington Marching Panthers freshman flutist Amelia Heinze suffers from vision impairment mainly due to albinism, a genetic disorder that limits the production of melanin. Albinism also affects development of the optic nerve, causing vision impairment. *Matt Dayhoff/Peoria Journal Star*

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