

– Daily Herald –

**'This just feels right': Streamwood teacher trades marketing career for a classroom**

Dec. 13, 2022

By Kevin Schmidt



**Streamwood High School teacher Meagen Balzer** traded a marketing career for a classroom, and has no regrets 17 years later.

*Brian Hill | Staff Photographer*

Meagen Balzer was enjoying life as a 20-something advertising and public relations executive in Chicago.

A conversation with her father changed everything.

"I told my dad I felt like a teacher with all these new college graduates," she said. "I was only in my 20s myself, but I was teaching them how to write and learn other elements of their jobs. My dad said, 'I always thought you should have been a teacher.'"

"And that was all I needed," she said. "Why was I not teaching? I enjoy the craft of writing. I enjoy reading. I enjoy all of it."



**Streamwood High School** teacher **Meagen Balzer** works with students in her **Incubator classroom** as they develop new business ideas.

- **Brian Hill** | **Staff Photographer**

Trading a rising business career for a classroom, Balzer, an **Elgin High School** graduate, returned to **Elgin Area School District U-46** to become an English teacher in the World Languages and International Studies Academy at **Streamwood High School**. Seventeen years later -- after briefly moving back home to Bartlett to earn a master's degree in education -- she's still at **Streamwood**.

Starting last school year, Balzer tapped into her previous career by also becoming a business teacher. As part of the burgeoning **LEAD Academy at Streamwood**, which will be replacing the World Languages and International Studies Academy, she guides juniors through an Incubator program to develop entrepreneurial ideas they pitch to area business leaders.

"The willingness and dedication she has to give her time and resources to others is what schools need now more than ever," said **Streamwood Principal Jennifer VanDeusen**. "The attention she dedicates to her students is also mirrored in the dedication she offers to her colleagues. Meagen is the true definition of an educator supporting the school community."

While Balzer doesn't miss her pressure-packed marketing career, she can't resist piling on responsibilities to her daily teaching routine. In addition to her two Incubator classes, freshman English class and Global Studies class, she's also involved with numerous activities, including her role as School Improvement chair and dance coach at **Bartlett High School**.

Close to her heart, though, is the Incubator program, which is already having a positive impact on students in just its second year. Last year's students, now seniors, are implementing their business ideas in the real world through the school's Accelerator program.

"Right away, you can tell she enjoys what she does for a living," junior Maria Solis said. "She has been one of my biggest inspirations in becoming a teacher myself, because even in times when the classroom setting gets stressful, she always finds a way to prosper through it all and puts her students first, always."

Balzer begins the yearlong Incubator program in the fall by helping her juniors through ideation and finding a problem that requires a business solution. Ideas this year include an app for high schoolers and an online winter weather shop for construction workers.

The students learn to develop a business model, which lays the foundation for them to work independently within their groups. By the end of the school year, they're ready to pitch their ideas to local businesses, with the possibility of a financial investment to execute the plan as seniors in the Accelerator program.

"I provide the structure and the foundation, but it's an autonomous class," Balzer said. "They have to work with each other and set their own deadlines. It's all on them based on the outline I give them."

Balzer said she "bounces" from group to group during class to make sure there aren't any major problems that need addressing. The students appreciate her ability to balance assistance with letting them find their own way through an issue.



**Meagen Balzer, an Elgin High School graduate, returned to her home district to become an English and business teacher at Streamwood High School. - Brian Hill | Staff Photographer**

"The thing I like the most about all of Ms. Balzer's classes is that she makes it feel like a community," junior Tiare Saucedo said. "She tries her hardest to make sure that we are all comfortable enough to ask her any questions we may need answered, and makes sure that we understand what is being assigned."

The LEAD Academy, which stands for Leadership, Entrepreneurship, Action and Design, already is showing signs of growth as more eighth graders apply to be part of it. Balzer's colleagues and students credit her stewardship of the Incubator program with spurring the LEAD Academy's success.

Balzer said she frequently senses the eagerness of younger students to become part of the Incubator program. She said freshmen are already approaching her with business ideas they aim to develop in two years.

It's further confirmation that Balzer made the right decision to switch careers.

"I always joke about what I'm going to be when I grow up, but this just feels right," Balzer said. "This feels like what I'm supposed to be doing."

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## **Curriculum vitae**

Name: Meagen Balzer

School: **Streamwood High School**

Occupation: English and business teacher

Age: 46

Residence: Bartlett

Education: Bachelor of Communication from Marquette University; Master of Arts in Education from Roosevelt University

Work history: Senior account executive in advertising and public relations before shifting to teaching in 2005

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## **Tips from top teacher**

Be reflective: Taking time every day to be reflective about what happened in the classroom -- how they're achieving their goals, how they're helping students learn -- is important for teachers.

Be flexible: The idea that we can be planned out three or four weeks ahead of time may sound ideal, but it's really not demonstrating a teacher's flexibility and our responsiveness to our students' needs.

Be kind: It's one thing to be a warm and caring teacher, but you still need to hold students to expectations and accountability. I always tell my students it's tough love. They need to learn lifelong skills and sometimes saying "no" is the best thing you can do for them.

Be collaborative: I try to teach my students to be collaborative and learn from each other, but it's just as important for teachers. We need that interaction, and we need to work with other teachers so that we can bring fresh ideas and growth into our classroom.

Be part of a positive support system: I'm always looking for people to grow with and to grow with me. There's enough naysaying in education today that you really need to release those people so you're not caught up in the negativity.

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## Muslim nonprofits receive grants to help serve suburbs

Dec. 12, 2022

Madhu Krishnamurthy



Illinois State Superintendent of Education Carmen Ayala talks with kindergarten students at **Elgin Area School District U-46's Channing Elementary School**. Ayala, the state's first Latina top educator, is retiring in February. *Paul Valade | Staff Photographer*

### Top educator retiring

Illinois' top education official, Carmen Ayala, recently announced plans to retire in February.

Ayala is the first female and Latina state superintendent of education, appointed by Gov. J.B. Pritzker in early 2019. She oversaw the shutdown of 852 public school districts serving nearly 2 million students during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. It led to widespread criticism from parents and politicians.

"Under her leadership, we've seen significant growth in high school graduation rates and other key educational metrics, a true testament to her hard work and dedication to Illinois students," Pritzker said.

Illinois' four-year high school graduation rate is at the highest in 12 years -- 87.3% -- driven by gains for Black and Hispanic students, according to the Illinois School Report Card.

Educator retention and diversity also increased during Ayala's tenure.

Ayala shepherded the creation of the Equity Journey Continuum, which helps school districts identify gaps in students' access to opportunities, resources, and supports.

She previously served as superintendent of West suburban Berwyn North District 98, assistant superintendent at Plainfield Unit District 202, director of school improvement at Algonquin-based Community Unit District 300, and assistant superintendent, director of bilingual services and teacher at East Aurora District 131.

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### **Boys basketball: Top 20**

**Dec. 12, 2022**

**By**

**Boys basketball**

**Team Comment**

1. Benet (8-0) 3 seed at Pontiac behind Simeon, Joliet W.

2. Rolling Meadows (9-1) Lost heartbreaker by 1 to New Trier
3. Stevenson (6-1) Bardic scores 19 in win over Warren
4. WW South (7-1) New Tigers making positive impact
5. Downers North (6-1) Impressive wins over Hinsdale C., York
6. Barrington (7-0) Schmidt 17 points, 8 boards in Fremd win
7. Hinsdale Central (6-2) West Suburban Silver going to be a bear
8. Glenbard West (5-2) Hope to learn lessons from Lyons loss
9. Metea Valley (5-2) Thrilling OT win over Waubonsie Valley
10. Palatine (6-2) One-point loss to Prospect
11. Crystal Lake South (8-1) Perfect 6-0 in games decided by 4 or less
12. Libertyville (6-3) Wildcats get back on track
13. Waubonsie Valley (6-2) Done in by Metea's clutch 3-point shooting
14. Lake Park (5-2) Rochford, Cerese shine vs. Batavia
15. Neuqua Valley (6-2) Solid start in DVC play
16. Fremd (4-4) Slow start costly vs. Barrington
17. Conant (5-2) Defense giving opponents fits
18. Naperville North (5-4) Triple OT win over DeKalb



19. Huntley (7-2) Key FVC game Friday vs. CL South

20. Hoffman Estates (6-2) Plays Geneva, Fremd this week

Others to watch: Warren 5-3, Hersey 6-4, Prospect 3-5, Lake Zurich 5-2, York 4-5, Burlington Central 5-2, Schaumburg 3-2, Marmion 5-3, West Aurora 5-3, Bartlett 6-2, Geneva 5-3, Kaneland 8-1, Grayslake Central 5-1