

Matthew Gasper

Power Autobiography

I went to much of elementary school in the suburbs of Baltimore, and middle school and high school in small towns in Central Pennsylvania. For a while, we lived in Orrtanna, PA, a “census-designated place” with a population of less than 200 people. My brother and I were part of the Gettysburg Area School District, with three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Our biggest challenge we faced on a school day was waking up on time to catch our bus. In a school district covering 185 square miles served by only one middle school, the bus routes get a bit long.

My parents did not have to worry about the quality of my education in the way that DC's parents do. They chose where to live, choosing their school district and their children's schools with it — a powerful kind of school choice.

I struggled still, with behavioral issues in elementary school and middle school borne of a challenging home. When I reached high school, I took the challenges I had faced at home, and my own personal struggles, and used them as motivations. Not just to graduate from high school — something my father never did — but to build a sort of stability and a sense of security for myself that I sorely missed. Success in school was my escape, and I devoted myself to as much academic achievement as I could muster, working my way through my own turmoil. I had a lot of help along the way: my mother, my father and many outstanding teachers.

When I came to DC to attend American University, it was my first time living in a city. I grew up in a diverse family, but the diversity of DC was something new — and so were its challenges. After having school as my escape, it was jarring for me to see schools that families wanted to escape from. The decisions placed on the shoulders of parents and children in DC, so critical to their future, were not decisions my parents had to make. The high school I went to was the only public high school I could go to. And it was safe.

I needed to try to understand my new city, so I volunteered through American University's DC Reads program and found myself at Higher Achievement's Ward 1 Achievement Center, sharing space at the Oyster Adams Middle School in Adams Morgan. I worked as a small group mentor, tutoring and training 5th through 8th graders — called scholars— on subjects they would need to succeed in the coming academic year. I met some outstanding and brilliant young scholars, and I met some scholars who were desperate for help and relief that their schools and communities could not provide.

Higher Achievement provides its scholars with year-round learning meant to prepare them for success in high school and, eventually, college. Fourth grade students commit to a program that



will support them until they graduate from middle school, and through their transition to high school. Helping scholars navigate through the high school application process is a critical part of this support.

A need to apply for a school that would serve me was not something I believe I would have fully understood in middle school, and it is not a need I or my parents had to meet. My parents had enough trouble engaging me in my college applications process. I'm sure if we'd had to apply for high schools, I would have fought tooth and nail. Yet the 8th graders at our Achievement Center were throwing themselves into this fully. For some, support from their mentors and Higher Achievement was the only support they had. Many other students across DC navigate this process without help.

When children forego their evenings and their summers to spend more time in education, they are exercising power — advocating for their futures and seeking out assistance they need to navigate the structures and systems that control their prospects. Genuine dedication to this program and others like it can come from families, communities, and attitudes emphasizing the importance of education and achievement. But in some cases, for some children, it comes from within: a self that has seen struggle and is seeking a path out, just as I did, but under very different circumstances with very different challenges.

Programs, networks, and the ability to advocate effectively all need to be expanded and kids can't do it on their own. No matter how driven our city's children, they still need their parents to support them and to fight for them. I have already met many outstanding parent leaders proud to support PAVE with their voice and I look forward to meeting more. My hope is that as DC's families organize and advocate, excellence in education, mental health supports, specialized school programs, and access to out of school programs all become the standard.

