

Personal Statement
By Sierra Prochniak

At a young age, I realized that loving learning and loving school are two very different things. Learning persists beyond boundaries, a makeup of my passion and innate curiosity. I began talking at 6 months old, and “why” has always been my favorite word.

My enthusiasm to understand the world was quickly stifled by how militant my first years of school felt. Classes rooted in linear problem solving felt maliciously challenging, math in particular. I asked my teachers what seemed to them like countless questions. I couldn't adhere to the curriculum—I drew word problems out on my paper to visualize them, and was scolded for doodling. I was often seated in the back of the class so teachers didn't have to address my odd questions or impending need for support, which heavily impacted how I viewed my self-worth. I began to feel fearful of school faculty and isolated from my peers, spending my evenings plagued by tear-stained dinner table homework. I grew to resent school, and the criticism I had experienced led me to believe my character was the problem. I thought I was stupid.

I allowed stupidity to define my relationship with education until my junior year of high school, and the journey for a proficient support system instilled the pervasive feeling of idiocy. Meetings with learning specialists, therapy sessions, and IQ tests failed to explain my behavior. Before I entered middle school, I was labeled “gifted,” both the opposite of how I felt and the next step in recognizing what support I needed. I began attending a school for gifted learners, with complete embarrassment of my divergence from the “normal” school path; my graduating class was nine kids, and we called our teachers by their first names. However, the school's individualized support and interdisciplinary curriculum was vital in understanding my learning profile. I was encouraged to ask questions in class, and grew to see that both an awareness of my academic strengths, and support, were essential to my success.

While aware of my needs, I was hesitant to take advantage of any resources outside of my small school. I continued to believe I was stupid because I had needed to forge a new academic path for myself. When I entered high school, I reluctantly began working with a tutor—I have been working with her for the past five years. It took until last year for me to understand that my academic success and nurturing my eagerness to learn were worth any embarrassment

over individualized support. I have spent most of my education feeling like a bad student, yet it was the frowned-upon help I received that pushed me to persevere and excel.

Academic support helped me learn how to learn. Consequently, I have developed great self-advocacy skills that I will continue to use within my own education. Every school year, I introduce myself to my teachers and explain that I have ADHD and a 504 plan, and I may need to stay in class through lunch to finish a test. I've explored education's societal impact through reading books like *The Rainforest Mind*, and I've come to believe that education is a privilege, but accommodating education is too. I aim to make change through spending my summers as a camp counselor, an authority figure who encourages children to be curious. I am a member of my gifted school's alumni panel, and I speak to eighth graders and their families about transitioning to high school with a different learning profile. This year, I am a teacher's assistant for AP US History, providing a source of academic support for students only a year younger than me.

While I am unsure of what occupation I want to pursue, I know that changing the education system will be a part of it. Even if loving learning and loving school are two very different things, they don't have to be.