AASuccess

Perfecting the Act of Giving Back.

AASuccess May to July 2026 E-Newsletter



The System That Does Not Age

People occasionally ask me which organization they should compare us to. After twenty years I still do not have a good answer, and I have stopped treating that as a compliment. It is a fact, and facts have reasons. Programs that build character exist. Programs that give young people real work exist. Programs that cost families nothing exist. What barely exists is all of it in one place, run mostly by its own AAS graduates, on a budget smaller than one salary at most nonprofits. The reason is not that nobody thought of it. The reason is that this model cannot be bought or staffed into existence. It can only be grown, one Saturday at a time, until the students you invest in come back and run it better than you did.

Our books balance twice each year. Once in dollars, where we operate under one hundred thousand. Once in people, where alumni return as mentors, operations managers, and now teachers of the next mentors. The second balance sheet is the one I watch.

Last month I sat in a circle at the White House Farm Retreat and said the least I have said in twenty years. Students spoke to students. Mentors received recognition from the very people they mentor. At

almost sixty, I was a student watching them. Nothing about our mission has changed since the basement in 2006. Almost everything about who carries it has.

This E-news issue is the record of what that looks like right now. Enjoy the reading, especially regarding our work as whole, where the small things connect for ripple impacts.

Dave Nguyen, Founder

Nathan Le and Marvin Pham — Our AASuccess Journey



On July 11, Nathan Le and Marvin Pham, both entering university this fall, stood in front of fifteen new 8th and 9th graders and told them what AASuccess was actually like. Senior mentors were in the room. The Operations Team was in the room. The founder was in the room. None of that changed how they spoke, and we are sharing their stories the way they told them.

Nathan and Marvin have both been students at AASuccess for four years and are both this year's Ebenstein Scholars. However, they admitted that when they first started at AASuccess, they never thought this would be possible. Nathan started by recounting his first days at AASuccess.

> *"When I first joined, I barely talked during meetings. I wouldn't even eat lunch because I was so scared, which is a big deal because I love food."*

By his own count, it took him close to a year before he could talk to people freely. Nobody rushed him. The Saturdays kept coming, the projects kept needing hands, and the room remained safe enough for him to stay quiet until, eventually, he no longer wanted to be.

His turning point at AASuccess wasn't a project or a workshop. It was his mentor, Liem, telling him, in the way only an older student can, that he would be singing at the annual Gala. In front of roughly three hundred guests. Nathan describes the performance honestly: "We were not good at all, but we did it anyway."

He admits that this was his turning point at AASuccess and helped him break through his fear of being on stage. Somewhere between agreeing to sing that song and finishing the performance, his breakthrough happened.

Then came the opportunities he didn't even know existed. Nathan spent days on an Outward Bound expedition, the kind of program that costs between $3,000 and $4,000 per student. Without being prompted, he named the person who made it possible: Mr. James Pan, the sponsor who has quietly sent two AASuccess students a year into the wilderness and back for many years.

Nathan spoke about that trip again at the Gala, and it was not a polished speech. It did not need to be. He spoke from the heart (and even cried a little). He talked about how Outward Bound was truly a life-changing experience for him and how it taught him so much about himself.



Nathan and Liem performing at his very first Gala, 2022

Marvin's journey at AASuccess was very similar. Like Nathan, he talked about how he had a hard time speaking in the office and would often just sit back and listen. He also participated in Outward Bound. He credits those days in the wilderness, without a phone, with helping him discover more about who he truly is.

> *"You learn more about yourself than any other thing."*

Now, Marvin is leading YouthCon 2026, a project that has placed school coordination, essay submissions, and judge panels squarely on his shoulders.

Their advice to the fifteen students sitting where they once sat fit into one line: **Start saying yes to every opportunity, even the ones you feel unready for.**

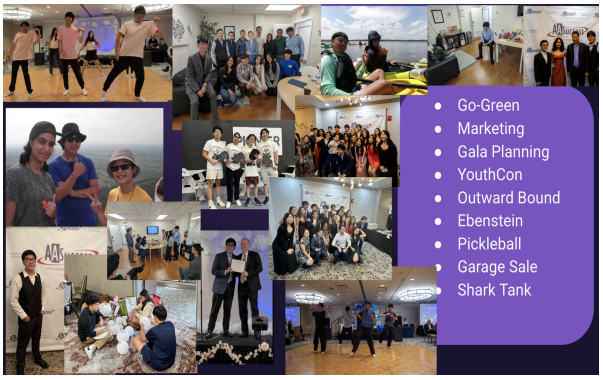
And Nathan's own honest realization, in his exact words: "You can't get to know someone by being silent. It sounds simple, but that's what I learned."

Since joining AASuccess, Nathan and Marvin have each participated in more than ten projects and have both stepped up to lead projects of their own. Now, they are this year's Ebenstein Scholars.

For both of them, this recognition is a culmination of everything they have worked toward at AASuccess. The scholarship requires a real commitment—measured in hundreds of volunteer hours, meaningful leadership, and a willingness to give back to the community that helped them grow.

Their journeys were not linear paths toward perfection. They were slow, honest transformations—from students who once sat quietly in the room to leaders now standing at the front of it, telling the next generation that they can get there too.







Where Mentors Become Students Again

In June our students, operations team, and mentors spent a weekend at White House Farm. The centerpiece was a dining table serving as a circle, and the circle had one rule drawn from the three Cs the participants embraced: Congratulate-Compliment-Communicate. Each person, from the newest student to the founder, took a turn receiving compliments—what the others had actually observed about them, accomplishments, character strengths and the harder things said with trust rather than around it.

What surprised no one who knows our AAS learning model well, and everyone who does not, is which direction the recognition flowed. The mentors heard the most from the people they mentor. Lara, who leads our Life Skills Academy, put it plainly to one of her own students:

> *"I know I am supposed to mentor you, but every session you make me reflect on who I am."*

The compliment circle took place at the farm house that has hosted our students for years through the generosity of the White House Farm Foundation and Scott Plein, a partnership now old enough that some of the students it first hosted were in the circle as mentors.







The Alumni's Cycles of Growth & Civic Work

Alumni mentors like Colby, Angela, Liem and Lara carry a credible, peer based authority, because they have walked in the students' shoes. That shared identity lets them build deep trust, helping students move from a mask of inauthenticity to finding their genuine voice, first within themselves, then in the community of family, AAS, and beyond. Nathan and Marvin put it more simply: seeing alumni like Colby return is like seeing a relative again, and it is a powerful reason for younger students to stay committed to their own growth.

An Example of How Our Ops Team Leads and Manages the AAS October 4, 2026 Gala

We're excited to announce that our annual AASuccess Gala will take place on **Sunday, October 4, 2026 from 3:00 to 8:00 PM**! For those who are new to our community, the AASuccess Gala is our biggest event of the year and brings together our AASuccess family of parents, sponsors, alumni, and community members.

The Gala is a culmination of everything our students work toward throughout the year. It is also where many experience some of their biggest breakthroughs, whether it's speaking on stage for the first time, confidently networking with professionals, or showcasing the projects they've worked so hard to create. Dinner will be served, and you'll also have the opportunity to enjoy special performances by our very own students.

More details will be shared in the coming weeks, but for now, please save the date! We would love for you all to join us!

Best,

Angela

Following the above - Current Sponsorship details

> We are honored to share now that Mr. James Pan has confirmed as our $5,000 honorary sponsor, a gift made in memory of his grandmother. We are equally grateful to welcome Dr. Thieu Do as one of our two $3,000 platinum sponsors. Dr. Do was among the original co-sponsors of the very first external AAS event, our birthday celebration at Eden Center in 2008, and his return to this Gala closes a circle eighteen years in the making.
>
> We are currently looking for one additional $3,000 platinum sponsor and five $1,000 primary sponsors, but of course, any donation will help us reach our goal. More details will be shared in the coming weeks, but for now, please save the date! We would love for you all to join us!

Parents in Action

At our recent parent conference, the most persuasive voices in the room were not staff—because we do not have staff. They were parents.

Len Tran told his story of coming to this country by boat and growing up in the Bronx, New York. Today, both of his children are part of AASuccess. He talked about his daughter, Lara, who was inspired by AASuccess after a mission trip to Vietnam and told her dad that she needed to be a part of it. Today, she is an Operations Manager. He talked about his son, Leo, who went from playing video games every day to becoming a crucial part of AASuccess and leading YouthCon.

Len shared that he no longer has to wake his kids up every Saturday and get them out of bed. Now, they wake themselves up, eager to get to the office—which any parent of a teenager will recognize as the real metric.

When Len summed up what the program had given his children, he reached for one word: **confidence**. Whether his kids got into the best school mattered far less to him than seeing them become confident in who they are and who they can become.

Nguyen, one of our core members, gave the newest parents the two things we actually look for when we accept a student. First, that the student believes there is a better version of themselves. Second, that once they are in, we leave no one behind.

Liem, from the Operations Team, described what that support really looks like:

> *"We will catch you if you fall, but the person opening the door and walking through it is them."*

That is the role AASuccess tries to play. We can create opportunities, provide mentors, and build a community that will catch students when they fall. But ultimately, each student has to choose to open the door—and walk through it.

The Ops Team: Orchestrating the Saturday Engine

Our current operations team, Angela Le, Lara Tran, and Liem Nguyen, continues to orchestrate the students' growth and their own growth with remarkable resilience. They represent the next generation of leadership, balancing heavy responsibilities across school and professional careers with authentic student ownership. From managing our annual Gala and supervising our scholarships to refining the Shark Tank Success initiative, they have created a structure where accountability is experienced as an opportunity.

In this Saturday Engine, 8th and 9th graders manage complex programs under the mentorship of university seniors, core active mentors, and trusted AAS supporters, ensuring that what we receive, we refine and return to the community. This is the engine's DNA: building a bridge between belonging and being counted on.





Impact in Action: What 2026 Looks Like So Far

Project Reactiv8 (Digital Wellness)

Led by Angela Le and AAS 9th grade students, this project tackles what screens do to attention. On July 12, 2026, the team held a mandatory educational session on digital addiction before their main event at Van Dyck Park on July 18, where students step away from their screens together, in person, outdoors.

YouthCon 2026

Managed by Marvin Pham, this $5,000 scholarship program proves that trust based responsibility works. Lead Marvin Pham, Class of 2026 and a prospective mentor, managed outreach and professional logistics for the YC ceremony. The ceremony will be held at **VietFoods in Eden Center at 3 PM on July 25th.**

The Ebenstein Scholars0

In May 2026, Nathan Le and Marvin Pham were named participating scholars, in recognition of their five year journeys from students terrified of stepping out of their comfort zones to mentors for the younger cohort. Each scholar carries a 200 hour community leadership commitment.

Touching Grass (Outward Bound Program)

This summer, 9th graders Mason Le, Sophie Pham, and Catha Phan begin a 12 day wilderness expedition without phones to build inner resolve. As Nathan reflected on his own expedition, being unplugged forces you to learn more about yourself than any other thing, forging tight knit bonds carried back to the office.

Student Treasury & Literacy

In May 2026, Vihanh Tham, AAS alumni, developed a financial literacy presentation for the cohort. Correlatively, the student treasury team reported raising $1,380, with $680 in proceeds and $700 in donations, from the AAS student led Pickleball Project and Fundraiser.

FAQs for Parents

How is my child matched with a mentor?

New students are observed during their first few Saturdays before being paired with a mentor. Our Operations Team considers each student's personality, needs, and potential. We match them based on what our mentor's strengths and the mentee's goals (personal, professional, school). The goal is not simply to match students with whoever feels most comfortable, but with the mentor who can help them grow into their own version of all-around success.

What actually happens on a Saturday?

Students meet with mentors between **10:30 AM and 2:00 PM**. Throughout the day, they engage with AAS mentors, the Operations Team, or a coach, work on live projects alongside other students, and eat lunch together. To a visitor, a Saturday at AAS may look unstructured. In reality, it is designed to grow organically, drawing on twenty years of lived experience and our Life Skills platform. Students learn by doing, through conversations, relationships, responsibilities, and real-world experiences that cannot always be planned into a traditional lesson.

What is expected of my child?

One thing above all: **show up on Saturdays.** Everything else is built on that. Growth here is a marathon. Consistent attendance is how a student gradually builds both social confidence and professional skills through year-round practical experiences. The process makes room for both shortcomings and growth, because both are part of success.

How will I know how my child is doing?

Every student is assessed quarterly based on their own three-month development plan, with input from evaluators beyond their individual mentor. After each assessment, we hold a quarterly meeting with parents to discuss all of the student's progress, areas for growth, and next steps.

How can families and friends support this work?

Our annual budget is approximately **$100,000**. Roughly **$30,000** supports the essentials that make a safe and supportive environment possible—from keeping the lights on to serving Saturday lunches. The rest comes from donors who choose to support the parts of our work they believe in, including longtime partners and supporters such as Eden Center, Scott Plein, Dr. Linh Tran, our AAS Board members, James Pan, Dr. Kieu Le, and James Holcombe, as well as federal employees who give through **CFC ID 88404**. But support does not begin and end with a donation. **Come and see the students on a Saturday.** See the work, meet the community, and experience for yourself what happens when students are given the time, trust, and opportunities to grow.

A Message of Gratitude: Perfecting the Act of Giving Back

This AAS living engine would not run without our sustaining partners. We honor the consistency of Eden Center, our primary foundation for over 17 years, led by Alan Frank and Graham Eddy; Ms. Nguyen Nguyen and Mr. Jim Kelman, individual champions who have stood by our youth for over a decade; and APABA-VA, the Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Virginia, in particular Attorney Elizabeth Soc, whom we are thrilled to welcome as our newest 2026 sponsor with an in-kind donation of service.

In particular, we extend our deepest gratitude to those who provide the fuel for this engine to build character and resolve, the key to developing AAS alumni as caring professionals and civic citizens.

To **James Pan**: thank you for your $5,000 donation for 2026, made in the **memory of your grandmother, Ting Lan Pan Lee**. This gift, and the deep meaning of family root it carries, has given us another living example of how to emulate your core principles of inner strength, structure, and discipline. By reconciling that discipline with our applied practice of emotional intelligence, embracing adversity with resolve, we ensure our students are not just productive, but socially thriving in the age of AI.



Leo Lue, Aashee Balani, James Pan and Nathan Le (Outward Bound Alumni)

To our students' parents, in particular **Hien Phan and Tina P. Huynh**, for not only participating and volunteering in our upcoming community events, including Reactiv8 at Van Dyck Park and the 2026 YouthCon Ceremony at Viet Foods Restaurant in Eden Center, but for becoming active donors in the joint work of developing AAS students into future AASuccessors.

In Numbers

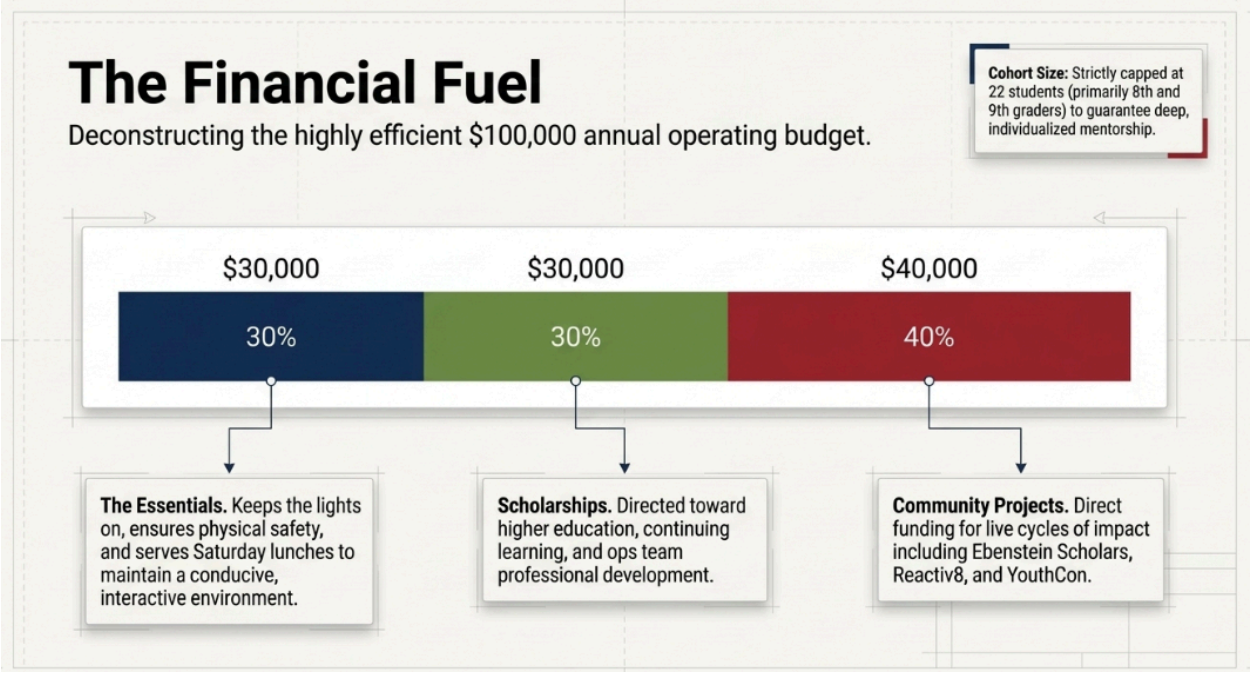
22 students currently enrolled, most if not all 8th and 9th graders. The number is capped for this year. Average is 12 to 15 per year.

$30,000 on average directed to the essentials, a safe, conducive, and interactive place for our students to be themselves every Saturday.

$30,000 on average directed to scholarships for higher education and continuing learning, including for ops team members actively pursuing higher education and professional development.

$40,000 on average in donations and sponsorships directed to AAS community projects designed to create cycles of impact and sustainability.

> We are currently short of $60,000 for the September 2026 to September 2027 work plan. We would like to raise $80,000 by the end of 2026 so as to ensure we have 20% as our reserve fund. Non-Profit AAS EIN: 20-5897385 - Donation Link



Awards and Recognitions



House Joint Resolution No. 5172, commending AASuccess, from the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Non-Profit Organization Award from the Asian American Chamber of Commerce.
