AASuccess E-Newsletter

August and September 2026

One mission, twenty years, built to bend without breaking.

The Ground That Schools Cannot Reach

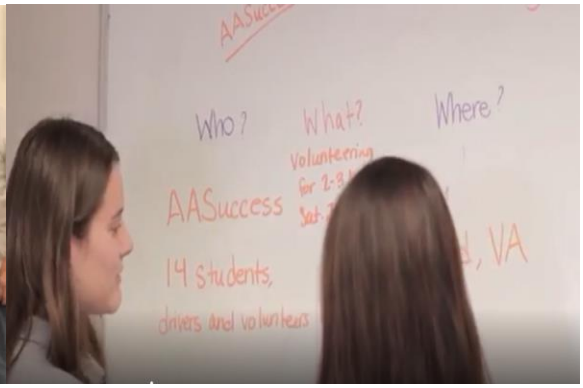


Every year the gap widens between what our schools are built to do and what our students actually need. Schools are not designed to build the kind of character that holds a person together when the check boxes run out, when AI replaces the task, when the room at a workplace goes quiet and the real world expects more than what is written for the current and future college graduates. This gap is growing faster than ever before.

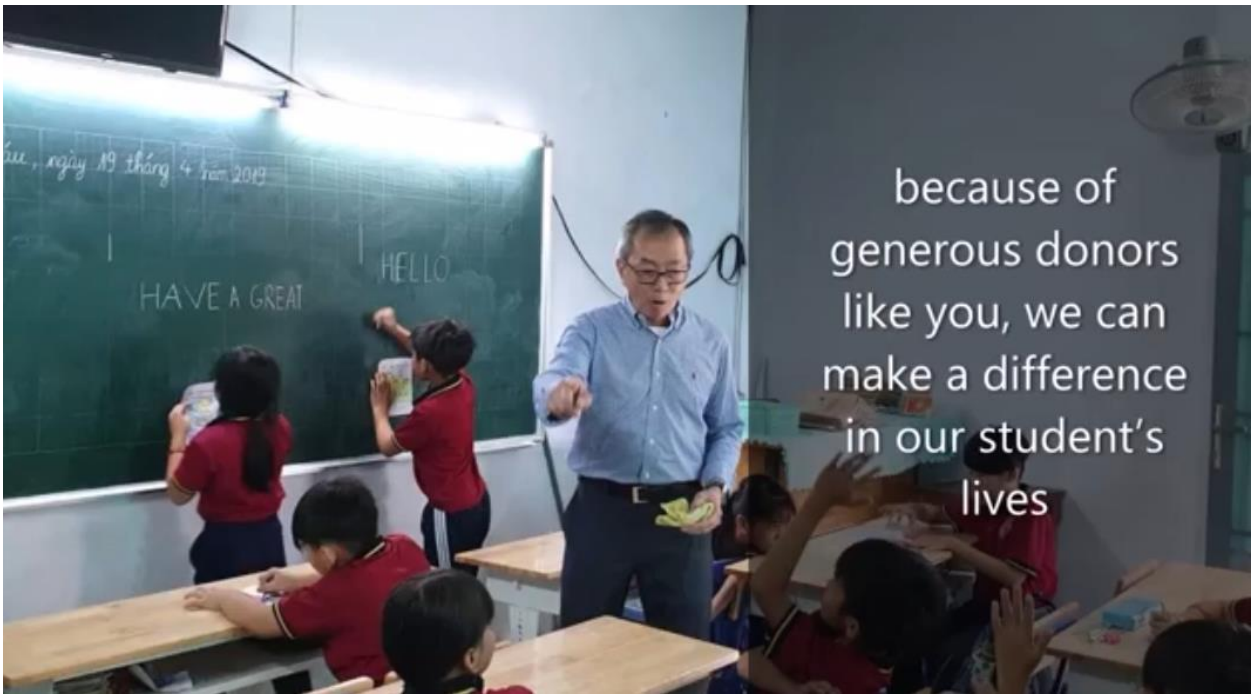
AASuccess exists and has become essential to address the gap. The AAS ground via our Saturday Engine as its backbone becomes more valuable every year as screens replace conversations, AI replaces tasks, and young people lose the organic spaces where character used to work naturally on its own.

This issue shows you the model in motion: three sessions with three students at three different stages, documented the way they happened. But it also looks back at the year that brought us here, through the words of the people who lived it, and the continued community's effort to help build AAS individuals to do well and good now and into the future is what we are all about. We need your help.





On October 4, our annual Gala takes place at the Royal Banquet and Event Center in Springfield, 3:00 PM to 8:00 PM. To sustain the Saturday Engine through 2027, we need to raise an additional $50,000 toward our minimum $80,000 operating budget.



The deeper ask is for the understanding that supporting AAS is an investment in a system that your own family, your colleagues' families, and your community draw from. The more people who invest in this AAS engine, the more connections and opportunities exist for every family inside it, including yours. We are inhibited only by our capacity, and not by qualifications for our young AAS students in middle or high schools, because we believe in what a student can become before they have become it.

Dave Nguyen, Founder and Mentor



Enjoy!

Behind The Scenes AASuccess.mp4

Mentoring Grace Le: From Checklist to Homework Space

In our January 2026 issue, incoming ninth grader Grace Le described her first impression of AAS: she expected a classroom with a teacher handing her a checklist. Instead she walked into a room where everyone was collaborating on real projects, and she had to find her place and start helping. In the May to July issue, we published the system she walked into, our dual balance sheet, the retreat circle, the alumni who run the engine. Now Grace is back, and this time the record is a single mentoring session.

Grace shared during one mentoring session that she had shifted from wanting to study psychology to exploring biomedical engineering. When asked what biomedical engineering actually means inside a hospital, she admitted she had never been in a hospital setting. Grace herself put it this way: standard schooling conditions students not to be creative and to do things inside certain borders or rules. She said she wanted to override those rules and create her own ideas.

During the session, Dave reciprocated by sharing his own path with Grace as a fact pattern: escaping Vietnam by boat, attending Virginia Tech with a quite modest GPA, changing majors from engineering to computer science to microbiology, working on the Human Genome Project under Dr. Craig Venter and many years at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, and in 2005 co-founding AASuccess alongside students from Woodson High School. Grace, through the back and forth of the 1-on-1 mentoring session, discovered then that honesty and people who keep their word are her two primary core values. She then built her first two month development plan:

For school and personal growth: practice setting for volleyball with jogging every morning before sunrise, complete her Woodson High School orientation, and sit down for dinner with her mother at 7:30 PM at least 75 percent of the time.

For her AAS work: support her peer lead Catha on the Period Poverty Project, which advocates for hygiene access as a basic human right, and build direct 1-on-1 relationships with peer leads Sophie Pham and Nhi Nguyen.



Then the assignment during this month: Grace was guided to read the January 2026 and May to July 2026 E-Newsletters carefully, reflect on their meaning, and complete the following in 10 minute 1:1 session:

Grace Le's Reflection

1. What specific insights stood out to you when reading the January and May to July issues regarding student ownership, mentor humility, and the Saturday Engine?

> *Having more experience in this structure as a whole, I know I was reading the January to May e-news, and I read it through. I kind of got more insight into what we actually do here earlier on because I read it maybe a month ago. Having a little more experience, I'm here now, and I'm actually going through this stuff. I'm attending LSA, and I'm meeting my mentor. It's really cool because I get to experience all that hands-on, and it's a lot deeper than reading it from the e-news, in my opinion.*
>
> *I think the mentorship program here is a lot different than what you'd expect from a regular tutor or someone meant to help you get through high school or middle school. I feel like they delve deeper into you as a person and your life. It's more of a mentor/mentee growth type of thing where you can learn more about the other, and therefore you can teach each other better to make better connections or something.*

As for the Saturday Engine, I feel like it's pretty true to what has been written in the e-newsletter. It's very organic, and each Saturday, we don't have a fixed schedule. We have things we need to do, but there's no particular order in which we do them. Whatever we need to do, we just get it done, and we're all together. Sometimes we're all doing the same thing, like in LSA, where the ops team is giving us a lesson, or if we're all working on student projects and we're all working on completely different things and we can help each other then. It's very free-form in the sense that we can do literally whatever, and it's a nice place for us to be productive together and give back to our community in that sense. I think that's it. That's what I have for now.

2. How do the stories of Nathan, Marvin, Hanna, and Lara connect with your own goals of moving beyond rules and boundaries to build creativity, honesty, and meaningful projects that you care?



I feel like there's a lot of initiative going on in the office. I see everyone, and a lot of the time, in the student leadership roles for each project, they're very dynamic. They change a lot. However, everyone's in a space where they're capable of leading a group of people in order to reach a goal. I think that's really cool because prior to joining AAS, I didn't know that many people who could do that: who could step up and lead a project and make sure that things get done all by themselves.

All this is voluntary. Now that we're past the team list stage or whatever, we come here out of our own will, and we actually want to do all this. It's nice because at the same time that they're teaching us to, I guess, lead projects, we get to do it hands-on. It's nice knowing so many different sides of this community of these people that I'm cooperating with. I know them as a person, but I also know them as people who can lead, who can direct, and that's just really cool because I hope to be like that someday.

In respect to creativity, I feel like the ideas are very much student-run, and they don't really give us projects to do. They have us assemble into teams, and we can do literally whatever we want in terms of what we're interested in. I think that boosts my creativity a lot as a person. As I said earlier, there's no real structure. See how these meetings go. It's very much student-led, student-run, if not by the ops team. I guess just the stuff that we do here every Saturday: they're like, "Oh yeah, do whatever you want, as long as it works. Make it work." We're able to have a lot of freedom in expressing ourselves and doing the things we do, doing the projects we need.



Nhi Shadowed a Room She Was Not Expected to Understand



During an advanced strategy discussion between Dave Nguyen and David Montanari, a senior USPTO Patent Examiner and one of our original 2005 co-founders of AAS, in July 2026, a rising ninth grader, Nhi Nguyen, sat in to shadow the exchange.

The conversation covered running open source AI models locally on consumer hardware, ensuring complete data privacy by keeping everything offline for our affiliated AAS DECA Integrative Medicine Center. The adults in the room were also developing a framework for AAS project grants, designed to fund students whose beliefs are actionable through meaningful work in the field of BioHealth, similar to the Ebenstein pathway managed by AAS qualified students, where the funding exists not to reward achievement but to sustain a student's capacity to do real work while they are still becoming.

Nhi was asked afterward whether she felt ready to participate. She said:

> *"I'm so moved. I think I can do this."*

Earlier in the year, in our February E-News, Nhi described the AAS office in her own words:

> *"Oh, yeah. I feel like because I know that everyone's around me and watching me, you feel this pressure to have a certain personality. Or actually, no, it's not even my personality. It's just what I say. It feels like it's an answer. I feel like people are watching and they're thinking and they're analyzing what I'm saying."*

And when asked why she did not just quit:

> *"Oh, because I know that there's so much I can learn here. It's my own problem that I'm not motivated, but just in general, a place where there are other people who also want to be here, I know that they will motivate me and inspire me."*





Nhi is a student at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, and is currently active in the Reactiv8 project. Her own words explain why AAS is relevant to her beyond her academic profile as a TJ student, which does not bear meaningful weight on how AAS works with her at such a young age.

What AAS Trusted Vivian Cao Dao to See

Finding the right people beyond the middle or 9th grade HS level for this AAS engine is like finding needles in a haystack. The design of AAS works for that probability, but only because we operate as a

"village": small, collective, and built so that every resource connects back to a center where everyone benefits.



Vivian Cao Dao is a second year medical student at UVA. This summer she traveled to Vietnam to shadow Dr. Hoang Thu Thuy at AAS DECA, our healthcare prototype designed to sustain the AAS ecosystem. For four days she observed patient care, reviewed charts, sat in family consultations, and watched a clinical team that cooks meals for its patients, sleeps overnight at the clinic, and treats the patient's family members in the same visit.

AAS DECA gave a student the full, unobstructed view of a practice where the physician is also the neighbor, the cook is also the caregiver, and the patient's family is part of the treatment plan. No medical training program at her stage would have offered this kind of access. At the 2025 BioHealth Conference, Vivian put it in her own words:

> *"I plan to attend medical school in two and a half weeks from now, but this experience will not be one I can find, let alone be empowered to do in medical school."*

Vivian went as a shadow and came back with a structured assessment of the clinic's operational systems and a volunteer commitment to serve as a long term resource for patient data architecture and future research. During a routine mentoring call before the trip, she had walked Dave through why standard serum magnesium tests can mislead clinicians in complex metabolic cases, connecting her coursework to real patient outcomes. The mentoring relationship produces knowledge transfer in both directions.

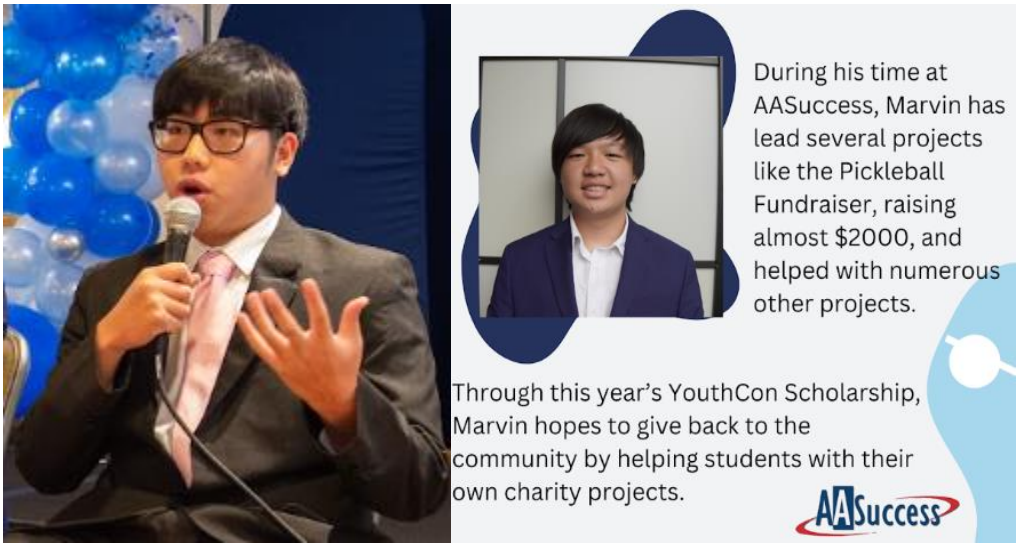


Separately, rising ninth grader Vivian Ly is navigating her transition into high school, using the Saturday Engine as an organic soundboard to explore her identity and build self-confidence. Two students named Vivian, at opposite ends of the pipeline, both are self-discovering and cultivating their own best version of who they are and what they need in the same system.

Nathan Le and Marvin Pham: Class of 2026

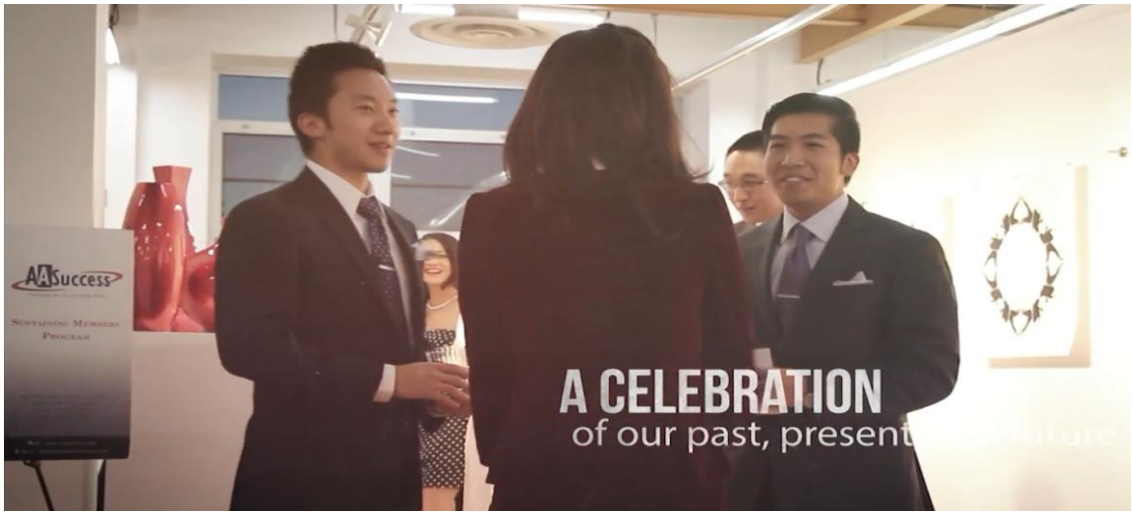
As Nathan and Marvin head to university this fall, we recognize their four year evolution as our 2026 Ebenstein Scholars, each carrying 200 hours of community leadership and a $3,000 scholarship commitment. Their full journey was published in our May to July issue.

For readers joining us for the first time, Nathan barely spoke in meetings for a year. His mentor Liem volunteered him to sing at the Gala in front of 300 guests. He describes the performance honestly: "We were not good at all, but we did it anyway." Marvin found his voice leading YouthCon 2026 and credits Outward Bound with helping him discover who he actually is: "You learn more about yourself than any other thing."



Nathan's advice to the students now sitting where he once sat: **"You can't get to know someone by being silent. It sounds simple, but that's what I learned." This fall, the seats they leave behind will be filled.**

One Path, Three Generations: The Year in Their Own Words



This year we published three issues of this newsletter. Each one carried voices from different parts of the AAS ecosystem. The living work of AAS belongs to the people who made it.

In January, Lara Tran opened our issue with her own letter. She wrote about conducting a casual discussion with students, asking them to reflect on their progress and what they wanted to improve. She described her favorite part of each month: watching students in their element as they present what they are passionate about. And she described what most people in her position would not admit publicly:

> *"As proud as I am to see the ripple impacts in their growth, it also makes me feel like I have grown too, as a mentor and as an individual. I think that is the beauty within this community where we can all learn from each other, no matter what age you are, or what background you come from."*



She concluded by comparing the students to the snow that had imprisoned her car, announcing the 2026 theme: resilience.

That same month, Hanna, three months into her AAS journey, said: *"The work we do on Saturdays is real. It is not just a practice or a lesson. We are actually handling projects that help people in the community, and that makes me feel like what I do matters."* Grace, just beginning, described looking for a checklist and finding instead a room where she had to find her place.

In February, Nhi described the pressure of feeling watched and analyzed, and then said she keeps showing up because the people around her want to be there. Nick Huynh, a volunteer observer, wrote: *"AASuccess gives students an environment to be more social without having to be inauthentic."* Aashee Balani, a senior at Oakton heading to UVA, added: *"The key difference is that at AASuccess the only person you have to compete with is yourself."*





In May to July, we published the retreat at White House Farm, where Lara told a mentee: *"I know I am supposed to mentor you, but every session you make me reflect on who I am."* Nathan and Marvin stood in front of fifteen new students and shared their unpolished journey. Len Tran, a parent, reached for the word confidence and said whether his kids got into the best school mattered far less to him. Gigi admitted the only reason she stopped coming to Saturdays is that Nathan drives himself now.

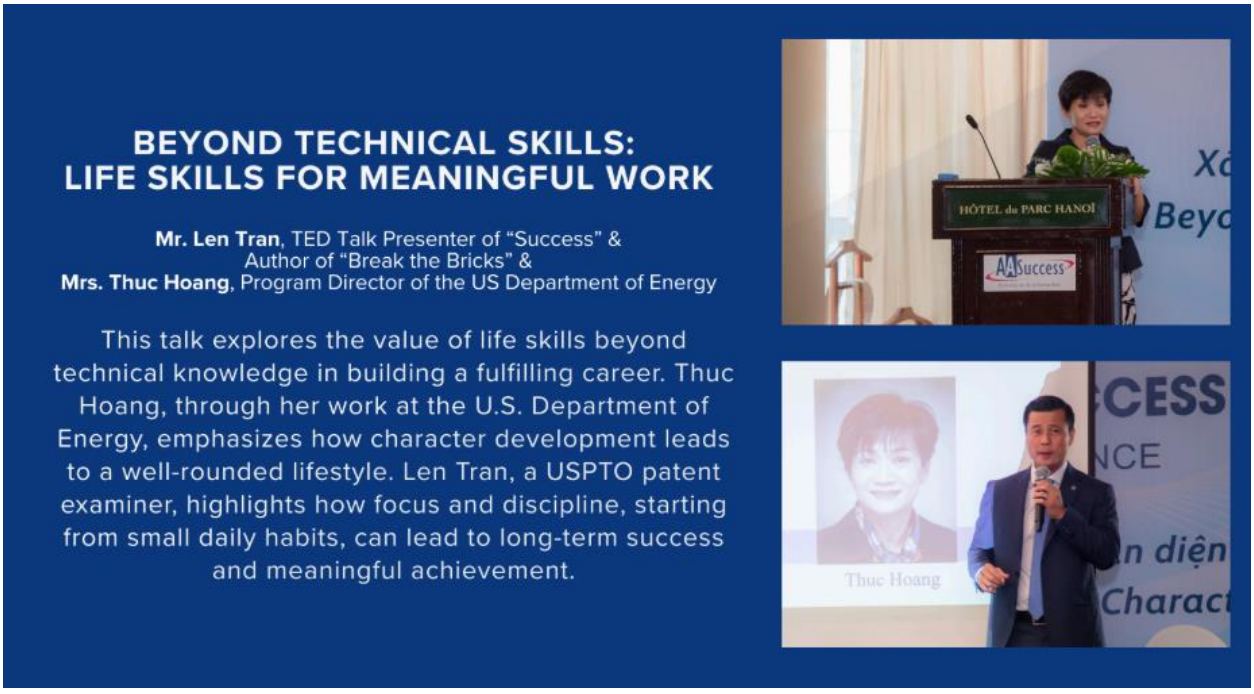
And now, in this issue, Grace is sitting in a mentoring session building her first development plan. Nhi is shadowing adults prototyping AI strategy. Vivian is in Vietnam reviewing patient charts at a clinic that cooks for its patients. Nathan and Marvin are heading to university.

That is one path across three generations. Ninth graders entering. Senior students and Alumni running the engine. The projects changed, from Shark Tank to YouthCon to Reactiv8 to Garage Sale to Menstrual Hygiene Poverty to Outward Bound to a retreat at the White House Farm Foundation in Luray [an enormous appreciation to our sustaining sponsors including but not limited to **Eden Center, Ebenstein Family, Scott Plein, Jim Kelman, Nguyen Nguyen, James Holcombe, James Wu, Dr. Linh Tran, Dr. Kieu Le, Dr. Thieu Do and James Pan**].

What did not change: students are trusted with real work, their failures are treated as part of the process, mentors admit when they learn from the people they mentor, and every project is small enough to be honest about and real enough to matter.



In essence, learning to adjust is a constant process in the AAS space and time. What has changed is that AAS is now in effect turning the page, carried by the people who have been adjusting alongside it. Angela finalized the May to July E-News herself. Liem coordinated the Gala planning. Lara leads the Life Skills Saturday Engine. The adults and youths are becoming increasingly adaptive as co-learners and team members - the only outcome that proves the AAS system can 'turn the page'. This quote from one AAS student, Mason Le, a 9th grader at TJ HS, said it all, *"But why close up and not take it with the people you love? That is what makes life worth living in the first place."* AAS 's hidden gem is genuine care and love to embrace challenges even as social media and AI are consuming all of us. It is the living privilege of building people one Saturday at a time.



In Numbers

12-15 high school students per year on average. We currently have 22 students, most if not all 8th and 9th graders. AASuccess without a robust sustaining membership secured for 2027 presently does not accept any new students.

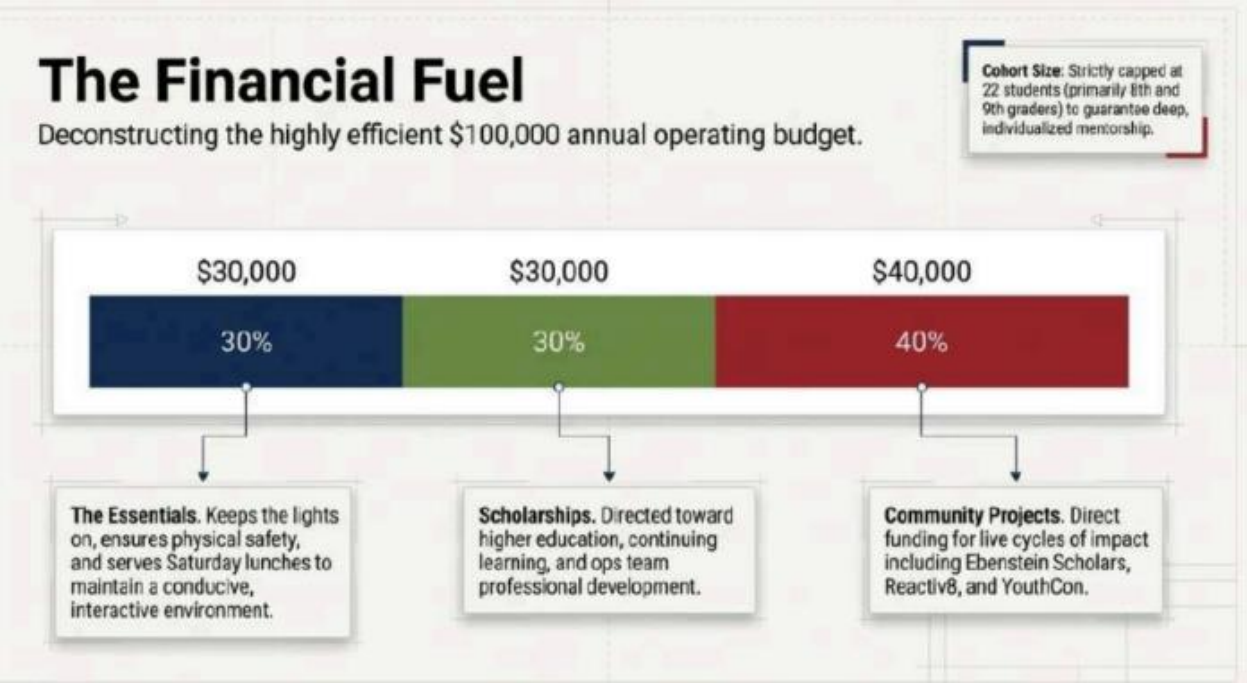
$30,000 on average is directed to the essentials, a safe, conducive, and interactive place for our students to be themselves every Saturday.

$30,000 on average is 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 is directed to AAS community projects designed to create cycles of impact and sustainability.

> We are currently short of $40,000 for the September 2026 to September 2027 work plan. We would like to raise $60,000 by the end of 2026 so as to ensure we have 20% as our reserve fund for 2028.

Support the community's AAS Saturday Engine: aasuccess.org/donate



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.


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