

BREAKING THE PATTERN

Text and design by
TALIA BONEH

MY PERSPECTIVE: What does it mean to be “good” at school?

I would be so stressed out if I were you.” I’m never quite sure what people intend when they say this to me. I’ve heard this sentence repeated back to me over and over throughout high school by various students, friends and family members.

Being the youngest of three, I am the last of the Boneh family to make their mark at Palo Alto High School. My sister, who graduated in 2021, and my brother, who graduated in 2023, both made profound impacts on Paly and are now undergraduate students at elite universities. They were both high-performing students, earning various national awards throughout their high school careers while balancing internships, research opportunities and other activities.

But while I try my best to do as my siblings did, I’ve noticed more differences than similarities between us.

I would say I noticed a “difference” between my siblings and I beginning in sixth grade. When my siblings began middle school, they both skipped two grades of math. This meant as sixth graders, they were taking eighth-grade level math.

In order to make such a big jump in math lanes, students must complete two rounds of tests at the beginning of sixth grade: a qualification test and the official test itself. At 11 years old, I spent my whole summer preparing for these two tests, hoping to continue the pattern of my math prodigy siblings. However, the preliminary test didn’t go as well as I had hoped, and I didn’t even qualify to take the official test itself.

So, as a junior taking math right now,

it’s hard to feel like I’ve accomplished anything if I earn a strong score on a math test when my siblings have already done it before me. Two years younger. And probably better.

I have always felt guilty about “breaking the pattern” of accomplishments that my siblings had established before me.

Among all their extraordinary achievements, sometimes everything I do feels like nothing more than ordinary.

However, the further I’ve continued through high school, the more I’ve learned to embrace interrupting this “pattern” that I have often felt so compelled to continue.

In my first two years of high school, I explored Paly Athletics through cheerleading and track and field, got a job at a local boba shop, worked on advancing my artistic ability and essentially tried everything my siblings did not do when they were in high school. By doing so, I hoped people would view me more as someone who was simply incomparable to my siblings.

This topic of comparison and being the youngest sibling has come up in conversation with my parents at various dinnertime conversations, walks to Safeway and drives home from school. In many ways, I consider myself extremely lucky and grateful to have parents who recognize the pressure I face and help alleviate the unnecessary stress I put on myself.

My dad has always told me that my siblings and I are all trailblazing our own paths. He acknowledges my differences but has never seen them as something that makes me worth less, or that needs to be

“fixed.”

However, I do think that despite the academic differences between my siblings and I, we all share a prominent quality — persistence.

When a test doesn’t go well for any of us or we feel like we are stuck in a rut, we reach out for help and work hard to get ourselves back to where we want to be. We all value our education, understand the privilege of being in the Bay Area and have an endless appreciation for the hard work my parents put in to make sure we received strong educations.

This year, when I walked into my fourth-period class in the second week, my teacher gave us a rundown of her grading policies and how her class works.

“I reward hard work and determination in this class, not talent,” she said.

Something about this was comforting and motivating when I heard it. I’m not always in control of what questions my teachers are putting on my next test, but I am in control of the effort I put into a class to understand the material and prepare.

For me, being “good” at school has gradually become less about grades and scores, and more about being able to overcome challenges and persevere through times that feel impossible.

Although some aspects of academics may not come as easily to me as they do for my siblings, I know that in reality, we are all simply equipped with different skill sets that ultimately cannot be compared. And while I admit that some days I get a little more hyper-fixated on a bad grade or a difficult test, my friends and family are quick to remind me that I’m doing my best and working as hard as I can for what fits my lifestyle.

At the end of the day, that’s all I can really ask from myself.

