



Shifting Into 9th Gear

The transition from 8th grade to high school challenges students as they adapt to a larger building, new friends, new teachers, new expectations, and perhaps even a new neighborhood. For students experiencing difficulties at home or in school, it can be fraught with even more uncertainty. This summer, JPA launched [9th Gear](#), a mentorship program to support 8th graders and their families during this key transition.

9th Gear pairs students with young professionals, fostering one-on-one relationships that help ease the jitters young students can feel. This summer, nineteen students came together with their mentors to support each other, learn about what's coming, and make new friends in a positive environment. In the process, they became more comfortable with trying out and successfully facing new situations. 9th Gear recruited mentors who were referred by our associate and auxiliary boards, as well as by staff and other community members.

Meet Antoine. He's a typical 8th grader — energetic, curious, and a little mischievous, but also shy and uncertain about how he's going to fit in with a new group of kids. In his old school he had reached the top as an 8th grader; now he's about to start all over on the bottom rung, a lowly freshman among much bigger and older students.

But that's not all he has to worry about: Antoine and his family are homeless, unsure where they'll sleep from night to night. The electricity has been turned off in their home and his parents are struggling to make ends meet. "We've been going to shelters and soup kitchens to take a bath and eat. It's been really hard."

One of six kids, Antoine doesn't get many chances to talk with his parents about his feelings and fears regarding transitioning to high school, let alone about his family's situation. "I really wanted a place where I could go to meet and talk with other kids my age about what I was going through, maybe even find some support." 9th Gear provided just that, by recruiting students from our partner schools to build a support network.

What started as a way to meet new people and feel more comfortable with the transition to high school quickly turned into a fast way to make friends for Antoine. "Going into [9th Gear], I was unsure of what to expect. I was nervous, but quickly realized I was surrounded by kids who were going through similar things. By the end of that first Saturday I realized I wasn't the only one with fears."

That Saturday, Antoine met his mentor and his peer group, quickly bonding over cupcakes and games. In addition to talking through what it felt like to be entering high school, 9th Gear provided Antoine an opportunity to share his concerns, disappointments, and sadness regarding what his family was going through, so much so that he never missed an event. With mentors providing guidance and peers coming together, Antoine came to look forward to Tuesday evening meetings. Despite having a long commute to get there, he attended every workshop and field trip this summer.

9th Gear quickly became a supportive group for Antoine's family as well. His father attended multiple parent groups, also a part of 9th Gear. Erin Vanden Brook, JPA's Director of 9th Gear, says, "Not only is the transition to high school difficult to navigate for many students, but for families as well. Many parents have a student entering high school for the first time, and when you add in the financial barriers that many families face, it can feel like they're going through it alone. Parents don't often know where to turn for emotional support and a sense of togetherness around their struggles. This is why we also built in parent events, to create community for families as well." Antoine's father, Rodrigo, appreciated the friendly environment. "I don't know what I would have done without the support I received from the other parents in my group. We discussed hardships we were having, as well as ways to support each other and our kids. It was nice."

Erin is also quick to share how strongly mentors felt this community spirit. In fact, one mentor was so moved by his experience he took time off from a corporate job and decided to make a career shift into education. "All our mentors are eager to come back and be involved, and have generated compelling and enthusiastic ideas to continue to make this program great." Many mentors said that through the program they were able to see the south side Chicago community as rich with energy, drive, and potential beyond what the media portrays or what some might think.

According to Erin, mentors said "[the] students changed our weeks. They made Tuesdays something to look forward to." With all involved asking for more, it was difficult to see it come to an end, she says. "So many people were involved in the success of this program: mentors, mentees, their families, volunteers, JPA's associate, auxiliary, and executive boards. So many were so supportive in creating and executing our vision and helping us develop a program that was able to bring so many people together. We look forward to coming years and to seeing the ways 9th Gear will continue to grow."

We're confident participants felt the same and we look forward to our second year next summer, when we plan to have even more families in the program.