

Growing up in an environment filled with talented students striving to excel academically can be both inspiring and overwhelming. When I was in high school, many of my fellow classmates seemed to master schoolwork with ease, scoring high grades and participating in every club imaginable. They talked about college applications and academic competitions as if they were second nature, while I often felt like I was struggling just to keep up. For a long time, I believed I was falling behind, and that my place among them was a mistake. It felt like I didn't belong, and I questioned whether I was capable of achieving what they seemed to do so effortlessly. However, everything changed when I began making friends with those very students. Their support and encouragement transformed how I saw myself, and, ultimately, they helped me find my sense of belonging.

In the beginning, it was intimidating to be surrounded by students who excelled in everything. They studied hard, played sports, participated in clubs, and seemed to have their futures mapped out with clear goals. I often felt out of place, as if everyone else was miles ahead academically while I struggled to keep up. I convinced myself that maybe I wasn't as smart or capable, and that I was just taking up space in a group where I didn't belong. But over time, as I got to know some of these students more personally, I realized they were not just focused on competition, but they were also kind, curious, and open-minded. They welcomed me into their study groups and shared advice on how they managed their time and stayed motivated.

Making friends with these students changed everything. They didn't look down on me for not being at their level academically. Instead, they celebrated my strengths and encouraged me to keep improving. Their belief in me made me start believing in myself. I no longer felt like an outsider who was trying to catch up; instead, I felt like I belonged among people who cared

about each other and were working toward similar goals. Seeing my friends' determination motivated me to work harder in school, not because I wanted to compete with them, but because I wanted to pursue a future alongside them. Slowly but surely, my grades improved, and I started thinking about college as a real possibility.

One of the most important lessons I learned from this experience is that belonging is not about being perfect or matching everyone else's abilities. We belong where we are, not because we measure up to a certain standard, but because of who we are and what we bring to the table. It's okay to feel like you're struggling at times, but it's important to remember that you are not alone. Many of the students I thought were always ahead of me also felt uncertain about their abilities, but they didn't let that stop them from pushing forward. Their support showed me that belonging is something we create by connecting with others, sharing our journeys, and helping each other grow.

Now, I want others who feel left out to know that they belong, too. It's easy to think you are the only one struggling or that you don't fit in, but the truth is, we all have moments of doubt. The key is to find people who uplift you, challenge you to grow, and remind you that you are worthy of being where you are. Everyone's journey is unique, and it's okay to move at your own pace. What matters is that you keep going and surround yourself with people who believe in your potential. Just as my friends helped me feel like I belonged, I hope others can see that they are not alone, they belong right where they are.

In the end, being surrounded by talented students taught me more than just how to improve academically. It taught me the value of friendship, encouragement, and the power of community. No one succeeds alone, and no one needs to be perfect to belong. We all have a place in this

journey, and sometimes, the very people we think are out of reach turn out to be the ones who pull us forward.