

# The Boston Globe

## Match High valedictorian is headed to Brown, taking her passion for learning with her

By [Jeremy C. Fox](#) Globe Staff, Updated September 3, 2024, 3:52 p.m.



Marie Kasongo, valedictorian at Match Charter Public High School, was photographed at the Boston Public Library. Kasongo immigrated as a child from the Democratic Republic of Congo and is attending Brown University in the fall. *Kayla Bartkowski For The Boston Globe*

When classes begin Wednesday at Brown University, first-year student Marie Kasongo will be ready.

Kasongo, 18, of Dorchester, is this year's valedictorian at Match Charter Public High School in Boston and a voraciously curious student, so intent on learning that her mother has to remind her to goof off once in a while.

When she was learning English after her family immigrated from the Democratic Republic of Congo, she read so much that her mother would tell her, "Go watch TV, stop reading. You're going to hurt your head."

"I would always have my homework done on the bus ride home from school, just because I didn't want to wait until I got home," Kasongo said. "And then I would ask the teacher for more homework because it was fun for me."

"She's someone who really likes to be in school, even when she's home," said her mother, Germaine Kasongo, 40, adding that Marie often falls asleep at night while reading a book.



Marie Kasongo and her mother, Germaine, were photographed at the Boston Public Library. *Kayla Bartkowski For The Boston Globe*

It's that drive that made her the valedictorian at Match, where she also co-founded a student group called Mosaic that works to build a welcoming and inclusive school environment. The experience helped the formerly introverted teen develop more confidence in her leadership skills, a teacher said.

“She realized the power of her voice,” said Ishrat Chowdhury, her chemistry teacher at Match. “She realized the need to create more community at our school, and she no longer needed an adult to be the leader of that group. . . . This is the first time where it was really her voice and her leadership abilities.”

When she wasn’t busy excelling academically or working to change her school’s climate, Marie Kasongo was often at home, helping her single mother care for her younger siblings, ages 15, 13, and 8, two of whom have autism. She also has a 22-year-old brother.

She said her siblings are mostly pretty self-sufficient, so her job is mostly making sure they shower and brush their teeth on schedule and finish their homework, but sometimes she has to put on her mom hat and do things like monitor their screen time.

“If I notice, like, ‘OK, you haven’t touched your homework,’ I’ll tell them, ‘Yeah, time to switch it off,’” she said. “Sometimes it does feel like I’m a parent, but it also just feels like I’m an older sister. I want to be someone that they can talk to, someone they can come to.”

She often takes on a similar role with classmates, “holding everyone accountable to seeing through their commitments,” according to the school’s principal, Joseph Gallagher.

As the school’s cheer captain last year, she tutored other girls who needed help to maintain their athletic eligibility, Gallagher said, and once he overheard her “give some of our ninth graders some much-needed tough love about what it means to be seen as a leader amongst your peers.”

“I think her words inevitably had more of an impact than anything that the coach or I could have said,” Gallagher said.



Marie Kasongo, valedictorian at Match Charter Public High School, was photographed outside the Boston Public Library. *Kayla Bartkowski For The Boston Globe*

The Kasongos immigrated to the United States when Marie was 5, and her two youngest siblings were born here. She has only hazy memories of life in Africa, mostly of the loving extended family they left behind and the food, like her beloved fufu, a sort of starchy dough made from root vegetables, and the fresh fruit, which had a different flavor than the fruit available here.

She spoke only French when her family arrived in Boston, where she was placed in a kindergarten class for children learning English. Not only did she quickly master the language, she also began developing the study habits she's taking with her to Providence.

“I think where I started to really fall in love with school and enjoy learning was actually from learning English, because I would read a lot of books,” she said. “That’s how I learned English.”

Over time, her love of learning grew into a love of sharing what she’d learned.

Once, when Marie Kasongo was in middle school, her mother was approached by a classmate’s mother who wanted to give her a hug and thank her, because Marie

had spent her lunch period each day tutoring the woman's daughter, enabling her to pass a difficult class. She hadn't told her mother she was helping.

"She doesn't work only for herself," Germaine Kasongo said. "She has a big heart."

The desire to help others extends to her career plans, which were set at an early age.

"I've always wanted to be a doctor," she said. "It's something pretty personal to me. You can see videos . . . where I'm like 8 years old saying I'm going to be a doctor and cure the world."

A decade later, she has refined her vision and sees a future in developing biomedical devices. She believes that the open curriculum at Brown, the university she has dreamed of attending since she started high school, will enable her to delve into some of her many interests and prepare her for that future.

"Hopefully, I can work at a biomedical company and spend all day working in a lab making devices that . . . help people," she said. "That's the dream, like just a mad scientist in a lab 24 hours a day."

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