THE RIGHT TO DREAM

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After rising from poverty to parliament, Brazil's Tabata Amaral wants future prodigies to succeed because of policies rather than luck

"If I'm here today, it's because of public schools' math olympiads," says Tabata Amaral. By "here" she means her office in Brazil's House of Representatives, where the 31-year-old, already serving a second term, found time to speak with F&D in a video interview on the same day that country's 2025 federal budget was up for a vote.

As a science child prodigy turned education activist and political rising star, Amaral's life exemplifies both the possibilities of individual brilliance as well as the real-life challenges of developing talent, especially for children from humble backgrounds: Before spending on labs and scholarships, it starts with broadening their horizons, or achieving "the right to dream," as Amaral puts it. "If you don't even know something exists, how will you dream about it?"

The daughter of a housekeeper and a bus ticketing agent, Amaral was born in a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of São Paulo, Brazil's largest, richest, and very unequal city. A brilliant student from an early age, at 11 she won her first medal in the Brazilian public school mathematical olympiad. The prize was joining a supplementary weekend course, and it came with a small pocket money stipend. "This showed me, at 11, that the world was big," which at the time meant to be able to go to the city's affluent neighborhoods for the first time. "It gave me the right to dream about a different future."

She went on to win more than 40 medals in math, chemistry, robotics, astronomy, and astrophysics olympiads, in Brazil and abroad (always as the only girl on the national team), and a full scholarship to an elite high school. She became the first in her family to finish secondary school. Soon after getting into Brazil's most prestigious university to study physics, she won full scholarships to the California Institute of Technology and to Columbia, Harvard, Princeton, Pennsylvania, and Yale universities.

Tabata Amaral is pictured in São Paulo, Brazil.

PATRICIA MONTEIRO/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

She chose astrophysics at Harvard. Four days after learning she had been accepted, her father, who had a history of mental health problems and drug abuse, committed suicide. Feeling guilty about leaving her grieving family behind, she considered dropping out. "It felt like life was telling me to stop being a fool and go back to where I really belonged." She credits former teachers with getting her back on track. "They said that if I quit, that opportunity would never happen again to a poor girl from Brazil."

Turning point

In her third semester at Harvard, as part of general education requirements, she signed up for a course on comparative politics in Latin America. It was a turning point. "It's like it was about my life, inequality in Latin America. Why am I here and others aren't?" That class's professor joked that Amaral, who had studied about a year and half of English before attending Harvard, had "the worst English and the best questions." Despite the pile of science medals, she changed majors from astrophysics to political science and graduated magna cum laude with a thesis on the effectiveness of education reforms in Brazil—all while working at various jobs to support her family.

Returning home in 2014, she first founded an education advocacy organization, which soon won awards and international funding. In 2018, aged 25, she ran for Congress and received the sixth highest number of votes among the 70 lawmakers elected in São Paulo, the country's most populous state. In 2022, she was reelected with a third more votes than the first time. Last year, she ran for mayor of the city of São Paulo. Although she finished fourth in a bitterly fought contest, she almost doubled her votes from the previous election.

Once in Congress, one of Amaral's first priorities was to secure funding for the math olympiads that gave her a first glimpse of a larger world. Created by the country's science and technology ministry in 2004—the year she won that first of many medals—the program has suffered deep budget cuts over the years, despite evidence suggesting that when students win a science medal, their whole school sees lower truancy and higher college attendance later. These programs are "a cheap and effective policy," she says.

Keeping the math competitions alive may have a deeper, personal meaning for Amaral. The minister who made them possible happens to be the father of her boyfriend of five years, João Campos—also a young rising politician, whom she first met as a fellow lawmaker and who last year easily won reelection as mayor of Recife, capital of Brazil's northeastern state of Pernambuco.

"My trajectory is a statistical miracle. So much could have gone wrong, and I've been very lucky," Amaral acknowledges. She therefore focuses on creating mechanisms that would allow other gifted students to rely on policies instead of fate. The first part involves broadening their horizons and helping them develop the capacity to dream. "When you're poor, you grow up without references or role models. You don't even know how to get into college. We need to show children that the world is big and that you can experience it through education, sports, and culture."

Her mayoral campaign education proposals included full-time schooling, public foreign language programs, and foreign exchange programs for young people. "It's cheaper to send a kid abroad for six months than eventually having to maintain them in jail for the same amount of time later on," she says, adding that this is a factual, not rhetorical, comparison.

If getting kids to school is difficult, keeping them there until graduation presents a different set of challenges. A program Amaral drafted established two-pronged funding for low-income secondary students: a monthly pocket money stipend and a savings fund accessible only after high school graduation. She knows firsthand how even a small amount of money can change the harsh reality of children dropping out of school to seek work and help at home. "When I got that first small salary, at 11, it showed my family that I could earn money while studying. It was very symbolic," she says.

Dreaming big

She worked with a group of economists to design the project, based on evidence showing that school absenteeism and lower education levels ultimately cost governments more. "A student that drops out of high school has a life expectancy up to four years shorter, is less productive, and is more likely to go to jail or to become seriously ill," she says, quoting research from economist Ricardo Paes de Barros, who estimated the overall cost of truancy to society at 3 percent of GDP. Effective since March 2024, the national program is already benefiting over 3 million students.

Next she wants to expand the program for low-income college students, knowing well that many of the same problems are compounded at the next phase. Poor students need to overcome social barriers and stigmas—"I heard so many times that I would probably end up a drug addict like my dad"—as well as financial hurdles unknown to someone from the middle class. "When that kid finally starts dreaming big, they might be very hardworking and have clear objectives," she says. "But at the end of the day, if you don't have money for the bus fare, it's over." F&D

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