



Photo: Evolve Academy

Equitably Measuring Student Progress to High School Graduation

Insights from the Engage New England Initiative

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Introduction

Accurate data on meaningful outcomes are the foundation of any successful continuous improvement effort or accountability system. For high schools, it is particularly important to understand the extent to which students are progressing toward graduation. Finishing more years of high school, and especially earning a diploma, is associated with a decreased risk of premature death, increased prospects for employment, and a higher lifelong earning potential.¹

Unfortunately, the traditional metrics for tracking progress toward graduation assume a steady progression from 9th through 12th grade. Consequently, these metrics are neither helpful nor valid measures of success for students who take nonconventional paths through high school. In traditional high schools, these metrics obscure the progress of those students least well served by the education system who end up off track to graduate in 4 years, and they can even disincentivize educators from focusing on these students. In alternative high schools, which typically serve large proportions of students with nonconventional paths, these metrics do not function at all.



Photo: Evolve Academy

This brief describes revised graduation metrics developed in partnership with five alternative high schools participating in the Barr Foundation’s Beyond Engage New England (Beyond ENE) initiative, an effort to develop exemplary demonstration high schools that serve students who are currently off track to graduate. Grounded in the tenets of positive youth development, the Beyond ENE initiative aims to support new or redesigned schools to use competency-based approaches and flexible learning environments to improve the educational and life outcomes of students who have not experienced success in traditional school settings.

SRI Education, a research partner for this initiative, engaged in a collaborative development process with Beyond ENE school leaders in spring and summer 2022 to create new measures of progress toward graduation and graduation rates that are tailored to the unique paths of their students. Ultimately, these metrics will inform continuous improvement efforts and initiative supports. In this brief, we first discuss why new metrics that are inclusive of students with nonconventional paths to graduation are needed and then describe the metrics chosen for the Beyond ENE initiative. These metrics may be useful to other school, district, or state leaders interested in implementing continuous improvement or accountability systems that recognize the diverse pathways students take through high school.

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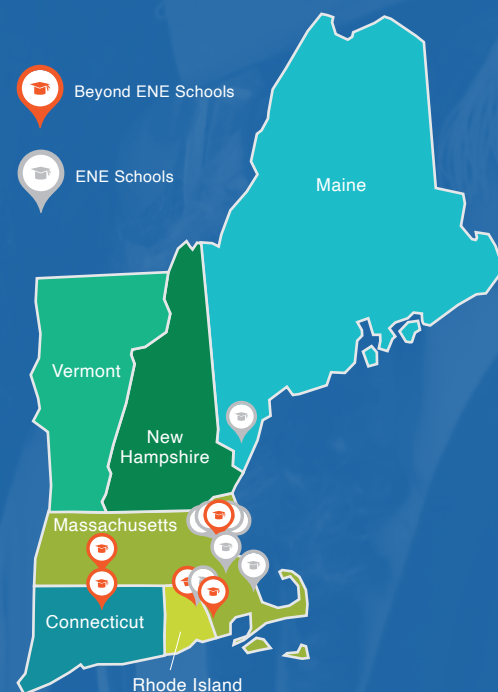
Engage New England: Doing High School Differently

In 2017, the Barr Foundation launched Engage New England (ENE), an initiative to support the design and implementation of excellent high school options for students who are off track to graduate. With planning and implementation technical assistance, grantees developed innovative models for either new or redesigned schools that would build the skills and competencies students need to be successful in and after high school. Each new or redesigned school was anchored in positive youth development, an approach that emphasizes caring, supportive, and trusting relationships; high expectations; opportunities for student voice, choice, and contributions; engaging learning experiences; and consistency. The ENE initiative supported school leaders to ground positive youth development in both core instructional practices and student support structures. The initiative's goal is to empower students to take ownership of their path to graduation and a postsecondary plan by developing rigorous and purposeful learning experiences and effective and transparent academic systems, such as competency-based learning and academic case conferencing.

The Barr Foundation invested in three cohorts of grantees across New England, with the first cohort funded in 2017–18, the second in 2018–19, and the third in 2019–20. Across the cohorts, a total of 18 grantees received an initial one-year planning grant, and 13 received continuation grants for additional planning, piloting, or implementation of the new or redesigned schools. In 2022–23, the foundation launched the second phase of the initiative, Beyond ENE, with five continuing grantees.

Each grantee received technical assistance from Springpoint, a national organization that supports the design and implementation of innovative school models. Springpoint provided grantees with customized technical assistance, including individual coaching and research visits, network-wide convenings on topics essential to developing strong school models, and study tours of exemplary school models. In the first year of the ENE initiative, Springpoint's support focused on planning whole-school design. During subsequent years, Springpoint focused more deeply on helping grantees develop a strong instructional core supported by an intensive academic advisory model. Beyond ENE supports will additionally focus on postsecondary planning and community partnerships.

SRI Education is conducting a rigorous, multimethod evaluation of the ENE initiative. The evaluation includes interviews with school and district staff, focus groups with students, surveys of staff and students, review and scoring of teacher assignments and student work, and analysis of students' high school and early postsecondary outcomes.



Why New Metrics?

Many students take nonconventional paths through high school for reasons that are both individual and rooted in systemic inequalities. Some of these students remain in their traditional high schools, and some enroll in alternative high school programs. In either setting, traditional accountability metrics have limited use and validity in measuring their success. Typified by a 4-year cohort graduation rate (also called an “on-time graduation rate”), traditional metrics assume students progress steadily through school (e.g., they start in 9th grade and graduate 4 years later after 12th grade).^A Metrics that treat students with nonconventional paths as though they are part of a cohort progressing toward graduation without interruption both contradict the students’ lived experiences and hold educators to unrealistic expectations.²

For example, consider a student who attended a traditional high school for 3 years but attained only 1 year’s worth of credits before transferring to an alternative high school. Under the traditional 4-year cohort graduation rate, the new school would be held responsible for supporting the student in earning 3 years’ worth of credits in 1 year. Even if the school supported this student to attain an accelerated 1.5 years’ worth of credits, the student would still need additional time to

Codevelopment of Metrics

Traditional accountability metrics do not perform well for students with nonconventional paths to graduation. To identify metrics that will perform better, SRI researchers engaged in a collaborative process with staff from alternative high schools in the Beyond ENE initiative. Our process included:

- An initial review of resources and literature on accountability metrics for alternative high schools
- Interviews with school staff (school leaders and counselors) to understand the types of data schools currently tracked, how schools use and store these data, and the feasibility of tracking additional data
- Development of draft metrics that drew on the interviews and literature review
- Small-group meetings with school staff to discuss the draft metrics and solicit feedback
- Revisions to metrics based on the feedback from school staff

We will begin calculating these metrics following the 2022–23 school year. We are committed to continue working with Beyond ENE school leaders to reflect on and refine these metrics to ensure they are performing as expected. We believe that to develop metrics that capture the experiences of students on nonconventional paths, the leaders who know these students best need to have a voice in the process.

^A The standard 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate, which the federal government requires states to report, is calculated by dividing the number of students who graduate within 4 years with a high school diploma by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for that graduating class. The adjusted cohort begins with all students who entered 9th grade for the first time 4 years earlier and then adds any students who subsequently transferred into the cohort and subtracts any students who transferred out, emigrated, or died during the years covered by the rate.

graduate. The school's success in supporting this student would not be reflected in the 4-year cohort graduation rate.

It should come as no surprise, then, that alternative high schools make up a disproportionate number of high schools with low graduation rates—defined as schools that graduate 67% or less of their students.³ Alternative high schools are also disproportionately represented among school closures.⁴



Photo: Chelsea Opportunity Academy

Federal policy now allows states to use different measures to hold alternative high schools accountable. This flexibility is beneficial because it does not force states to hold alternative high schools to unrealistic expectations. However, in some cases, school districts have taken advantage of the flexibility by pushing struggling students into low-quality alternative high schools without adequate oversight—a practice that artificially inflates the ratings of the traditional high schools in the district.⁵ Gaming the system in this way is harmful to students and exacerbates inequalities. Revising or augmenting the accountability metrics for *all* high schools so they work for students with nonconventional paths to graduation would reduce these perverse incentives and encourage all schools to better serve these students.



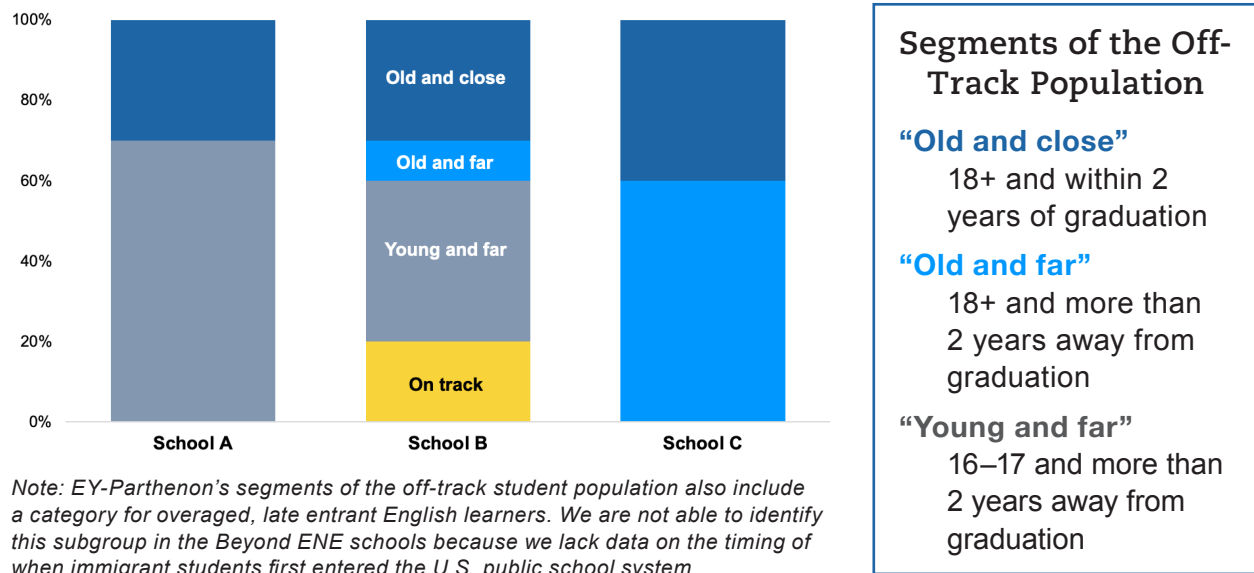
Attributes of meaningful metrics

Alternative high schools, which serve large proportions of students with nonconventional paths to graduation, are helpful contexts in which to “pressure test” new metrics. A strong metric would give alternative high school leaders insight into how much progress students are making in their schools and would not penalize the schools for what had transpired in students’ academic careers before they enrolled. To develop metrics with these characteristics, we need to consider two distinct features of alternative high schools:

- **Students enroll at different stages of their high school careers.** When designing metrics for alternative high schools, we must carefully consider who should be part of a cohort. Assigning students to cohorts based on when they entered 9th grade will not work for schools that enroll all or a majority of their students after the 9th grade.
- **Students enroll at different times during the school year.** Many alternative schools have rolling intake windows, with students entering and exiting frequently. When designing any metric, we must carefully consider how to handle students who transfer in or out throughout the year. This is a best practice for metrics in general, but it is particularly important in alternative high schools where these decisions may impact large proportions of the student population.

Finally, in the Beyond ENE initiative, it is important that any metrics be comparable across the participating alternative high schools, which serve different segments of the population of youth who are off track to graduate. EY-Parthenon, a consulting group that has conducted research in Boston Public Schools, recommends disaggregating the off-track population by a combination of age and distance to graduation—“young and far,” “old and far,” and “old and close” (Exhibit 1).⁶ The group argues that a 19-year-old student who is about to age out of the system and has only 1 year’s worth of credits has very different needs than a 16-year-old student who is 2 years behind. Exhibit 1 demonstrates the potential variation among alternative high school student populations. Comparable metrics need to perform well in schools serving different segments of the off-track population: schools with large populations of students who are young and far from graduation (School A), schools with a mix of youth who are off track and on track to graduate (School B), and schools with large populations of students who are old and far from graduation (School C).

Exhibit 1. Potential Variation in Alternative High School Student Populations



In the next section, we describe the metrics selected to measure student progress toward graduation across the Beyond ENE initiative. Our goal was to identify metrics that would support continuous improvement in Beyond ENE high schools and serve as common measures across the schools. States and school districts seeking to adopt metrics that meaningfully assess schools with different student populations will need to address this issue of comparability and select metrics that do not penalize the schools serving the students who are most off track to graduate.

Metrics are comprised of two main components. The first component is simply *what* is being measured. Or put another way, how do we operationalize the outcome of interest? For example, if school leaders are interested in understanding student engagement, they could operationalize this outcome in several different ways, including examining attendance rates or surveying students about how engaged they feel in their classes. The second component is *for whom*—who is the sample for the metric? When creating a cohort, how will it be defined? Does the denominator include students who transfer in or out of a school midyear? Does it include students who drop out?

For each metric we describe below, we explain our reasoning for both the metric itself and the sample of students who will be included in the calculation. We focus on the metrics for tracking progress to graduation and graduation rates because they are the most complicated to customize for students with nonconventional paths through high school.⁷

Progress to graduation

Students with nonconventional paths may change high schools more than once. They may arrive at their new school at different points in their high school careers and often with fewer credits than expected based on their age or years in school. The traditional method of assessing a student's progress toward graduation is against a *cumulative* credit benchmark—or the total number of credits they have earned over the course of their high school career. This method provides useful information for understanding the remaining number of credits the student needs to graduate from high school, but it can unfairly attribute the student's previous progress or lack of progress to their new school. Instead, assessing a student's credit accumulation against an *annual* benchmark, such as a 1-year credit expectation, provides a measure of how well the student's current school is supporting their progress to graduation. This method is a more meaningful measure of progress toward graduation for students with nonconventional paths because it works for students regardless of what year they enroll and how many credits they have upon entry. In addition, earning 1 year's worth of credits has been found to be highly correlated with students' ultimate success in graduating.⁸



Photo: CREC Impact Academy

Exhibit 2 details how the annual credit accumulation metrics we selected for Beyond ENE schools will be calculated.

Exhibit 2. Metrics for Student Progress toward Graduation

Annual credit accumulation	
Metrics	Sample
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average 1-year credit accumulation • Percentage of students earning <i>at least</i> 1 year’s worth of credit • Percentage of students earning <i>more than</i> 1 year’s worth of credits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes students enrolled as of October 1 who have at least 1 year’s worth of credits remaining • Excludes students who drop out or transfer midyear

We calculate a 1-year credit expectation by dividing the total number of credits needed for graduation by 4 (the number of years for students on conventional paths through high school to graduate). We then calculate the percentage of students who have met or exceeded this 1-year credit expectation. This calculation allows for comparability across schools that are spread across different states and districts and have different credit systems and graduation requirements.

In addition to calculating the percentage of students earning at least 1 year’s worth of credit, we added two supplemental metrics based on feedback from Beyond ENE school leaders. The leaders shared that, when possible, they strive to support students to accelerate their progress by earning more than 1 year’s worth of credit each school year. Therefore, we also identified two additional metrics: an average 1-year credit accumulation metric that can be tracked over time, and the percentage of students earning *more than* 1 year’s worth of credits.^B

For each of these annual credit metrics, we restricted the sample to students who were enrolled as of the beginning of the year (by October 1) with at least 1 year’s worth of credit remaining. A school leader suggested this sample restriction, noting that some of their seniors may have only a few credits left to earn in their final year. The sample also excludes students who drop out or transfer midyear, to allow schools to see how much progress students are making after a full year of school.

An important caution, however, is that if credit-focused metrics of progress toward graduation are used in a high-stakes context, they can incentivize school leaders to reduce the rigor of classes so students can earn credits as quickly as possible, resulting in graduates who are not adequately prepared for postsecondary opportunities. Put another way, credit-focused metrics can end up reinforcing rigid expectations of how long students

^B We explored adopting a measure of “credit acceleration” that would calculate students’ rate of earning credits in their current schools relative to their previous schools. Unfortunately, we had to abandon this measure when we learned from school staff that we would not be able to collect data on the credits students earned at their previous schools.

should take to progress through the curriculum at the expense of a focus on mastery of content and skills. In the Beyond ENE initiative, where the metrics will be used for continuous improvement rather than high-stakes decision-making, this is not a significant concern. Education leaders seeking metrics for accountability purposes should be aware of this risk. One approach to guarding against this perverse incentive is to ensure students demonstrate mastery to earn credits, as in a competency-based system. Beyond ENE schools are in the process of shifting to competency-based education models.

Moreover, when supporting individual students on their paths to graduation, schools will need to supplement these credit accumulation metrics with any additional state, district, or school graduation requirements such as senior capstones or state-mandated graduation exams. Because Beyond ENE schools are spread out across different states and districts and thus subject to different requirements, we chose to limit the common metrics for the initiative to the annual credit accumulation metrics presented in Exhibit 2.

Graduation

Developing one graduation rate metric that will perform equally well across different segments of the population of youth who are off track to graduate is challenging because of the diversity of age and credits earned within this population. After discussion with Beyond ENE school leaders, we decided to adopt two graduation rates to be used in tandem: a 1-year graduation rate and a cohort graduation rate (Exhibit 3). In addition, we will supplement the cohort graduation rate with a cohort extended engagement rate. Both of these cohort-based rates will be based on a single-year entry cohort (described later in this section). While each metric has strengths and limitations when used alone, together they paint a fuller picture of how well Beyond ENE schools are supporting their students to graduate.



Photo: Evolve Academy

The two graduation rate metrics share two key features. First, we define graduation as earning a high school diploma (not a GED or other high school equivalency certificate). This decision was driven by the goals of the Beyond ENE initiative and may not make sense in all high school settings. Second, the denominator for both rates excludes students who transfer to another school because we view the responsibility for these students as moving to their new school.

Exhibit 3. Graduation Rate Metrics

One-year graduation rate	
Metrics	Sample
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One-year graduation rate with a high school diploma 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All students who begin the school year as “seniors,” defined by number of credits Does not include students who transfer in or out midyear Includes students who drop out
Single-year entry cohort graduation rate (and extended engagement rate)	
Metric	Sample
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three-year cohort graduation rate <p><i>Supplementary metric:</i> Three-year cohort extended engagement rate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All students who first enroll in a given school year (at any point during the year) are included in the rates 3 years later Does not include students who transfer to another school Includes students who drop out

One-year graduation rate. This metric tracks the percentage of students who start the year as seniors and who earn a diploma by the end of that same year. We define seniors by the number of credits they have at the beginning of the school year, not by the number of years they have been enrolled in high school. As a result, our sample of “seniors” may not always match a district’s definition.

For alternative high schools that typically serve students who need more than 4 years to graduate, a 1-year graduation rate does not penalize a school for enrolling students who entered already off track. For this metric, we do not include students who transfer into a Beyond ENE school midyear, even if they have sufficient credits to count as a senior, because the school would have had less than a year to work with them. If these students are still enrolled the following year, they would be included in the 1-year graduation rate for that year.

Both the strengths and the limitations of this metric stem from limiting the sample to those students who have only 1 year’s worth of credits remaining. A strength is the resulting comparability across schools serving different segments of the population of youth who are off track to graduate. This comparability is a virtue of limiting the sample to only students who start the year at the same stage in their high school careers, thus comparing apples to apples. The corresponding limitation is that this metric does not provide any insight into how well schools are doing with the segments of their population who are further from graduation.

Single-year entry cohort graduation rate and extended engagement rate. The traditional 4-year cohort graduation rate calculation does not perform well in schools that serve large proportions of students with nonconventional paths to graduation because of the way cohorts are defined. Defining cohorts based on the year a student first enters high

school *anywhere* puts alternative high schools, which are often the second or third high school a student attends, in an impossible position. To address this concern, our cohort-based rates use a “single-year entry cohort.” For the cohort graduation rate, all students who first enroll in a Beyond ENE school in a given school year—at any point during the year and at any stage in their high school careers—are included in the graduation rate 3 years later. We chose this time frame because Beyond ENE school leaders believed that graduating within 3 years is a realistic goal for the majority of students they enroll. School and system leaders can select the time frame that makes the most sense for their context and may wish to look at more than one. For example, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has adopted a 4- and 5-year graduation rate (supplemented by a 5-year extended engagement rate, as discussed below).

The strength of the single-year entry cohort is that it holds Beyond ENE schools accountable for every student they enroll in a given year while providing a reasonable time frame to prepare students to graduate. School leaders preferred the single-year entry cohort to defining cohorts based on credit level at entry because it provided greater flexibility to accommodate different, nonlinear paths to graduation.

A limitation to the single-year entry cohort, however, is that assigning students based on when they enter makes the metric less comparable across schools serving different segments of the off-track population. For example, performing well on this metric will be easier for a school that serves a majority of students who first enroll when they are “old and close” to graduation than for a school that serves a majority of students who first enroll when they are “old and far” or “young and far” from graduation. To mitigate this limitation, we are pairing the cohort graduation rate with an extended engagement rate that uses the same single-year entry cohort but includes both graduates and students who are still enrolled in the numerator. In a hypothetical cohort of 100 students, if 50 students graduate within 3 years, 30 are still enrolled, and 20 drop out, the graduation rate would be 50% (50/100) and the extended engagement rate would be 80% $([50 + 30]/100)$.



Photo: Chelsea Opportunity Academy

Conclusion

To ensure high schools meet the needs of all students, education leaders need metrics that account for nonconventional paths through high school. Otherwise, metrics intended to provide meaningful data for continuous improvement or accountability may deter schools from enrolling students who have been least well served by our educational system. Supplementary metrics are particularly important for alternative high schools, which play a critical role in our education ecosystem by enrolling students who have not found success in traditional high school settings. These schools deserve accountability systems that are fair, hold them to high standards, and provide genuine measures of their success in supporting students. Further, they deserve valid data on how well their students are progressing toward graduation to inform their own continuous improvement efforts.



Photos: Evolve Academy

Endnotes

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