

OPPORTUNITY ACADEMY



Photo: Holyoke Opportunity Academy

Doing High School Differently

*The Student Experience in
Engage New England Schools*

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May 2026



Introduction

“I have learned that you can always do it. That zero credits, 50, 40, 30, you can always do it. ... if you have the right staff, the right mentality, you can go to school and get out.”

These are the words of a student who entered his junior year one year behind in credits. Now, he plans to graduate high school a semester early. This student’s experience is not unique among students attending schools that are part of the Barr Foundation’s Engage New England (ENE) initiative, an effort to develop exemplary demonstration high schools that meet the academic and developmental needs of high school students who have fallen off track on their path to high school graduation and postsecondary success. The ENE initiative supports new or redesigned schools in using student-centered instructional approaches—including competency-based instruction and project-based curricular units—and personalized support structures to improve the educational and life outcomes of students who have not experienced success in traditional school settings. The initiative’s goal is to **empower students to take ownership of their path to graduation and beyond** by developing schools that equitably support student success through rigorous and purposeful learning experiences and robust advising models grounded in strong relationships, high expectations, and student voice.

Through ENE, Barr sought to demonstrate how student-centered schools can meet the varied needs of students, especially historically underserved students, and ensure their postsecondary success. The foundation invested in three cohorts of grantees, with the first cohort funded in 2017–18, to engage in planning and implementation of key strategies for school improvement. These strategies included establishing a student-centered culture, building a strong instructional core, implementing an intentional academic advisory model, and providing comprehensive postsecondary planning. Grantees received ongoing coaching and support from Springpoint, a national organization that facilitates innovative school model design and implementation. In 2022, Barr selected four schools to receive continued funding and technical assistance related to the initiative strategies.¹

This brief examines **how the experiences of students are different at these four ENE schools** compared with traditional or alternative high schools serving similar populations of students, and **whether these experiences are translating to stronger success skills**. Learnings may be useful to other alternative schools or traditional schools aiming to improve the student experience. This brief is part of a series by SRI, the initiative’s research partner, examining the design and development of ENE schools. Future briefs will further explore the implementation and impacts of the ENE initiative.

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About the Engage New England Schools

The ENE schools offer unique learning contexts for specific populations of students who are off track to graduate when they enroll. The schools vary in the off-track populations they serve. Some schools target overaged and undercredited students, and others serve younger students who have special circumstances like parenting.

Chelsea Opportunity Academy (COA) is an alternative high school in Chelsea, Massachusetts. It is part of the Chelsea Public Schools district and was launched in 2018–19 with support from the ENE initiative. Guidance counselors refer students to COA

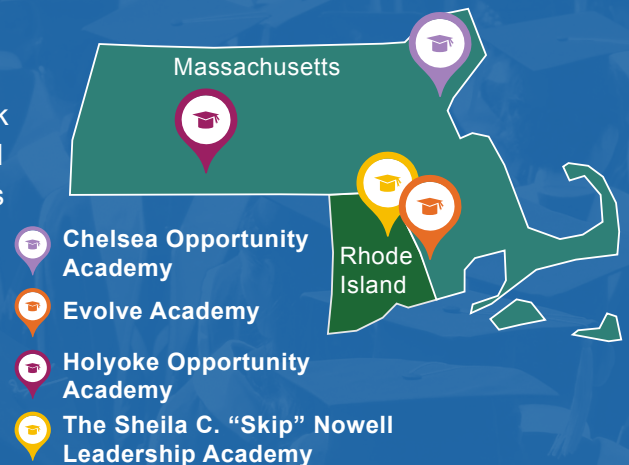
who are overaged and undercredited, who are not well served and are struggling at the district's comprehensive high school, or who have been unenrolled after being absent for 15 days. COA serves a large percentage of newcomer students who have been in the United States for less than 3 years. At the start of the 2024–25 school year, COA served 168 students.

Evolve Academy is a program within B.M.C. Durfee High School in Fall River, Massachusetts. It launched in 2019–20 with support from the ENE initiative as a program within the district's alternative high school. When it started, most students came from the alternative high school. Evolve moved to Durfee High School in 2021–22, making it easier to enroll students from the comprehensive high school. Students can begin enrolling at Evolve in 10th grade. On average, Evolve enrolls a younger student population than the other schools in the ENE initiative. Evolve enrolled 92 students at the start of the 2024–25 school year.

Holyoke Opportunity Academy (HOA) is an alternative high school in Holyoke, Massachusetts. It is part of the Holyoke Public Schools district and has a mission of serving youth who have not been well served in traditional high school settings. HOA joined the ENE initiative in 2019. It offers three programs to serve students with a diverse set of needs: Success Center, LightHouse Holyoke, and Gateway to College. Success Center is the largest program and the only one involved in the ENE initiative. It is a combined program for high school students and adult learners and is designed for students who are at least one year off track to graduate. At the beginning of the 2024–25 school year, Success Center enrolled 143 students.

The Sheila C. “Skip” Nowell Leadership Academy is a public charter school in Providence, Rhode Island. Nowell's mission is to ensure that “pregnant, parenting and underserved youth graduate from high school with the knowledge and skills they need to be prepared for success in college, career and family life.” Nowell joined the ENE initiative in 2019 and is open to students across the state. The school enrolled 184 students at the beginning of the 2024–25 school year.

Given the population they serve, these schools have great promise for diminishing unequal outcomes associated with income, wealth, and race in the United States. To learn more about the student populations these schools serve, see SRI's [student profiles brief](#) from 2022–23.



How are ENE schools transforming the student experience?

By the time students enroll in an ENE school, many have become highly disengaged from school because their previous school settings did not meet their academic or developmental needs. Some students transfer to the ENE school from a traditional high school or alternative school severely behind in credits; others enroll after previously dropping out of high school. ENE schools aim to implement innovative approaches to support these students to get back on track. The Barr Foundation expects ENE schools to provide students with educational experiences grounded in Springpoint's [Indicators of School Quality](#) and characterized by:

- a strong community that fosters student voice, trust, and belonging
- identification and prioritization of core skills and competencies that students need for secondary and postsecondary success
- rich learning experiences that help students master these competencies and find purpose through engaging and authentic tasks
- a personalized student support system that ensures students are making progress toward and planning for life after graduation



The Sheila C. “Skip” Nowell Leadership Academy

To understand whether ENE schools were providing these experiences to students, SRI surveyed students both at the ENE schools and at traditional and alternative schools that serve similar students (comparison schools).ⁱ The traditional schools in the comparison group served 1,500 to 2,000 students, and the alternative schools were similar in size to the ENE schools, serving fewer than 200 students. Most of the ENE students came from traditional schools, so comparing them to students in traditional schools allowed us to examine if their experiences were different from what they would have been if they had stayed. Comparing ENE students to students in alternative schools allowed us to examine if the ENE schools are indeed offering a different type of alternative schooling experience.ⁱⁱⁱ For more detail on the survey methods and findings, see the ENE Spring 2025 Student Survey [Technical Report](#).

Additionally, we held focus groups with students at each ENE school to hear about their experiences at the school and at the schools they attended before enrolling in the ENE school. Finally, at each ENE school, we interviewed one student, either a current student or an alum, who had a particularly transformative school experience. We also interviewed individuals in that student's support network.^{iv}

We learned that, in relation to the comparison schools, ENE schools are fostering strong relationships and a sense of belonging for students, implementing competency-based approaches, providing rigorous and purposeful instruction, and beginning to help students plan for their future. These results are not as consistent for areas that were introduced later in the ENE initiative or that the schools have not prioritized, such as postsecondary planning support and developing external partnerships. Given the initiative's focus on racial equity, we also examined how Latine and Black students experience ENE schools relative to traditional high schools. The pattern of results for Latine and Black students was similar to that of students overall.^v



Building relationships and community

The ENE initiative is grounded in the idea that students having caring, trusting, and supportive relationships with adults and their peers is critical for effective learning environments.

The ENE initiative expected schools to build a strong culture of trust and belonging for the students as a foundation for other learning to take place. The vision was for schools to be spaces where *all* students feel known, supported, and comfortable sharing their voice.

Early in the initiative, the Barr Foundation and Springpoint fostered practices to achieve this vision. Barr looked for leaders who demonstrated high expectations for students and an asset-based mindset during the grantee selection process (Caspary et al., 2022). Student input was built into the initiative's design stage: Each grantee formed a design committee that had student representatives and that gathered and acted on student suggestions for the school. As the new or redesigned schools launched, Springpoint helped grantees be intentional in their hiring processes. ENE schools sought staff with experience using student-centered approaches and who were committed to treating students with respect and warmth. In some cases, the schools included students in hiring interviews (Cassidy et al., 2018).

Across the ENE schools, these practices resulted in the creation of a school culture where students felt welcomed and important. One student described “feeling wanted to come to school, feeling welcomed, like every morning I get a ‘hey, good morning, how are you?’” Students knew that their attendance mattered and that absences would be noticed. The schools have systems in place for extra outreach to reengage students, including text messages to absent students and home visits at some schools. One school has staff dedicated to outreach and reengagement efforts. Another school uses staff meeting time each week for triage to identify supports that students need.

Dominic, a recent graduate of Evolve Academy, was described by members of his network as having an infectious energy that lifts up his peers. He told us he was motivated to persevere and succeed by the school's tight and supportive culture.



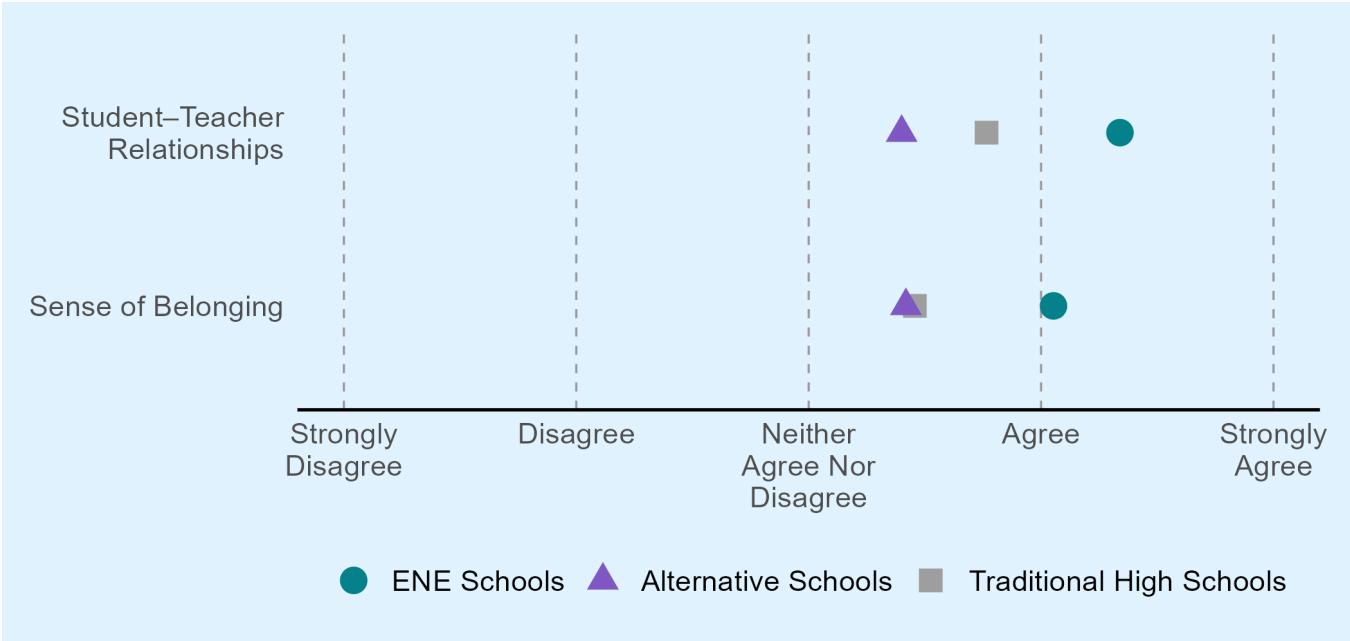
Before enrolling at Evolve, Dominic attended traditional schools and experienced substantial disruption to his schooling, including a 4- to 5-year period of severe truancy. He entered high school significantly behind in credits. On the recommendation of a friend, Dominic enrolled at Evolve at the end of his sophomore year.

At Evolve, Dominic found a learning community where relationships were central. Comparing his two high school experiences, Dominic said it was harder for the teachers at his previous school to get to know him. But at Evolve, teachers and students noticed when he was missing or when he was having a bad day. “If I walked in absolutely miserable, they’d notice.” He said they put him in a better mood. He became a student who never missed a day of school and finished most of his high school credits by January of his senior year. Dominic said Evolve taught him how to show up: “I feel like this is a skill and a mindset, is that you kind of just have to get up and go. You have to get up and do what is needed, or else you just can’t perform in life.”

Students also looked out for and accepted one another. Students in focus groups consistently expressed that it did not matter who you were or where you were before coming to the ENE school. One student said, “I feel like, in here, everybody’s a favorite. Everybody gets treated the same.” As a result, students were able to participate in class without fear of embarrassment. Another student remarked, “Yeah, I don’t care [if I do something embarrassing] because everyone in [the school], kind of like we all just have like a mutual respect, we all just get it.” Another student echoed, “When I come here, I’m not afraid to be myself or make mistakes or genuinely just sit down and learn and open up and feel comfortable. I didn’t feel like I had that at [the traditional high school].”

On the survey, ENE students reported **stronger relationships between school staff and students** and a **stronger sense of belonging** than students at the comparison schools did (Exhibit 1). Notably, this result held true even when compared with the alternative schools, which also provide smaller classrooms and individualized attention and where research has shown that students build supportive relationships with adults (Glassett Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Exhibit 1. Student reports of relationships with teachers and sense of belonging



Note: Differences between mean values for ENE schools and comparison schools are statistically significant.

By all accounts, ENE schools foster a supportive culture, close relationships, and a strong sense of community and belonging for students. Students in all ENE schools described their school community as feeling like “family”—particularly students who did not have a strong support system outside of school. One student said the principal was like his dad and the school social worker was his second mom. In addition to the careful attention to staff mindsets and student-centered design during the design stage, ENE schools also established comprehensive advising systems (discussed next) to maintain this positive school culture.



Providing personalized supports and progress monitoring

ENE schools build strong relationships with students and monitor their progress through a **primary person model**, in which each student has at least one adult who knows them well and helps them monitor their progress toward graduation.

ENE schools ensure students are known and supported through intentional systems of support. With the primary person system, ENE schools **assign students to a primary person** who has a maximum of 18 students on their caseload in an advisory class (also called “crew” or “pod”). Teachers, school staff, and leaders at the ENE schools all serve in this role, although in some schools the guidance counselor or social worker do not take an advisory class because they support all students. On the survey, ENE students were more likely to report being assigned to an adult with whom they meet regularly than students at both types of comparison schools.^{vi}

During advisory time, primary persons meet individually with each student in academic case conferences. During these meetings, the student and their advisor develop SMART academic goals and monitor their progress toward those goals. Students are encouraged to develop their voice and take ownership over the meetings, leading the identification of their goals and next steps. Primary persons receive training and support from a primary person manager, who coaches them on conducting academic case conferences and tracks meetings to ensure all students are being served.

Compared with students at traditional high schools, ENE students were more likely to agree their **advisor knows them well** and **believes they can succeed** (Exhibit 2). ENE students described guidance counselors at traditional schools as having large caseloads and lacking time to meet regularly with students.

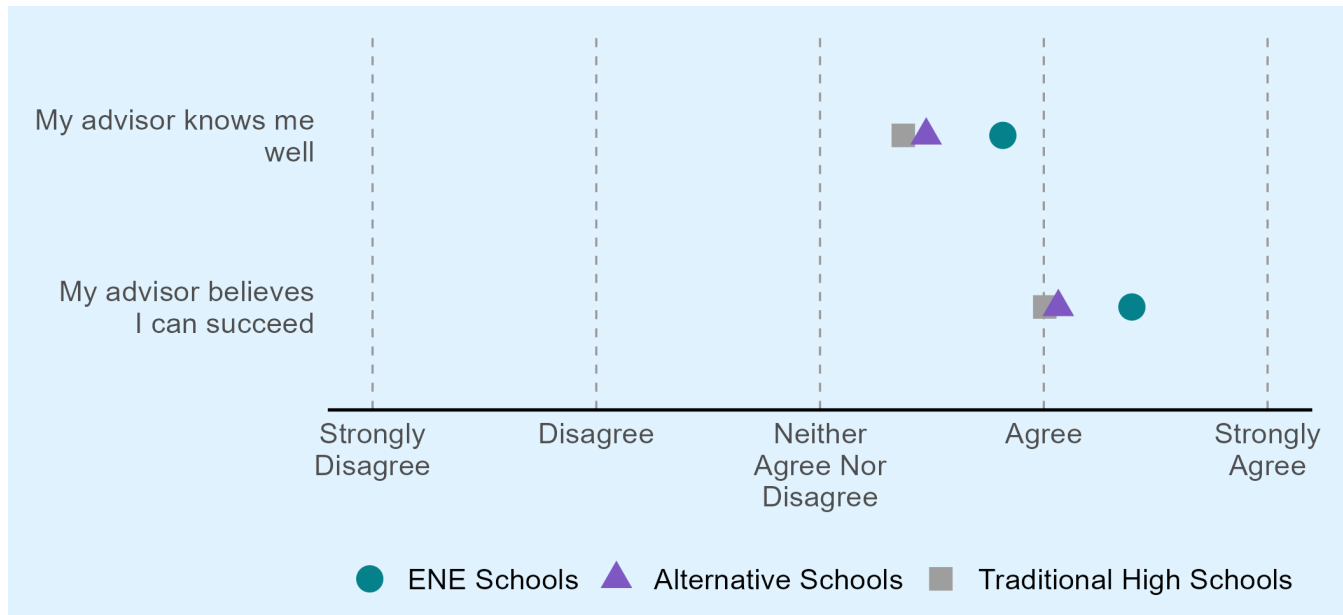


A senior at Holyoke Opportunity Academy (HOA), **Elijah** is described by teachers and peers as kind, determined, and expressive.

He is resolved to earn his high school diploma, something he was unsure he would be able to do at his previous high school. There, he was skipping school, getting suspended, and hanging out with the wrong crowd. He said the staff started to expect this “bad version of himself” so that was how he acted.

Elijah joined HOA during his junior year and feels more understood in the supportive and small environment. He has a close relationship with his primary person, who he checks in with every morning, meets with in advisory, and has case conferences with every two weeks. He seeks her out when he needs to talk to someone, which his father said was a departure from his operating style at his previous school, where he bottled everything up. Elijah said, “I feel like everybody needs a staff like that where they’re one-on-one there to make sure you’re okay even when you’re not.”

Exhibit 2. Student reports of relationship with advisor



Note: Differences between mean values for ENE schools and traditional schools are statistically significant.

ENE students who had previously attended traditional high schools that offered advisory time noted the difference with advisory in ENE schools.

“Most of the time, the advisor [at previous school] just sat there, and we would just do nothing. But I feel like in [ENE school], it’s different because we go over our grad plans. We go over, we write down how our week was, our goals, some action steps. I feel like it’s much more different, and I like it because I can kind of talk to my teacher about my goals and they can help me with that.” -ENE student

Students also shared that the regular goal setting and progress monitoring that happens in case conferences helps them stay on track toward meeting their goals.



The Sheila C. “Skip” Nowell Leadership Academy



Offering rigorous and purposeful instruction

ENE schools provide **rigorous, engaging, and purposeful instruction** that is connected to the development of transferable skills. They use project-based curricular units, called **transformative learning experiences (TLEs)**, and define and teach competencies **that students can use in and beyond high school**.

Recognizing that many ENE students struggled to engage with academics at their previous schools, ENE schools set out to give students **instruction that both interests and challenges them** and provide them with **skills they can transfer beyond high school**. With a focus on core learning competencies and powerful learning experiences intended to elevate quality instruction, the ENE initiative aims to avoid the low expectations and lack of academic rigor that have historically characterized many alternative schools (De La Ossa, 2005; Fairbrother, 2008; Glassett Farrelly & Daniels, 2014; Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Competency-based instruction.

At the outset, ENE schools identified core competencies students must demonstrate in order to graduate, shifting the focus of learning from meeting seat-time requirements to acquiring skills students can apply across courses and settings. Over time, each ENE school has narrowed in on a small set of core competencies—such as argue, discern, collaborate, and communicate—many of which are the same across ENE schools. The schools emphasize mastery, allowing students to revise work until they demonstrate each competency. Some schools use flexible learning structures, such as asynchronous learning, which allow students to work toward mastery at their own pace.

Compared with students in the comparison schools, ENE students reported that their **teachers employ competency approaches** more frequently (Exhibit 3). These approaches included teachers sharing exemplars to convey expectations, making grading transparent and clear,

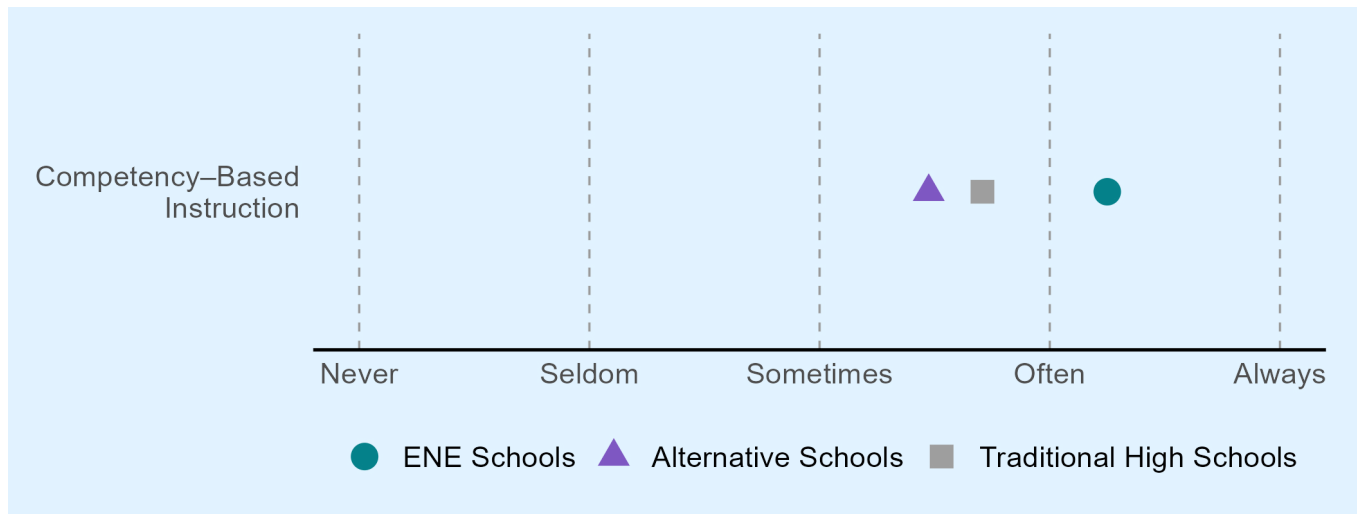


A recent graduate of Chelsea Opportunity Academy (COA), **Kevin** is motivated to keep growing holistically as a person while developing his technical skills. But prior to enrolling at COA, Kevin struggled personally and academically, disenrolling from his previous school in 11th grade. When he entered COA, he was overaged and undercredited and had a tendency to retreat inward, with a teacher describing him as quiet and observant.

At COA, Kevin found coursework to be relevant to his interests, especially the You Auto Know TLE, in which students quantify the many trade-offs in selecting a car to purchase. This class taught him to communicate and advocate for himself. For his final presentation, he had to represent the car buyer's profile and interests, and a teacher said he asked the right questions and requested support when he needed it. He took the initiative to speak to the postsecondary counselor and dually enroll in an automotive course at a local postsecondary institution; he is now pursuing his associate degree in automotive technology. A teacher called Kevin the "poster child for growth mindset."

providing feedback on work, and providing multiple chances to meet expectations for an assignment or to show mastery of a skill.

Exhibit 3. Student reports of competency-based instructional approaches



Note: Students responded about how often their teachers used specific competency-based instructional practices. Differences between mean values for ENE schools and comparison schools are statistically significant.

In focus groups, ENE students described understanding the substance and purpose of the competencies better over time. In their prior experiences at traditional schools, ENE students said they did not understand how their learning translated outside of school. By contrast, they found the competencies in ENE schools useful in broader contexts.

“I think many times when we usually go to traditional high schools, we don’t learn how to do many things at home, and all the competencies are like communicate, analyze, self-direct ... But we learn how to do all these things throughout these courses, and it really works out because it’s not only for school. You can go ahead and use these if you have a job. You use them at work. You use them at home.” -ENE student

Project-based learning experiences.

ENE schools implement Springpoint-designed curricular units called transformative learning experiences (TLEs), in which students complete projects rooted in real-world scenarios that culminate in authentic products to be delivered to real audiences. Some schools offer only TLE-based courses, while others offer traditional curricular units or teacher-designed project-based learning units in addition to select TLEs.

Students across ENE schools consistently noted the value of courses—especially TLE units—that gave them **concrete skills** they need in the world beyond the classroom. For example, students often described the usefulness of learning how to negotiate the process for buying a car in the math TLE, You Auto Know. By contrast, ENE students described classwork at their previous schools as contrived and rote, often coming in the form of handouts and worksheets.

“Yeah, that’s one thing you always hear students say to teachers in [the traditional high school] or in middle school always ... when am I ever going to need this? You don’t hear that here because everybody knows you need this. It’s kind of we’re learning stuff that you need if you want to make it in this world, and I think that’s a privilege that a lot of other students don’t get to see.” -ENE student

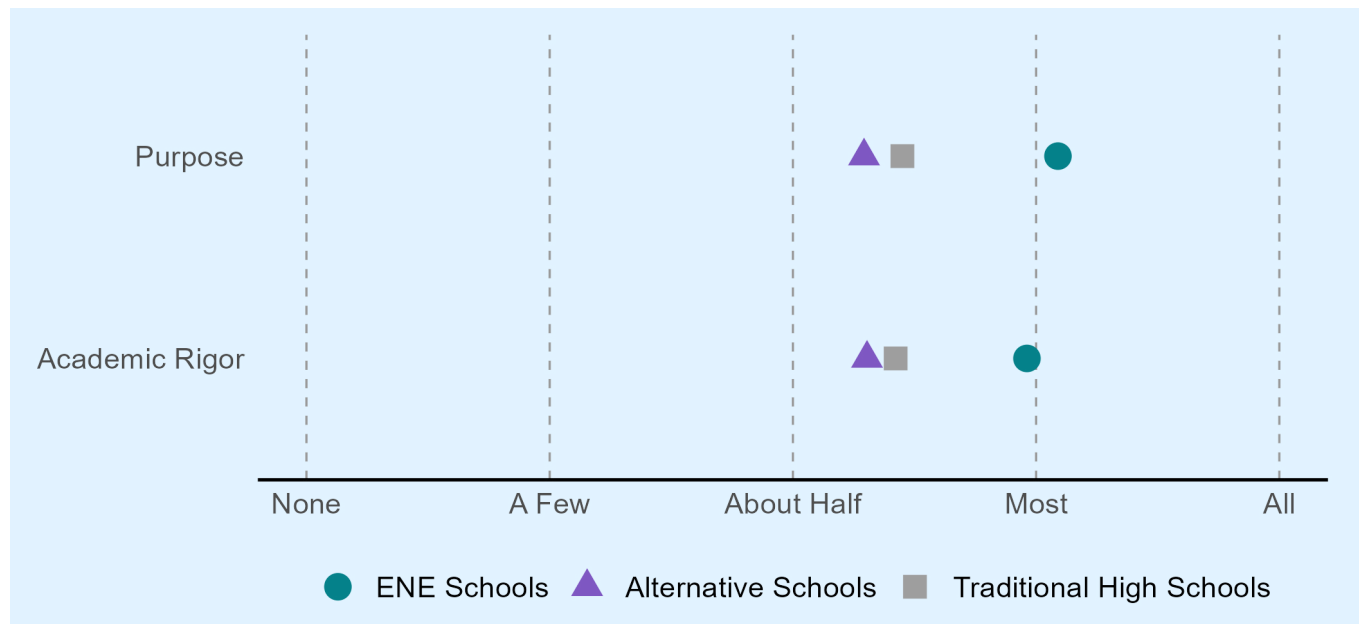


Holyoke Opportunity Academy

Although TLEs are designed to incorporate an authentic audience, ENE schools did not prioritize developing external partnerships to support these experiences. The TLEs were supposed to include community partnerships that provided students with audiences for their presentations and opportunities for feedback and learning from community members. Developing these partnerships required considerable time and energy from TLE teachers, and they could only create meaningful partnerships for a few TLEs. On the survey, students at ENE and comparison schools reported presenting work to external audiences with similar frequency.

Nonetheless, the focus on transferable skills and project-based units made instruction different for students at ENE schools. ENE students reported **higher levels of rigor and purpose** in instruction than students at traditional and alternative comparison schools (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4. Student reports of rigor and purpose in instruction



Note: Students responded to statements about whether their teachers give them work that is purposeful (purpose) and pushes them to think (rigor), rating how many of their classes the statements were true for. Differences between mean values for ENE schools and comparison schools are statistically significant.

The focus on high-quality learning experiences at ENE schools is meant to prepare students academically for any path they choose after high school.



Supporting postsecondary planning

ENE schools provide postsecondary supports that help students make an **informed choice** about their life after high school, complete a postsecondary planning portfolio, and take the necessary steps to reach their postsecondary or career goals.

Improving postsecondary planning systems was the latest addition to ENE initiative support, beginning in earnest in the 2023–24 school year. The initiative offered schools a clear approach for supporting students with postsecondary planning through an informed-choice framework and associated tools.

Springpoint’s informed-choice framework lets students take the lead in determining their postsecondary goals and plans and ensures they chart a course that is right for them. The framework lays out the various dimensions students should consider in determining their postsecondary plans, including their passions, identity and strengths, financial security, and current and future viability. The framework underlies the support ENE schools provide students for postsecondary planning, including expectations for students’ postsecondary planning portfolios and curricular offerings focused on postsecondary planning.

At ENE schools, students compile artifacts in a portfolio that documents their postsecondary planning process. These artifacts are meant to help students think through their strengths and interests, explore potential careers, research the cost of colleges, and complete resumes and cover letters. Implementation of this strand of the initiative is still underway, and some ENE schools are still developing portfolio expectations. All the schools have a postsecondary coordinator who may meet individually with students to discuss postsecondary planning and portfolio completion.

Caleb graduated from Nowell Leadership Academy in 2025 and is currently a full-time machinist and a student at the local community college. His network described him as determined and self-



aware. But prior to enrolling at Nowell, Caleb was a young parent who struggled with academics and his mental health. After failing 10th grade at his previous high school, Caleb found success and direction at Nowell. During his first year there, he caught up on both his sophomore and junior year credits. He developed a close relationship with the college and career counselor who led his senior seminar course. At the counselor’s suggestion, Caleb did a paid internship at a makerspace in a local library and dual enrolled in the local community college during his second year.

These experiences built his interest in engineering and mechanics. Leveraging community resources, he found an opportunity to work at a manufacturing organization that partners with the community college. Caleb eventually wants to go back to school to get his bachelor’s degree. His girlfriend described him as going from having no idea what he wanted to do with his life, to having clear goals and experience to get him there because of Nowell. Caleb said, “I’m hoping to move from machining into engineering because that’s a pretty good way to double your salary. I guess my end goal is to start my own little business.”



Holyoke Opportunity Academy

The ENE initiative also provides more structured curriculum to support postsecondary planning. Springpoint developed a series of postsecondary success TLEs that focus on supporting students with postsecondary planning and completing the portfolio artifacts. In some ENE schools, the postsecondary coordinator teaches portions of these TLEs during advisory time or capstone courses for students nearing graduation. In others, the coordinator pushes into courses that touch on postsecondary planning to support students with completing the artifacts for their postsecondary planning portfolios. As with their academic coursework, students appreciated that the courses with postsecondary planning were relevant to their lives and supported them in determining their goals.

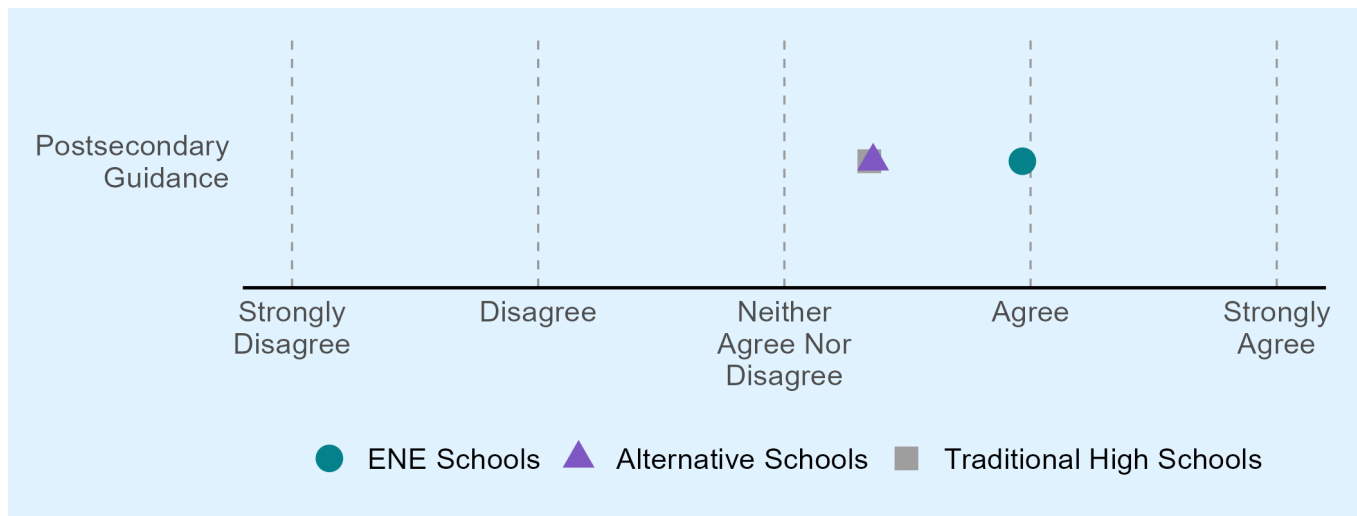
“I actually took this course ... [where] we explore ourselves, we figure out what was our past, and we try to connect, and then at the end ... we have an idea of what we want in the future.” -ENE student

Many ENE students were not at their previous schools long enough to experience the postsecondary supports there, but some differences are apparent in students’ survey responses. ENE students were more likely to say that they had **written a postsecondary plan** describing what they would do after graduation and that they had help from someone at the school to develop that plan, compared with students at both types of comparison schools.^{vii} ENE students also had **more positive perceptions of their school’s postsecondary guidance** (Exhibit 5), which includes agreeing that the school helped them understand what they want to do after high school and the steps they need to take to achieve that plan. Further, ENE students reported receiving higher levels of support in preparing job search materials: They were more likely to report receiving help with creating a resume than students at traditional high schools, and more likely to report receiving help with developing a cover letter than students at both types of comparison schools.^{viii}



Holyoke Opportunity Academy

Exhibit 5. Student reports of postsecondary guidance



Note: Students responded to statements about how much their school has helped them with specific aspects of postsecondary planning. Differences between mean values for ENE schools and comparison schools are statistically significant.

ENE students reported participating in college exploration activities, such as reviewing college admission requirements and costs, with similar frequency as students at both types of comparison schools.^{ix} This result is notable given that ENE students reported lower postsecondary aspirations than students at traditional high schools. Students at traditional high schools were more likely to say that they planned to continue their education immediately after high school and that they aspired to earn a bachelor’s degree or higher.^x The lower postsecondary education goals among ENE students is perhaps unsurprising when one considers that graduating high school seemed out of reach or at least uncertain to many students when they first enrolled in the ENE schools.



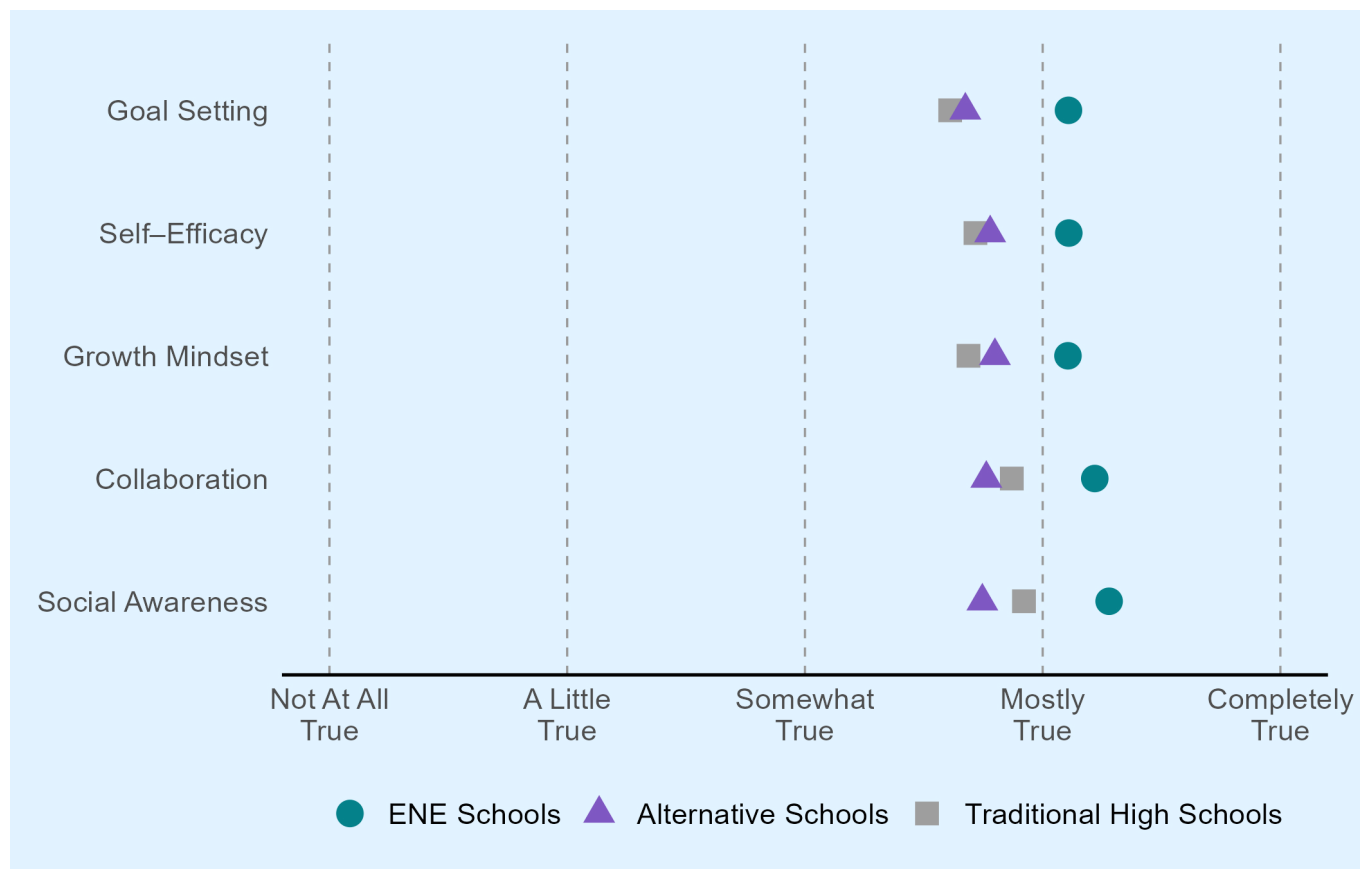
Evolve Academy

Although still in development, the postsecondary supports in ENE schools have made an impression on students. One student said, “It makes you feel more mature and like, on track. ... [It] kind of has my head in the game, like what do I really want to do in life after high school.”

How are ENE schools building students' success skills?

Together, the core ENE strategies are intended to help students build the skills and competencies they need to be successful in and after high school. On the survey, students assessed their development of five of these competencies—goal setting, self-efficacy, growth mindset, collaboration, and social awareness—by rating how true statements related to each competency were for them. For the sixth—professional communication—they rated how prepared they felt for different modes of communication, both written and verbal, with an emphasis on external audiences. ENE students rated themselves higher than comparison school students on most of these measures, indicating that students' experiences in ENE schools are leading to real differences in students' development of these important competencies (Exhibit 6).

Exhibit 6. Student reports of developing interpersonal and self-management skills



Note: Students responded to statements about how true they think statements related to each competency were for them. Differences are statistically significant for ENE relative to traditional schools on goal setting, collaboration, self-efficacy, and growth mindset; the difference is marginally significant for social awareness. Differences are statistically significant for alternative schools on collaboration and social awareness and marginally significant on goal setting.

Notably, the ENE initiative's focus on strong advising seems to be paying off. ENE students reported higher levels of **goal setting** than students at both comparison school types. Establishing a strong primary person system was an early emphasis of the initiative, and all four ENE schools have instituted case conferencing.

Further, students at ENE schools reported higher levels of two additional intrapersonal competencies, **self-efficacy** and **growth mindset**, than students at traditional high schools. The differences between the levels reported by ENE students and students at alternative schools were not statistically significant.



Evolve Academy

For interpersonal skills, all four ENE schools emphasized the collaboration competency, with a focus across courses on developing students' ability to work together to solve a problem or complete a task. This emphasis included fostering shared ownership, encouraging productive discourse, and valuing multiple perspectives. On the survey, students at ENE schools reported higher **collaboration** skills than students in both types of comparison schools. ENE students also reported higher **social awareness**, such as respectfully listening to another's point of view, than students in alternative schools.

For just one of the competencies measured on the survey—professional communication—the higher level of preparation reported by ENE students relative to students at either comparison school type was not statistically significant. This finding makes sense given the measure's emphasis on external audiences: ENE schools did not prioritize external partnerships in the same way they did other initiative strategies, such as case conferencing and competency development.

Looking ahead

Students' responses to surveys, focus groups, and interviews suggest that ENE schools are providing a different high school experience from that of traditional and alternative high schools. Dominic, Elijah, Kevin, and Caleb are all real students for whom ENE schools have had an immense impact. On the whole, ENE students feel known and supported by their teachers and peers, find their instruction purposeful and challenging, and are beginning to plan for the future. They also reported developing certain student success skills at higher rates than students at comparison schools, particularly traditional schools. This early evidence suggests that the core initiative strategies, such as case conferencing, competencies, TLEs, and intentional postsecondary supports, are worth replicating in other school contexts.

This brief presents a glimpse of the ENE initiative from the students' perspective. Given the positive impacts students reported as a result of attending ENE schools, it is worth understanding more deeply the strategies and structures the schools are implementing and the quantitative evidence of their impact. Future briefs will focus on implementation more broadly and on the impacts ENE schools have on students' high school and postsecondary outcomes. If Dominic, Elijah, Kevin, and Caleb are any indication, these schools have the potential to truly make a difference for students.



The Sheila C. "Skip" Nowell Leadership Academy

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Endnotes

- ⁱ A fifth school, PROMISE College and Career Academy, received continued funding the following year and is not included in this brief.
- ⁱⁱ SRI's selection of comparison schools was guided by student demographics such as gender, race, English learner, and Individualized Education Program/Section 504 Plan status composition. The survey analysis is based on responses from 332 students at the four ENE schools, 2,434 students from five traditional high schools, and 79 students from three alternative high schools.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Because the respondent sample from alternative comparison schools is small, we highlight findings for ENE schools compared with alternative schools when the differences are marginally statistically significant ($p < .10$) if they also align with our qualitative findings.
- ^{iv} SRI conducted student surveys and focus groups in spring 2025. Interviews with the profiled students and their support networks occurred in fall 2026.
- ^v Results for Black and Latine students are provided in the accompanying student survey report. Latine-identifying students made up the majority of respondents at three of the four ENE schools, while 16% of respondents from ENE schools identified as Black or African American. Because of the small number of Black ENE survey respondents (53), results for this student group should be interpreted with caution. The alternative school respondent sample was too small to support subgroup analysis.
- ^{vi} Rush et al., 2026, Exhibit 2.
- ^{vii} *ibid*, Exhibit 8
- ^{viii} *ibid*, Exhibit 10
- ^{ix} *ibid*, Exhibit 10
- ^x *Ibid*, Exhibit 11



This research is supported by a grant from the Barr Foundation. The Barr Foundation’s mission is to invest in human, natural, and creative potential, serving as thoughtful stewards and catalysts. Based in Boston, Barr focuses regionally and selectively engages nationally, working in partnership with nonprofits, foundations, the public sector, and civic and business leaders to elevate the arts, advance solutions for climate change, and connect all students to success in high school and beyond.



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May 2026

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Suggested Citation:

Cassidy, L., Caspary, K., and Warner, M. (2026). *Doing High School Differently: The Student Experience in Beyond Engage New England Schools*. SRI.

All photos by Paul Schnaittacher.