Leading by Example: How Kevin Found Success at Chelsea Opportunity Academy

A local from Chelsea, Massachusetts, Kevin graduated from Chelsea Opportunity Academy (COA) in June 2025 and began pursuing an associate degree in automotive technology—a path closely aligned with his long-standing passion for cars and mechanics. Known for his honesty, quiet confidence, and ability to connect with others, Kevin became a strong communicator and an advocate for himself during his time at COA. He is motivated to keep growing holistically as a person while developing his technical skills and balancing school, personal time, and family responsibilities.



Kevin shared he was not always this purpose driven. Earlier in high school, he struggled academically and personally, navigating family challenges, working night shifts, and dealing with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. He said his confidence and motivation declined, he saw school as less relevant, and he disenrolled from the local comprehensive high school during 11th grade. His trajectory changed when COA reached out to him—a turning point that reshaped his education, goals, and outlook on life.

"I thought it was just a regular high school. But then when I saw later on, day-by-day, it's a different thing. [To future COA students, I suggest] you take time to open yourself up to other peers, to other teachers, and embrace them and enjoy the time."

– Kevin

COA's **caring adults** and **relevant hands-on projects** helped Kevin get back on track with credits and feel recognized—not just as a student, but as a whole person. In his own words, "It felt like home."

Instructional approaches

COA offers **asynchronous, hybrid instruction** and a rotating daily schedule to provide flexiblity and accomodate working students' schedules.

Advising structures

COA staff get to know each student, support them through challenges, and push them to be the best version of themselves. All students are assigned an adult to meet with 1:1 to monitor their progress toward graduation and ensure at least one adult knows them well.

Postsecondary planning supports

All students are provided support to help them **plan for life after high school**. Students enroll in Life After COA, an online course that includes a career interest inventory and FAFSA support. Students also have access to college and career exposure activities, such as college visits.

Competency development

COA courses are designed to develop the concrete skills students need in their lives beyond the classroom: argue, analyze, communicate, collaborate, investigate, and self-direct.

Becoming a leader in school



"He is the poster child for growth mindset."
– Teacher

At COA, Kevin went from keeping to himself to becoming a leader. He said he built relationships with peers and adults that helped him feel comfortable in school. When he started at COA, he said his mentality was to be by himself and not get involved, and teachers and peers recalled him as observant and reserved at first. But within a short time, he became more comfortable speaking up and taking initiative. A teacher described the change in Kevin: "When he started here he was definitely more timid and you could tell he was listening and observing and trying to figure out his place, and I think once he did, he just walks through this place like … he is very much part of it."

Kevin said he responded well to staff who understood and embraced his cultural background and to having male role models who exhibited openness and vulnerability. One administrator in particular became a father figure who pushed him to attend school on time and complete assignments. Kevin described another teacher who helped him "through my journey in trying to find myself," seeing potential in him that he didn't see in himself.

Through these relationships and interactions, Kevin grew to ask questions, advocate for himself and ask for help, offer support and feedback to classmates, and step into leadership roles. Kevin welcomed new students and actively engaged in community circles, encouraging his peers to participate as well. A teacher said, "He was so quiet and then all of a sudden he was a leader … If you watch him walk through our space, he changes the energy in the hallways. He says hi to everybody. He's shaking hands, giving high fives, hugs, he has such positive energy."



"When he's in community meetings, where other students might be hesitant to take part or be sort of ready to command a group or invite people, he's always that person ready to invite, ready to listen, ready to participate."
– Teacher

Learning by doing

Hands-on, relevant coursework helped Kevin reengage academically. He said that, unlike classes at his previous high school, he saw the purpose behind the classes at COA: “These classes, it was like this was really involved in your life. … More relevant and something that you could relate to different aspects of your life.”

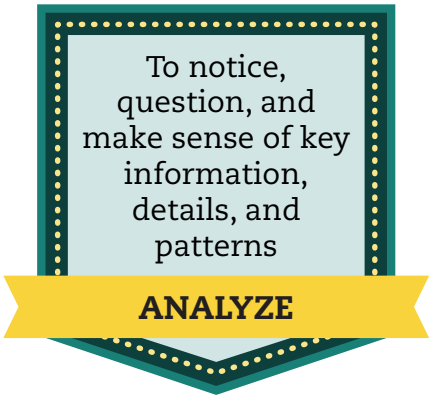
A project-based math course about the car-buying process aligned with his interest in cars and shifted how he thinks about making financial decisions.

In a science class, he worked diectly with a car engine and tested carbon emissions. “I think that made him realize that learning can be fun, and it can be about things he cares about.” – Teacher

In Language Arts, he analyzed and created poetry using newspaper clippings. He shared his poetry with classmates and received thier feedback. “He loves to derive meaning from poetry, from formulas, from everything.” – Teacher

In a history class, he engaged in a project to explore his community through a medium of his choice. He and a friend started a podcast to learn from peers how COA helps them with real-life situations. They chose to continue the podcast after completing the assignment.

A teacher described how Kevin strengthened his communication, organization, and analytical skills through his courses. His curiousity, she said, was apparent through the questions he asked, and she called him “a learner about life, about content, about people.” More than that, he is not afraid to ask for help, even coming back to COA for support with a college math class.



“I feel like when he’s learning about things, he’s ready to do the work and ask the questions and sort of form his own opinions on things … He understands that your views of things can change. You learn new information, you think about it, you find out if it’s valid or not. He knows how to do that, like investigating and analyzing and making meaning of things in a new way that is true to who he is.”

– Teacher

Directing his future

COA prepared Kevin to make informed choices about his future. He said a career fair at COA helped him see different types of jobs and network with people in the car industry. The school counselor took students on college visits, including the local community college where he saw the auto mechanic shop and equipment.

Kevin took the initiative to speak to his counselor about his interest in auto mechanics, and she recommended he enroll in dual enrollment courses at the local community college. He took three courses while at COA, which helped him discover that college, and a career in auto mechanics, was both attainable and a good fit for him.

Now enrolled full-time in the automotive technology program at the Benjamin Franklin Cummings Institute of Technology, Kevin is taking five courses and making steady progress toward his associate degree.

Kevin and those who support him believe his strengths—analytical thinking, perseverance, and a willingness to seek support—will continue to guide his progress. Kevin now approaches decisions thoughtfully and strategically, reflecting carefully while balancing school, work, and family responsibilities with increasing independence. As he moves forward, Kevin and his support network are confident he will continue setting ambitious goals and pursuing them with intentionality.



"The self-direct competency — he does it: He said he wanted to do dual enrollment, he went to the postsecondary counselor, talked to her, did all the work, got enrolled, showed up for classes, finished with good grades, and still made sure to go back to finish classes at COA."
– Teacher

Part of Chelsea Public Schools, **Chelsea Opportunity Academy** is an alternative high school in Chelsea, Massachusetts. The school serves students who are over-age and under-credited, who are struggling at the district's comprehensive high school, or who have been unenrolled after being absent for 15 days. COA serves a large proportion of newcomer students, who have been in the United States for less than three years.

Since 2018, COA has been a part of the **Engage New England (ENE) Initiative**, funded by the Barr Foundation. With the aim of "doing high school differently," ENE supports educators in building innovative, student-centered school models that address both the academic and developmental needs of high school students who have fallen off-track on their path to high school graduation and postsecondary success. ENE schools are often smaller than traditional high schools and offer rigorous and purposeful instruction, intentional advising structures, and robust postsecondary planning supports.

SRI's Education Division has been Barr's independent evaluation partner for the initiative since its inception, conducting interviews, focus groups, and surveys of ENE school staff and students and collecting and analyzing school documents and artifacts as well as student data. Learn more about the student experience at ENE schools. This student profile is based on interviews with Kevin and two members of his support network conducted by SRI in fall 2025.