# Showing Up: How Dominic Found Success at Evolve Academy

During interviews in fall 2025, members of Dominic's support network described him as **outgoing**, **kind**, and **empathetic**. They said he has an infectious energy, lifts up peers who may be struggling, and **always shows up and does what is needed to succeed**. Dominic graduated from Evolve Academy (Evolve) in June 2025, and he currently works full-time, enjoys playing multiple instruments, and is considering getting his cosmetology license to become a barber.



*"It's kind of like life started at high school."*
– Dominic

Dominic shared that graduating high school was not always a given. During elementary and middle school, he experienced a period of four to five years when he did not attend school. A new living situation provided stability and accountability, and he began attending a local high school in ninth grade. Dominic's attendance improved, but **he struggled academically and soon fell behind in credits**. Toward the end of his sophomore year, a friend suggested he enroll at Evolve, a program located within the high school.

Evolve's sense of **community**, **high expectations**, and **project- and competency-based instruction** helped Dominic feel supported, understood, and engaged.



### Instructional approaches

All classes at Evolve are transformative learning experiences (TLEs), project-based units designed to be rigorous and purposeful. Students are expected to revise work until they are proficient in key comptencies.



### Advising structures

Evolve implements a primary person system, in which all students are assigned an advisor (a primary person) to meet with 1:1 to **monitor their progress** toward graduation and ensure at least **one adult knows them well**.



### Postsecondary planning supports

When students reach 65 credits, they meet regularly with the postsecondary coordinator to complete a postsecondary planning portfolio and **plan for life after high school**. They create a resume, research career options, discuss financial planning, and more.



### Competency development

Evolve's courses are designed to develop the concrete skills students need in their lives beyond the classroom: self-direct, investigate, argue, academic discourse, discern, and communicate.

## Becoming part of a supportive community



Dominic with his advisor.

At Evolve, Dominic found **a community that truly cared** about him and his success. He said both Evolve students and staff noticed when he was absent, which signaled to him that his presence really mattered. More than that, they saw what he needed when he was present. Dominic said staff noticed his mood changes and intervened or gave him space as appropriate. He was able to spend time in the office when he felt distracted or overwhelmed.

At the same time, Dominic and his teachers said Evolve staff **set high academic expectations** for him and **held him accountable** for meeting them. Dominic admitted he did not complete much schoolwork at first. But staff pushed him to stay on track. He worked 1:1 with an advisor who he met with twice a week to set goals and check in on his academic progress. When he fell behind, teachers called his guardians, who in turn regularly checked to make sure he was completing his assignments at home. With shorter terms at Evolve compared to his previous school, transparent grading criteria, and a requirement to revise assignments until demonstrating mastery, Dominic could no longer coast unnoticed through classes. Through this combination of support and accountability, he learned how to **self-direct**—to take responsibility for his own learning: He asked for help, received feedback, and stayed after school to finish his school work.




## Learning real-world skills

As he engaged in school more deeply, Dominic **found classes interesting and relevant**. In You Auto Know, a project-based math TLE in which students use data analysis to understand the true costs of purchasing a vehicle, he developed practical skills he later used to buy a car. Another class helped him build financial literacy and understand the steps involved in starting a business. He also continued with a cosmetology program he had started at the comprehensive high school. He completed 1,000 hours for licensure, and in the process persisted through the challenges of the detailed, hands-on work.

*"I think what kept me interested is the fact that [the classes at Evolve are] real-world classes and stuff that I could use."*
– Dominic

Dominic also learned **academic discourse skills** in his courses. In his genetic engineering class, he worked with a group to test water for pollution. He gave a presentation at the culminating exhibition, of which his advisor said, "Just to watch somebody who has a hard time really focusing on the nitty-gritty of details talk about, this is how we're going to find pollutants in the Soddy Pond of Tiverton. It was really, really cool." Similarly, Dominic spoke at a youth leadership event at a local college about bias in the media based on his learnings from the language arts class, Fake News. In addition to public speaking, he learned active listening skills. Teachers described Dominic as someone who learned how to be a better listener to staff and peers, reflecting the schoolwide emphasis on collaboration.




## Choosing his future

Dominic graduated from Evolve on time, finishing most of his credits halfway through his senior year. After graduation, he was working a retail job and considering taking the cosmetology licensure exam to become a barber. He was also exploring the possibility of getting a Commercial Driver's License. Dominic shared that after graduation, without the daily structure and community of Evolve, he initially felt unprepared and unsure of what to do. Members of his support network viewed this as a natural post-graduation adjustment and believed **he has the skills, determination, and resourcefulness to succeed in whichever path he chooses**. Dominic said the most valuable lesson he learned at Evolve was **the importance of simply showing up**; he plans to carry this mindset with him as he navigates his life beyond high school.

*"You have to get up and do what is needed or else you just can't perform in life."*
– Dominic

Part of Fall River Public Schools, **Evolve Academy** is a competency-based program within Durfee High School in Fall River, Massachusetts. The school has a mission to serve youth who want to do high school differently to reach their goals for college, career, and beyond. The school enrolls most students in 10th grade who are often behind in credits for graduation.

Since 2019, Evolve 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 Dominic and three members of his support network conducted by SRI in fall 2025.