Rewriting His Story: How Elijah Found Success at Holyoke Opportunity Academy

During interviews in fall 2025, members of Elijah's support network described him as **kind**, **driven**, and **expressive**. In a conversation during his senior year at Holyoke Opportunity Academy (HOA), he was determined to earn his high school diploma and live up to his full potential. After graduating, Elijah was considering enrolling in a welding certification program.

Before enrolling at HOA as a junior, Elijah's future was less certain. He did not feel like he had adults at his previous school to turn to for help, and he struggled to engage. He described himself as lacking motivation and associating with peers who did not prioritize his success. Without support in his classes, Elijah said it was easy to give up, and he did not know if he would graduate. Then, a counselor at his high school suggested he transfer to HOA.



"Before, he actually didn't know where he was going. Now he's got some goals that he wants to do well."
– Elijah's parent

HOA's **engaging curriculum and project-based instruction, intentional advising structures, and emphasis on key skill development** helped him build critical competencies and plan for a future after high school.

Instructional approaches

Classes at HOA have a **strong project-based learning** component. The courses, called transformative learning experiences (TLEs), are designed to be rigorous and purposeful.

Advising structures

HOA's primary person model assigns each student an advisor (a primary person) to meet with 1:1 to **monitor their progress** toward graduation, support and encourage them, and ensure at least **one adult knows them well**.

Postsecondary planning supports

When students have 30 credits left to graduate, they take a capstone class designed to **prepare them for life after high school**. Students create a resume, discuss career options, visit and apply to colleges, and more.

Competency development

HOA courses are designed to develop the concrete skills students need in their lives beyond the classroom: collaborate, communicate, self-direct/grow, discern, investigate/think, justify, and live.

Engaging in school work



At HOA, Elijah **discovered a love for creative, project-based learning and writing**. He said he especially liked building a greenhouse in a science TLE called Plant Power, in which students explore how to use greenhouses to maximize plant growth. This course tapped into his interest in hands-on work and his experience with landscaping. Elijah also mentioned an assignment from a narrative class in which he had to write about what he would do if one day he woke up as a millionaire. He said, "That was just like a good topic for me because you're doing work but you're also getting your mind creative." Elijah said the assignments at HOA made it easier to understand course content than more contrived assignments like worksheets.

HOA gave Elijah opportunities to speak to authentic audiences and develop his **communication skills**. As a student representative, he wrote and delivered his own speeches in front of large audiences, including to the school governance committee about his journey at HOA, something he never would have imagined having the **confidence** and skills to do before coming to HOA. Elijah said he overcame his fear by thinking about other kids like himself who could learn from his story. "Now that I have showed my true potential," he said, "I know that there are kids just like me that are going through the same situation, that they might be like, 'Oh, that's not going to help me, oh, I don't want to move [schools],' but it comes to the point … where you got to choose education." Elijah's teacher said he reflected openly on the experience, articulating not just what occurred, but what it meant to him. She said he now communicates with clarity, insight, and purpose.



Owning his learning



Elijah described HOA as having a culture in which both staff and students encourage his success. Elijah **worked 1:1 with his advisor**, checking in daily and setting goals together. He said he could go to the advisor's office when he needed to reset. His parent noticed the change in Elijah: "If he's struggling, he will not hesitate to go to somebody and [say], 'I'm struggling on this.' He was never like that. He was the type of kid that bottled up stuff, where here it's teaching them now to open up more." Elijah developed self-awareness and an understanding of when to seek help before falling behind. With support from his advisor and other adults at HOA, he went from skipping school to having **perfect attendance**. His grades improved so much that he **became a top student** at the school, quickly moving from a year behind in credits to being **on track to graduate early**.

Making an informed choice about his future

At the time of the interview, Elijah was considering enrolling in a welding certification program, either directly after high school or after working for a time to save money. Elijah explored the costs and benefits of future college and career options in a math TLE called Does College Make Cents, and HOA's postsecondary advisor helped him arrange an interview for a welding program through Job Corps. He felt ready for life after high school, saying, "I feel confident about reaching my goals now."



"If you asked me maybe a year and a half ago if I think I would have been able to graduate early, I would have told you no. I would have thought I would have had to stay back. But showing my true potential, now I have the ability to graduate a couple months earlier."

– Elijah

Part of Holyoke Public Schools, **Holyoke Opportunity Academy** is an alternative high school in Holyoke, Massachusetts. The school has a mission to serve youth who are not succeeding in traditional high school settings and enrolls students who are at least one year behind in credits for graduation.

Since 2019, HOA 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 Elijah and two members of his support network conducted by SRI in fall 2025.