

Is a diploma enough?

Setting ambitious visions for success in high schools

CASE STUDIES IN HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN

Abstract

Between 2015 and 2019, Holyoke Public Schools in Massachusetts cut its dropout rate nearly in half and increased its graduation rate by 10 percentage points, with notable gains among historically marginalized student groups. The district cites Opportunity Academy (OA), an alternative education program within the district's high school, as a key driver of these improvements. OA surrounds students with supportive relationships and provides multiple pathways to graduation, including a competency-based pathway in which students earn credits through flexible learning experiences inside and outside traditional classrooms. But for OA's design team, getting students to graduate isn't enough. Real success, the principal said, means students have "the ability to live a choice-filled postsecondary life." This case wrestles with what's needed to achieve this higher bar for students who often just want to get high school over with, but whose success beyond the K-12 system depends on life skills, supportive relationships, and concrete postsecondary plans in addition to a diploma. The case concludes with key questions for high school leaders and design teams in both traditional and alternative education.

Teaching note

Leaders and design teams engaged in high school redesign are hungry for relevant learning materials that build our collective capacity for innovation. This document is part of [a series of teaching cases](#) featuring real-life scenarios from high schools grappling with design dilemmas. The cases were researched and developed by the Center on Reinventing Public Education at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (CRPE) and the Center for Public Research and Leadership (CPRL) at Columbia University to generate a grounded, in-depth discussion of key issues related to innovation and equity in high school education. Common approaches to using teaching cases include:

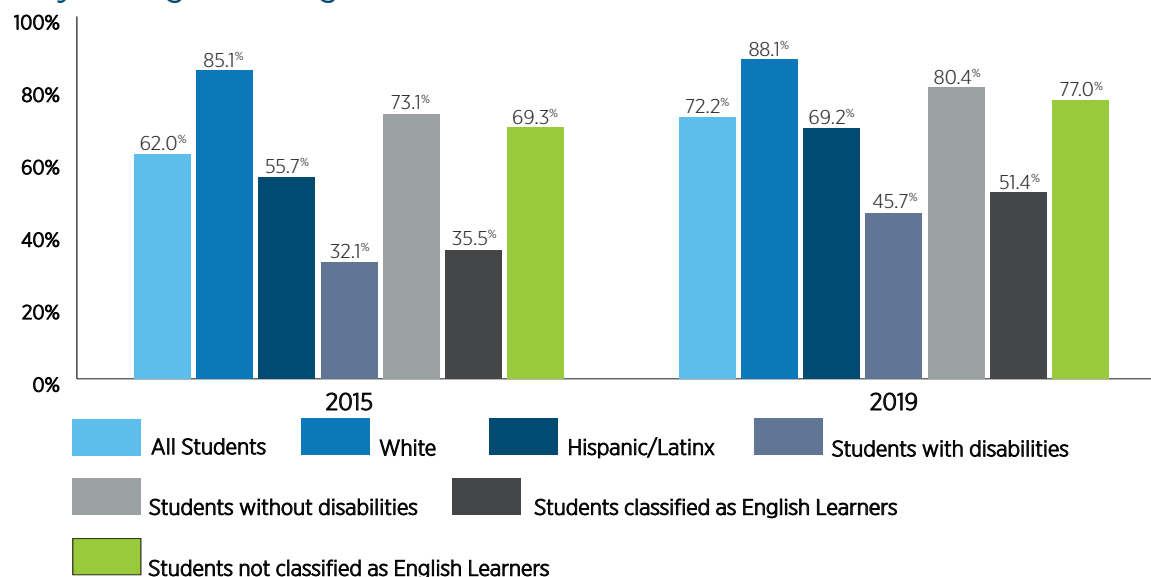
- Asking participants to read the teaching case in advance.
- Using group time for discussion or presentations that focus on the questions at the end of the case. One set of questions invites participants to advise the school featured in the case, and a second set broadens the discussion to high schools in general.
- Concluding by asking participants to align themes in the discussion to the broader learning objectives they have as a group.

Introduction

Between 2015 and 2019, Holyoke Public Schools cut its dropout rate nearly in half and increased its graduation rate by 10 percentage points, with notable gains among emergent bilinguals classified as English Language Learners, Latinx students, and students with disabilities.¹ A significant part of this achievement is due to the school’s alternative program, called Opportunity Academy (OA), which operates as a “school within a school” at Holyoke High School.²

“I feel tremendous about this school year,” OA’s principal said at the end of the 2021-22 school year. “We’re graduating a class that’s bigger than any class we’ve graduated in the history of the school.” With a graduating class of 100 in 2021-22 and a 76% graduation rate within the program, it’s clear that Opportunity Academy is positively affecting performance at Holyoke High School.

Holyoke High School graduation rates



Source: Holyoke High School

But the principal also noted the school has a long way to go to ensure students’ postsecondary success, and he was not the only staff member to raise this concern. Despite a rise in graduation rates and a reduction in dropout rates at OA, staff believe that a diploma alone won’t translate into stability and opportunity in life after high school. Especially for students who struggled in high school, who are complex learners, or who face structural barriers like racism and economic disadvantage, more is needed to set them up for success—such as ongoing support from mentors and peers, opportunities to develop self-knowledge about their own interests, strengths, and goals, and a solid postsecondary plan.

In a K–12 landscape where graduation rates still reign as the final measure of success, what students do afterward is often treated as beyond the scope of high school responsibility.

1 “Significant improvement in dropout and graduation rates in Holyoke Public Schools,” *El Sol Latino*, March 2020, https://issuu.com/elsollatino/docs/el_sol_latino_mar20_final_web/s/10283899. According to SY2020-21 data, the dropout rate rose during the height of the pandemic, but forthcoming data from SY2021-22 (as reported by the school) will show a return to the pre-pandemic improvement trajectory.

2 Holyoke High School has a unique structure in which three “campuses” serve distinct purposes but operate as a single school for reporting purposes. In addition to OA, Holyoke’s North campus is a comprehensive high school with three academies students choose from, and the Dean campus offers nine career and technical education programs.

However, a high school diploma alone is less correlated with successful life outcomes than it used to be. For example, studies show that increased income is associated with increased well-being and life satisfaction.³ Increased income is tied to additional education, according to a RAND analysis of numerous studies that consistently find degrees and certificates earned at two-year and four-year colleges lead to improved earnings.⁴ In real terms, recent history has shown that workers without post-secondary education tend to fare much worse in recessions and never fully recover after recessions.⁵

These findings make it especially important for high school leaders to determine if a diploma alone is sufficient to reliably launch students into life, ongoing education, and work. High school leaders and educators nationwide—in both mainstream and alternative schools—know that many students who manage to “make it” to graduation aren’t necessarily set up to thrive.

With relevance for high schools across the nation, Opportunity Academy raises the issue: Is a high school diploma the right goalpost? And what would it take to ensure that all students, including those at alternative high schools, leave the K-12 system with the life skills and postsecondary plans that lead to career opportunities, ongoing education, or both?

The context: Opportunity Academy

OA has come a long way since its beginning in 2016, when the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education deemed Holyoke Public Schools chronically underperforming, which led to the redesign of the district’s high school offerings. Even before the redesign process officially launched, district leadership had committed to opening an alternative high school option to meet community needs by fall 2016. The merging of these timelines meant Opportunity Academy’s founding team had to launch an alternative schooling option just months before the start of the school year. One of the distinguishing features of OA is that it was created as a program of Holyoke High School, not a separate entity. According to one of OA’s founders, this meant that OA couldn’t become “a dumping ground like so many alternative schools,” because Holyoke High School’s overall performance includes—rather than omits—data from students in its alternative school.

With little time to design the program, OA’s founding team decided to make use of programs that were already operating in Holyoke. They brought Holyoke Community College to the table to offer a dual-enrollment program, Gateway to Community College. They also created an agreement with [LightHouse Holyoke](#), a personalized learning space led by a nonprofit organization, to reserve a certain number of seats for students from the district whose needs were a good match for

Opportunity Academy demographics

- Opportunity Academy currently serves about 200 students.
- Over half (70%) attend Success Center, a little less than one in five (17.5%) of students attend LightHouse, and the remaining students (12.5%) take all their classes through Gateway to Community College at Holyoke Community College.
- Nearly all the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (90.2%). Students with disabilities make up 35.9% of OA students, and 31.5% are students learning English, classified as English Language Learners.
- About 80% of students are Latino, 7% are Black, 12% are white or other races.

3 Matthew A. Killingsworth, “Increased Well Being Rises With Income, Even Above \$75,000 Per Year,” PNAS 118, no. 4 (Jan 2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2016976118>.

4 Lindsay Daugherty, “The Value of Education and Training After High School,” RAND (Feb 2022), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PEA1100/PEA1141-9/RAND_PEA1141-9.pdf.

5 Hans Johnson and Marisol Cuellar Mejia, “Workers Without College Degrees Face Unprecedented Job Losses,” PPIC (blog), May 29, 2020, <https://www.ppic.org/blog/workers-without-college-degrees-face-unprecedented-job-losses/>.

LightHouse's approach. OA's design team also launched Success Center, a competency-based learning program for both off-track high school students and adult learners, using a space in downtown Holyoke originally used for a district-run adult learning program. Success Center awards course credit to students based on their demonstrations of progress on [specific competencies](#) and does not require them to be in class for a specific number of hours, which makes it a more viable option for students for whom regular attendance is a challenge.

Students referred to OA have highly varied strengths and needs, so a single approach to alternative education is insufficient, the founders said. As a result, OA is designed to provide multiple pathways to graduation that can accommodate students' varied learning needs. For some, this could be the need for flexible scheduling at Success Center; for others, it's the opportunity to undertake smaller, personalized learning experiences at LightHouse or to take college-level courses at the community college.

"For all of the students who need an alternative option, there's a different reason that they need [it] and a different thing that they're seeking from [it]... What a student who is a 17-year-old mom, but entirely reading and writing and doing math at grade level, needs might be entirely different from a student who comes to us with a disrupted formal education, speaking a different primary language and reading at a fifth grade level, but with a disrupted formal education, speaking a different primary language and reading at a fifth grade level, but able to do school every single day from nine to three."
- *Principal*

What all students have in common at Opportunity Academy though, is support from a dedicated staff member. Each student is assigned a "primary person," as OA calls it, who provides academic support through structured check-ins. These staff members also serve as a connection point between students and their other support networks, including families, content teachers, counselors, and others.

"Every staff in the building is considered a primary person, and they have a cohort of students that they try to build a rapport with. [They] also help the student understand what their support network is, whether that's an engagement coach or the teacher or an administrator. [We're] really trying to help the students understand that they have their go-to people." - *Lead engagement specialist*

Through the Barr Foundation's Engage New England grant, Opportunity Academy has also been redesigning its instructional model in partnership with Springpoint, a nonprofit specializing in high school redesign. Since 2019, teachers have begun designing learning experiences based around relevant, real-world issues, and awarding credit for learning based on students' demonstrated mastery of [core competencies](#), rather than a combination of attendance and final grades.⁶ OA and Springpoint call these "Transformative Learning Experiences (TLEs)," and the school is making progress defining a competency framework and aligning TLEs to it.

"Teachers are doing more intentional planning, more internalization of curriculum than they ever have before. The quality of work and the rigor that we're asking our students to commit to is higher and harder than ever before." - *Principal*

Opportunity Academy also offers ways for students to earn credit by demonstrating mastery of skills gained in a range of settings, including outside traditional high school courses. For example, for students who have to balance both a day job and a school schedule, there are ways to earn work-based learning credit. In one scenario, a counselor identified a group of

⁶ Because Opportunity Academy translates its competency framework into Holyoke High School's credits and transcript, the program has not encountered any need for seat time waivers or other policy flexibilities, as are sometimes required for schools transitioning to a full competency-based model.

students that would often visit her for social-emotional support. Through conversations with other staff, this counselor developed a curriculum and created a credit-bearing course that offered these students the social-emotional learning they sought, and tangible progress toward their graduation requirements. One student shared how she receives constant check-ins from her teachers and feels more supported to complete her school work:

“At my old school, I lived an hour away and so some days I just wouldn’t show up. Then it became hard to catch up on work, and no one worked with me one on one. Now I have a big support system and everyone is by my side. When I miss a day, my teacher is quick to text me and ask if I’m ok and if I need anything. They work with me so that I can start school at 9:30 and still get more credits than at my old school.” - *Student, 11th grade*

OA’s school design has provided a degree of flexibility and individualized support that’s been remarkably successful at getting students to graduate high school. But school staff and administrators still doubt that rising graduation rates are enough of a reason to claim that their approach is achieving its goals.

The challenge: Is a high school diploma the right goalpost?

OA’s original purpose was simple: catch students who were failing out of Holyoke’s comprehensive high school, and get them on track to return and graduate. But school staff and leaders quickly learned that for many students, OA would be more than a waystation. Rather than needing a temporary course correction, many students actually yearned for a different high school experience entirely.

“We found that students came here, they were finally having success, many of them for the first time in their schooling career—all of them for the first time in their high school careers, really—and they wouldn’t want to go back.” - *Principal*

“Before going here, I didn’t like learning. Now that I’m here, I’m actually involved with my classes. If I don’t finish something at school, I take it home and I finish that within that day and I bring it back. I know about what’s going on way more than I did in my other school. And that’s all because they actually sit down, they work with me, they work with me at my own speed. Not no one else’s, but my speed.” - *Student, 11th grade*

Leaders from the school and district decided that if students were to graduate from OA itself, rather than the comprehensive high school, then the school needed a clear vision for student success. At the very least, they agreed, OA graduates would still need to be held to the same expectations as other Holyoke students. When the school developed its competency framework, school staff and leaders ensured that credits aligned with the Holyoke High School transcript so that graduation requirements at OA automatically qualified a student for a Holyoke High School diploma.

But OA’s design team feels that securing a high school diploma is necessary, but not sufficient, for students to succeed in life when their high school experiences and life circumstances have been challenging. Students also need the life skills, supportive relationships, and work readiness to succeed in what lies beyond high school—whether it’s a career pathway or postsecondary education options. And they need the self-knowledge and skills to navigate systems that in many cases are stacked against them. The school’s [competency framework](#) features skills such as “I can show flexibility when faced with adversity” and “I have strong relationships with people like me, not like me, and people in power.”

“We want kids to be able to leave our system as 18, 19-year-olds, with the skills and dispositions, and background knowledge to take advantage of the multiple opportunities that are available for them, and to work through the challenges that may exist between them and those opportunities. 80% of our kids are Hispanic, almost 90% of those kids are Puerto Rican. There’s very real racial, language and ethnic discrimination in our world...Are our kids able to see those challenges, to de-personalize them, and then to think and work their way through those challenges?” - *Assistant superintendent*

Real success, the principal described, is that students have “the ability to live a choice-filled postsecondary life”—whether that is admission to a two or four year college, a career plan, or the pursuit of a passion. Delivering on that vision would require the school to ensure students develop a sense of their own interests and proclivities, create a concrete plan for their next step after high school, and establish supportive relationships that can sustain beyond their time in high school.

The shift in focus from a single goalpost—graduation—to a vision for differentiated postsecondary pathways exemplified what several administrators described as a shift from equality to equity. In OA’s very early days, staff thought success would mean that OA students would reintegrate into Holyoke High School to have the same experience as their peers. Now, staff want OA students to have individualized experiences that suit their strengths, needs, and circumstances—and that lead to a range of viable choices for work and ongoing education after high school.

For some at the school, ensuring students are well-positioned for opportunities after high school can feel difficult to achieve, even if they support it philosophically. One staff member expressed concerns that the challenges students faced, both personal and societal, were too great for the school alone to overcome. Another noted that every OA student arrives at the school having “failed somewhere else,” and that “overcoming that mindset” is one of the major hurdles to students being prepared to seize future opportunities. Staff are keenly aware that many of their students need more support to discover their own strengths compared to peers whose K-12 experience has been smoother.

“We now have this laser-like focus that our school cannot stop at graduation. We need to make sure that they have everything they need to make that happen. But I can’t lie to you and say that. I worry for every single student that leaves us, that they’ll have the tools to make a real life for themselves, with choices.” - *Teacher*

Additionally, some people noted that the old version of success—getting students over the finish line to graduation—is still persistent. One teacher said, “I think the district and the city, they want to see people finish.” Several staff members and administrators noted that for students and their families, simply finishing high school is still the most tangible goal.

“Most of our students just want to be done. They want to earn their diploma and they want to be done.” - *Teacher*

Staff have different philosophies for what OA students need most in order to succeed after high school. One tension lies between what one administrator called the “real side” and the “game side” of high school. On the real side, “you really have to learn stuff while you’re in high school in order to be prepared to be a well-functioning adult, able to care for yourself, and succeed in the socioeconomic world.” Those skills are often not reflected or prioritized on the game side, “which is checking all the boxes with credits and [standardized tests], and showing up enough to get those.” Some OA staff described wanting to minimize the game side and instead prioritize real-world life skills and relationships. Others, while sympathetic to

this view, asserted that rigorous, challenging academic instruction is essential to retaining the significance of “game side” indicators like a high school diploma.

A second tension for staff relates to how different types of staff members relate to students and measure success on a daily basis.

“There is often a...difference in ideology between engagement folks, many of whom know the students deeply and know the obstacles that they’re overcoming—and for many of our students [the] real trauma that they’re overcoming to get to school each day—and so [they] hold certain expectations of students that just getting there can be enough. And an instructional staff whose expectations are kids being in my classroom, doing the work I’m putting in front of them.” - *Principal*

Although the school’s primary person model has helped all staff, including teachers, build closer relationships with students, OA is working on better aligning the expectations of success coaches and teachers have for students.

Staff are proud of the progress OA has made since its founding. The school has become a special place where many students, especially those who feel out-of-place and marginalized in traditional high schools, feel cared for and believed in.

“Growing up, I thought I didn’t need school. I wasn’t learning anything. If I was out or didn’t understand the work because of how busy the class was, the teacher would say “I just went over this and you should know it.” Always making me feel like I’m dumb. Here I can ask as many different questions as I need. I understand everything. My perspective has all shifted to positive energy. I mess up — ok, next time I can do better.” - *Student, 11th grade*

“In middle school, I wasn’t engaged and I got terrible grades. I was going to drop out as soon as I could. Now I’m thinking about college. I’ve been researching with some teachers and staff to think about college, and what I want to do with my life. I want to work with special education kids, kids with autism. I connect with them very well. Or being some sort of educator, maybe trying to work here at OA. I want to help other kids like me and help them out as much as I have been helped. Everyone has a right path.” - *Student, 11th grade*

Still, OA isn’t a silver bullet. The school continues to actively grapple with circumstances where a high school diploma feels like the only success metric within reach, despite not being sufficient to launch students into a choice-filled post-secondary life.

“There was a kid who just graduated, who literally was with us from the entire time I’ve been here, seven years. And he came to us with only 15 or 20 credits to go, seven years ago. Finally finished his stuff and was walking in graduation. Well, the kid is still lost. He’s sleeping on couches all over Holyoke still. He hasn’t found himself yet, but at least ...if he ever does find himself, he’ll have the credential that allows him to do something else. Whereas if we didn’t get him that credential, he’d continuously have that obstacle of not being able to take the next step. So, I definitely came to the conclusion that if we could get a kid close, we have to do everything possible to finish the game side, or else we really weren’t serving them at all.” - *District administrator and OA co-founder*

Discussion

On Opportunity Academy

1. OA is designed to provide students with multiple learning pathways, including Success Center's flexible schedule, competency-based learning model, and project-based learning experiences. **How do these design choices connect to OA's goal to prepare students to lead choice-filled postsecondary lives?**
2. OA's staff sometimes disagree about whether students need more support and grace, or to be held to higher academic standards. **How might OA build a shared vision for balancing student support systems with high expectations, and supporting staff to get that balance right?**
3. OA's vision is for students to have a "choice-filled postsecondary life." **How would you advise OA on defining that vision more precisely? What necessary support systems will it need to provide for students—both current and former—to achieve it?**
4. Thinking about what you know about evidence-based strategies to support adolescent development and learning, **what additional ideas would you encourage OA to explore to ensure students are systematically prepared for life beyond high school?**

On high schools in general

5. How might your high school define, and measure progress toward, ambitious goals for student success beyond a high school diploma? If a diploma isn't sufficient to set up students for success, what other attributes and metrics might need to be defined?
6. In your school, what kinds of conditions might favorably support a shift toward new design choices to support equitable student success in and beyond high school? What conditions might stand in the way of these shifts?
7. What kinds of new partnerships and/or policy conditions would be necessary to validate learning that happens outside of the classroom, including on the job?

Resources

- [Competency framework](#)
- Partnership with [LightHouse Holyoke](#)

Additional reading

- Levine, Eliot. "[The Primary Person Model and Transformative Learning Experiences at Opportunity Academy.](#)" CompetencyWorks (blog). Aurora Institute. May 26, 2022.
- Levine, Eliot. "[Strategies for Responsive Pacing at the Success Center,](#)" CompetencyWorks (blog). Aurora Institute. June 2, 2022.
- Pangelinan, Cara. "[New England Profiles of Innovation | Holyoke High School.](#)" December 2021.