

# Think Forward New England: Profiles of Innovation

## Holyoke High School



*Image courtesy of Holyoke High School*

### Key Lessons

- Offering multiple opportunities toward attaining an education can ensure every student's unique needs can be met.
- Grounding all staff to play a role in student engagement can help foster student-educator relations.
- Keeping students' values and interests in mind while working towards long-term goals is vital to retaining student engagement.

### Key Questions

- How can high schools help every student succeed by multiplying the number of pathways to graduation while maintaining high expectations?
- What designs most effectively help each student feel known and supported by a caring adult, even in a large school environment?
- What existing structures in high schools are well-suited to be improved and expanded to meet students' and families' expectations?

## Introduction

Like every school across the country, Holyoke High School, in Holyoke, Massachusetts, struggled during remote learning: Teachers had to adjust to new technologies, and many students felt disconnected from the school environment. Despite these pandemic-induced challenges, Holyoke school leaders and staff kept student engagement at the forefront of their efforts to ensure continuity of learning.

One fifth-year culinary arts educator at Holyoke High School's Dean Campus said the 2020-21 school year was his best year as a teacher. Teaching remote students was difficult, he said, but for the students who came in once a week to attend their career vocational technical education (CVTE) courses, it was clear "how important it was for the kids to have a physical connection with school and their teachers, because they were happy to be there." Similarly, at the Holyoke High School's North Campus (which offers academic programming through three themed academies), teachers were excited to learn "that students actually like school." One sixth-year English teacher, who directed in-person summer school at the North Campus, noted how

“there are kids that are excited about school that maybe weren’t always.” The executive director of Opportunity Academy, an alternative education program at Holyoke, commented that “the biggest thing [the pandemic] did is thrust all of us into a much more effective, engagement-focused role.”

Holyoke High School offers an example of how personalized pathways, strong relationships between staff and students, and adaptation of existing structures can help students not only show up for school, but tune into their learning. This is especially relevant as attendance rates have dropped precipitously in schools around the country since the onset of COVID-19. As a result, school leaders facing the 2021-22 school year will have student engagement top of mind.

### Holyoke at a glance

- Holyoke, Massachusetts
- Traditional open-enrollment regional high school with CTVE and alternative education pathways
- Grades 9-12
- 1,508 students
  - » 3.4% African American
  - » 0.5% Asian
  - » 80.2% Hispanic
  - » 0.1% Native American
  - » 14.5% White
  - » 0.1% Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander
  - » 1.1% Multi-race, non-Hispanic

## Providing Holyoke students with multiple pathways

Holyoke’s high school students have seen a lot of change in their district in a relatively short amount of time. In 2015, Holyoke Public Schools, after being designated as a chronically underperforming district, was placed under state receivership. This included an ongoing high school redesign process for Holyoke High School and Dean Technical School, and the start of Opportunity Academy, the alternative pathway program. The plan—which was led by a design team of nearly 100 educators, students, community members and national experts and included over 150 site visits to observe best practices from other schools—sought to create more engaging and relevant school experiences for Holyoke students. As the district’s redesign

plan becomes reality, all three campuses are actively evolving their distinct identities and relationships to each other.

Holyoke’s North Campus consists of over 1,000 students and three learning academies: performing media arts, community and global studies, and engineering and life sciences. Within this large school setting, Lori McKenna, principal of the North Campus, aimed to create smaller learning communities “so that kids feel like they are recognized as a person and they have those meaningful relationships that help them to stay in school.”

### Core principles

- Career training and preparation (5+ years)
- Universal Design for Learning (3-4 years)
- Accommodations available to all students (3-4 years)
- Dual credit (3-4 years)
- Multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery (1-2 years)

Today, this ambition can be seen through North Campus’s teaming of 9th and 10th grade students. Ninth-graders explore the three academy options to determine which is a right fit for them; in 10th grade students can take electives that connect to their academy. An English

class for a performing and media arts student, for example, is different from an English class under the engineering and life science academy. Overall, the academy design allows students to explore areas of interest while also giving teachers meaningful ways to collaborate with one another.

On the other side, the Dean Campus started with a relatively small student population of approximately 200 students. Since the redesign process, Dean's current enrollment has doubled to nearly 400 students; incoming students are often put on a waitlist to secure a spot at the school. Alan Gates, Dean's principal, described the campus's goal as not only setting students up to be prepared, but also to be independently successful.

Students at Dean spend a significant amount of time in career technical classes, where they have more time to get hands-on training in one of the nine vocational trade programs; there are also co-op opportunities that allow students to get real job experience before they graduate. Together, vocational training and traditional core academics provide students with a pathway into the field they may want to enter, or enable them to continue their studies through higher education.

Lastly, Opportunity Academy offers three additional alternative pathways to high school education. This program, which is housed within Holyoke High School rather than operating as a separate school, pioneers an "umbrella" model. Students who are referred to Opportunity Academy continue their education through one of three ways: a dual-enrollment option that allows students to earn both high school and college credit at the local community college, a partnership with an independent nonprofit organization that offers a personalized learning option, and a success center that prepares both teenagers and adult learners to complete their Holyoke High School diploma or earn their GED.

While each Holyoke High School pathway has a distinct operational plan, they all have a shared goal of providing Holyoke students with high quality academic experiences and college/career readiness, creating multiple ways for students to succeed within and after high school.

## Adjusting in the face of a pandemic

When schools shut down in spring 2020, Holyoke High School faced similar challenges as other schools across the nation: Attendance rates were down, technology needs had to be addressed, and students ultimately felt disconnected from their primary learning environment. Despite these challenges, Holyoke staff were quick to identify the barriers to learning and effectively took action.

**Technology upgrades:** Prior to COVID-19, Holyoke High School was "behind on the times as far as technology was concerned," one educator from North noted. Many students in the Holyoke community did not have access to Wi-Fi or reliable devices, so the district had to rush to provide these resources in the beginning of the year. Although this teacher described the device distribution process as "patchy," upon reflection she said she was "grateful that we were forced into it. I think we need to incorporate more [computer skills] into our content-based classes." The technology lead at North marvelled at the various educational technologies he learned about over the past year and agreed that there is room to continue leveraging these instructional platforms in the classrooms.

**Staff communication:** The ability for educators to collaborate remotely became increasingly useful as staff adapted to electronic communications. Throughout the year, spreadsheets were used to document information about students; teachers would collectively add to these spreadsheets in order to keep track of their attendance and progress. One high school counselor found this resource to be particularly effective—she could easily note which students were missing their classes and refer them to additional supports. Teachers expressed interest in continuing electronic communications because it was an easy way to communicate about any particular student’s needs.

**Campus Learning Centers:** School staff realized there was a need to engage Holyoke students experiencing connectivity issues or who faced distractions at home. Campus Learning Centers were started to provide a space on each campus for students to complete their remote learning. This solution proved to be successful, as both the Dean and North campus expanded this resource throughout the year to offer more learning spaces. One Dean teacher, who started her first year teaching remotely, said that these centers made a big difference. The space not only gave students extra support, but teachers also felt better connected to students. Both campuses will continue these learning centers as an after-school program and plan to hire tutors to provide extra support for students.

**Strengthening 1:1 relationships:** A notable design feature of Holyoke is its priority to ensure that every student is connected to at least one staff member, or the “primary person model.” Beyond tracking a student’s academic progress, it is also each staff person’s responsibility to understand anything that may be impacting their designated students’ success in school. Geoffrey Schmidt, the principal of Opportunity Academy, noted that during the pandemic, “the need for every person on our staff to act out that role was necessary...to have more students engaged, and more students actively learning and participating.” By implementing this feature at every level of the school, Holyoke relies on all staff members to prioritize engagement and ensure all students are known and connected.

Despite efforts to resolve students’ most immediate needs to ensure access to learning, the lack of in-person instruction was still detrimental to each campus’s school model. For example, it was difficult for the North Campus to recreate authentic learning communities virtually. At the Dean Campus, teachers felt less effective teaching vocational skills without in-person workshops. And Opportunity Academy staff, who rely on regular touchpoints with students on alternative pathways to graduation, had significantly fewer opportunities to build and maintain their connections with students.

Luckily, Holyoke High School staff already had some foundational elements in place to evoke student engagement, even with limited access to in-person instruction.

## Innovation Spotlight

During their efforts to encourage student learning, all three Holyoke High School campuses were intent on keeping students interested and engaged. For the Dean Campus, which offers nine career vocational technical education programs, this meant once-a-week in-person instruction for students to get hands-on learning experiences through workshops. The North

Campus provided segmented time every other school day for students to maintain connections with their peers and educators. And Opportunity Academy staff doubled down on the primary person model to consistently keep in touch with all students—both those in attendance and those who were not.

Alan Gates, the principal of Dean, emphasized that “the work that’s been done in the last three and a half years before the pandemic allowed this place to have a foundation.” He noted that, in addition to having every student connected to at least one adult regularly outside of school time, there was also a lot of trust from the parents. One English teacher, who made a point to contact all parents in previous years, commented how “this year parents were partners. [Communication] helped us be aware of their situation and vice versa. I think that helped them to trust we were doing everything we could do specifically for students to receive services or supports.” So, when presented with the opportunity to have Dean students in-person for workshops once a week, the majority of parents opted to have their child back in school.

Taking full advantage of having students in-person for part of the year, staff strategized ways to keep students engaged in their learning over the summer. This included assigning daily themes, such as Motivational Monday and Wellness Wednesday. Beyond themed days, having a whole day for career technical classes was also a big win. One teacher shared how seeing students for the whole day gave him the time to teach concepts and skills more effectively. Academic teachers also appreciated the in-person days as they would often drop-in to connect with students. One English teacher noted the value of in-person interactions during that time. “Those small conversations that I had with a student for two minutes really just proves that there’s no authentic engagement through a screen,” they said.

Likewise, parent communication and student connections were essential at the North Campus. “We really stepped [family communication] up even more than we normally do,” a media and performing arts lead noted. One strategy North teachers found to be particularly useful during the year was “school squads,” where a group of students would meet and check in with their assigned teacher. Squad teachers became the go-to person for family communications and student progress, creating a cohesive communication system between families and among educators.

Squads were by no means a new concept at the North campus. Previously, squads operated as advisory groups—a short period of time dedicated for teachers to check in with students. Squads during remote learning, however, were specifically repurposed to mediate the effects of the pandemic, providing students with a block of time for prescribed social-emotional lessons and dedicated one-on-one check-ins. The North teachers agreed that this time was “all about the connections,” and used the time to develop relationships with each individual.

Opportunity Academy also prioritized maintaining contact with students, but using its own unique approach. For several years, Opportunity Academy has relied on three success coaches whose primary purpose is to create strong relationships with students and provide extra outreach to those who are not fully engaged in school. When school buildings closed during the pandemic, Opportunity Academy took a step further toward its primary person model by assigning each staff member to regularly check in with a small caseload of students. Thanks to one special education teacher’s commitment to daily contact with a student who had not attended school since the pandemic struck, this student eventually returned as soon as school



was back in-person again. Although attendance at Opportunity Academy is still not back to pre-pandemic levels, many students seemingly lost during the pandemic were back in attendance largely due to similar efforts from staff.

Another unique aspect of Opportunity Academy is its method of measuring engagement. As a program designed to serve students with complex life situations and for whom a traditional high school experience is a bad fit, Opportunity Academy has never relied on a simple measure of attendance to gauge student engagement. Instead, the program uses a mixture of data on student attendance, academic progress, and other out-of-school learning experiences (like a job or military training) that staff convert into high school credit. This strategy offers students a far more flexible path towards a high school diploma than they otherwise would have at a high school mandating full-time attendance during the school day.

All in all, Holyoke is moving away from the “one size fits all” notion of a high school experience. The district’s redesign plan acknowledges that students need different options to accommodate varying learning needs and life circumstances. Likewise, one approach to engagement does not work necessarily for everyone. During the pandemic, Dean, North, and Opportunity Academy used a mix of strategies to better connect with their student populations—both remotely and in person. Rather than reinventing the wheel, school staff sought to improve existing structures that were already in place. Though each campus took a slightly different approach adapting to learning limitations based on their students’ needs, they all had a shared goal of maintaining student and family relationships.

## Conclusion

As a district that has already been shifting goals and pivoting in new directions, Holyoke was well-positioned to not only change systems and structures that were not working, but also promote a culture that encourages improvement. The district’s ongoing vision for change, coupled with a steadfast commitment to student connections, enabled them to attend to student needs.

School districts seeking to prioritize student engagement this school year can learn from Holyoke High School. Start by considering the following questions:

- How can high schools help every student succeed by multiplying the number of pathways to graduation while maintaining high expectations?
- What designs most effectively help each student feel known and supported by a caring adult, even in a large school environment?
- What existing structures in high schools are well-suited to be improved and expanded to meet students’ and families’ expectations?

## About the Author

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## About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.

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