



Photo: Phoenix Charter Academy

# Transforming High Schools to Serve Students Who Are Off Track to Graduate

*Lessons Learned from the Engage New England Initiative*

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# Introduction

The Barr Foundation’s Engage New England (ENE) initiative was an effort to catalyze high school innovation by developing exemplary schools that support the success of students who are off track to graduate. Grounded in the tenets of positive youth development, the ENE initiative provided grants and technical assistance to support new or redesigned schools in creating rigorous and purposeful educational programs for students who have not experienced success in traditional high schools. Through ENE, the foundation sought to demonstrate how student-centered schools can meet the varied needs of students, especially historically underserved students, and ensure their postsecondary success. This brief presents lessons learned about school transformation from the foundation’s experience supporting three cohorts of grantees.

ENE schools fall under the broad category of alternative schools, schools that serve a disproportionately high number of students who have experienced multiple risk factors for dropping out of school, including trauma and poverty.<sup>i</sup> Whole-school reform is particularly complicated in alternative schools, which are more challenging to lead, manage, and staff than traditional schools.<sup>ii</sup> These schools, however, often operate under alternative accountability systems and may be less constrained by traditional school structures such as grade levels, making them potentially generative environments for testing innovative approaches to curriculum and instruction.

Given the population they serve, alternative schools have great promise for improving students’ academic trajectories and diminishing unequal outcomes associated with income, wealth, and race in the United States. Multiple studies, however, suggest that while alternative high schools often provide a caring environment and strong student–teacher relationships, many offer weak instructional rigor and fail to adequately prepare students for college and careers, signaling the need for alternative school reform.<sup>iii</sup> Through ENE, the Barr Foundation aimed to create student-centered schools that would serve as examples of how to equitably support student success.

The insights in this brief emerged as the Barr Foundation concluded the first developmental phase of the ENE initiative, which involved 18 grantees over three cohorts, and launched the second phase of the work, Beyond ENE, with five of the original grantees. Ultimately, the success of the initiative will be determined by the student outcomes it achieves, but the initiative’s first phase yielded important lessons about defining an initiative vision and strategy for school reform, selecting partners and providing supports, and allowing time for reforms to take hold. The insights gained from the ENE initiative can inform reform efforts in all high schools, not only because alternative schools are more challenging to manage, but also because the stakes are higher; for students who are already off track to graduate, there is little room for error.

## Insights About Transforming Alternative High Schools

### Key Levers and Supports . . . . . 3

- Identify Key Levers
- Model What Is Possible
- Sequence the Steps for Change
- Balance Common and Customized Supports
- Provide Resources That Facilitate Adoption

### Grant Structures and Processes . . 8

- Clearly Communicate Grant Priorities and Expectations
- Select Leaders with Aligned Mindsets
- Recognize That School Transformation Requires a Long-Term Investment



# Engage New England: Doing High School Differently

In 2017, the Barr Foundation launched Engage New England (ENE), an initiative to support the design and implementation of excellent high school options for students who are off track to graduate. With planning and implementation technical assistance, grantees developed innovative models for either new or redesigned schools that would build the skills and competencies students need to be successful in and after high school. Each new or redesigned school was anchored in positive youth development, an approach that emphasizes caring, supportive, and trusting relationships; high expectations; opportunities for student voice, choice, and contributions; engaging learning experiences; and consistency. The ENE initiative supported school leaders to ground positive youth development in both core instructional practices and student support structures. The initiative's goal is to empower students to take ownership of their path to graduation and a postsecondary plan by developing rigorous and purposeful learning experiences and effective and transparent academic systems, such as competency-based learning and academic case conferencing.

The Barr Foundation invested in three cohorts of grantees across New England, with the first cohort funded in 2017–18, the second in 2018–19, and the third in 2019–20. Across the cohorts, a total of 18 grantees received an initial one-year planning grant, and 13 received continuation grants for additional planning, piloting, or implementation of the new or redesigned schools. In 2022–23, the foundation launched the second phase of the initiative, Beyond ENE, with five continuing grantees.

Each grantee received technical assistance from Springpoint, a national organization that supports the design and implementation of innovative school models. Springpoint provided grantees with customized technical assistance, including individual coaching and research visits, network-wide convenings on topics essential to developing strong school models, and study tours of exemplary school models. In the first year of the ENE initiative, Springpoint's support focused on planning whole-school design. During subsequent years, Springpoint focused more deeply on helping grantees develop a strong instructional core supported by an intensive academic advisory model. Beyond ENE supports will additionally focus on postsecondary planning and community partnerships.

SRI Education is conducting a rigorous, multimethod evaluation of the ENE initiative. The evaluation includes interviews with school and district staff, focus groups with students, surveys of staff and students, review and scoring of teacher assignments and student work, and analysis of students' high school and early postsecondary outcomes.



Research on school transformation suggests that, to facilitate change, an external partner must be able to adapt to the dynamic local context while communicating the core principles of an intervention or reform effort.<sup>iv</sup> Throughout the first phase of the initiative, the Barr Foundation's vision for ENE—to create student-centered schools that prepare students for postsecondary success—remained constant. As the initiative progressed, however, the foundation refined and adapted its approach to achieving this vision based on grantee strengths and needs.

The Barr Foundation approached the first phase of the ENE initiative as a developmental stage, in which all partners learned more about what grantees needed and some adaptation was expected. The foundation established multiple mechanisms for collecting information on initiative progress, including regular conversations between foundation staff and grantee leaders; monthly written and oral updates from the technical assistance provider, Springpoint; and formative feedback from the external ENE evaluation. As a result of this intensive engagement, foundation staff had firsthand knowledge of the initiative supports and how each grantee was progressing. The foundation used this information to adapt the focus and delivery of the initiative's technical assistance as needed and to modify the grant structure and processes. The insights in this brief reflect the foundation's and Springpoint's experiences in supporting grantees through the first phase of this work.



## Key Levers and Supports

Initially, the ENE initiative focused broadly on whole-school design or redesign. It supported grantees to adopt innovative or nontraditional strategies to meet the needs of their students, such as personalized learning, partnerships for anytime-anywhere learning, competency-based education, and connections to postsecondary education and careers. The initiative funded each grantee to engage in a planning year, during which school-based design teams conducted needs assessments of their student populations, developed visions and missions, and identified the core elements of their new or redesigned schools.

The experience of the first cohort indicated that the school-based design teams tried to address too much at once. The teams planned a variety of structural and programmatic reforms (e.g., advisories, block schedules, work-based learning) and needed to prioritize their efforts. The initiative partners—the Barr Foundation and Springpoint—assessed the schools' strengths and weaknesses to identify where they needed to develop first. The partners then adjusted the focus and structure of the supports they provided to grantees during planning (for subsequent grantee cohorts) and implementation. This experience led to several lessons for structuring grantee supports—lessons about prioritizing change mechanisms; inspiring, sequencing, and facilitating change; and meeting grantee needs.

## Identify Key Levers

Similar to previous research in alternative schools, the ENE initiative partners found that grantees had strong student–staff relationships but needed further support to make students’ learning experiences rigorous and purposeful.<sup>v</sup> Their findings reflect a large body of research demonstrating that shifting teaching and learning is the fundamental challenge of school reform.<sup>vi</sup> In response, the partners determined that instructional improvement had to be the “lead domino” for changing schools and students’ experiences within the schools, before any focus on structural changes. After the first year, Springpoint narrowed and intensified their technical assistance to focus on instruction and instructional leadership, although the design teams continued to work on redesigning their schools more broadly. As one foundation staff member noted, “What we could see was that [when school leads said], ‘We will eventually or in parallel get to the instructional work,’ it wasn’t happening.” Barr found that schools were juggling too many priorities and needed outside support to focus on instructional improvement.

Focusing on a few key elements was paramount for helping school leaders and staff prioritize their time and efforts. The initiative partners defined two primary levers for transforming student learning experiences: (1) developing instructional systems, through improved instructional leadership and competency systems and adoption of high-quality curricular units; and (2) strengthening academic advising systems. The first lever would shift instruction by providing model instructional units, called Transformative Learning Experiences (TLEs), combined with support for teachers to teach in a new way. The second lever would build on the schools’ existing strong staff–student relationships to ensure staff were providing academic advising (and not only social-emotional supports) via academic case conferencing to help students succeed as their classes demanded more of them.

### Key Levers for the ENE Initiative

**Instructional systems:** Throughout the initiative, Springpoint provided coaching to school leaders to increase their instructional leadership capacity and establish instructional systems, such as routines for classroom observation and feedback and for looking at student work, as well as implementation of competency-based systems. In addition, Springpoint developed high-quality curricular units, called Transformative Learning Experiences (TLEs), on topics they deemed relevant to students’ lives. By developing rigorous and purposeful TLEs that could be embedded in core academic classes, Springpoint aimed to provide a model for high-quality instruction.

**Advising systems:** Springpoint encouraged ENE schools to institute a formal primary person system to ensure all students had an adult at school who knew them well and believed in them. Students were expected to meet one-on-one with their primary person at least biweekly for [academic case conferencing](#), when they set and reviewed goals and determined strategies to meet them. A trained primary person manager coached teachers and other staff in taking on this role.



These two key levers were intended to center the schools on creating rigorous and purposeful learning experiences for students and establishing systems of support to ensure students could meaningfully engage in these learning experiences. This emphasis was intended to help rebalance the schools' focus on relationships over instruction and encourage the integration of social-emotional development into the instructional core.

### Model What Is Possible

To catalyze school transformation, the ENE initiative partners intentionally structured the technical assistance to motivate change. Rooted in organizational theory literature, this strategy used “bright spot” models of excellence to demonstrate what is possible.<sup>vii</sup> During each cohort’s planning year, Springpoint organized tours to innovative schools for design team members, many of whom found them to be powerful experiences.<sup>viii</sup> Through these tours, for example, design team members could view high-quality competency-based instruction. The tours were embedded in cohort learning convenings to provide time for school leaders to delve into the underlying systems used by these exemplar schools.

Springpoint also applied this change strategy to guide the way schools rolled out the various initiative elements. The partner guided schools to start small in creating bright spots of high-quality instruction and academic case conferencing that would serve as examples to inspire widespread adoption. School leads identified initial TLE teachers and advisors based on their early buy-in to the TLEs and case conferencing and their willingness to learn. These educators received intensive support from an instructional coach or primary person manager. Educators implementing academic case conferencing were further encouraged to focus initially on just two to three students rather than trying to start with their full caseload. The schools could then use these bright spots as proof points to demonstrate to teachers the level of student engagement and work quality they can achieve with high-quality curriculum, instruction, and student support. This approach avoided overhauling the entire instructional system at once and overtaxing the abilities of school leaders to effectively support the change process.



Photo: Impact Academy

## Sequence the Steps for Change

Another strategy Springpoint used to help school leaders manage the change process was to provide sequenced steps for implementing individual initiative elements such as competency-based learning, the TLEs, and academic case conferencing. This strategy was designed to help school leaders avoid tackling too many changes at once.

For example, in the first 2 years of the ENE initiative, Springpoint found that design teams devoted significant time to identifying competencies and revising language. Several schools adopted a large number of competencies that used language that was inaccessible to students. Further, staff and students were confused when schools rolled out new competencies and simultaneously changed the process for earning course credits.<sup>ix</sup> In the initiative's third year, Springpoint introduced sequenced phases for transitioning to competency-based learning and encouraged schools to adopt established competencies and rubrics rather than developing their own. One Springpoint coach explained the motivation for this guidance:

Part of what we are helping folks do is appropriately sequence so that they have a better chance of coherence and success and clarity. So that in the competency system we're not having what we've seen ... where the system that is designed to make expectations more transparent, more equitable, give people more ownership and purpose around them, [ends up] actually being more opaque, more confusing. Students saying, 'I have no idea what my grade means or how I'm doing.' Or teachers saying, 'We're all confused.'

### Sequenced Implementation Phases: Competency-Based Learning

In the third year of the initiative, Springpoint introduced a [resource](#) outlining prerequisite conditions and three phases of moving to competency-based learning:

- **Establish the prerequisite conditions:** Select 3–4 prioritized competencies.
- **Phase 1: Develop a common language** related to competencies, including competency rubrics and common language used with students.
- **Phase 2: Build core systems**, such as making changes to grading policies and selecting a learning management system.
- **Phase 3: Personalize pathways** to graduation through adjustments to the school schedule and implementation of a learning management system.

Springpoint also defined implementation phases for other initiative elements such as the TLEs. Providing explicit guidance on what to tackle first was intended to reduce confusion and support schools in making smoother transitions as they changed their core academic systems.

## Balance Common and Customized Supports

In ENE, Springpoint had to balance the individual needs of a diverse set of schools with the overarching goals of the initiative. This tension is common to school reform efforts. Schools may be more likely to see the relevance of advice that is tailored to their local setting and context, making it more likely that they act to make changes in response.<sup>x</sup> Providing guidance that is fully customized to each school, however, can strain the capacity of a technical assistance provider and risks creating an initiative that is not defined by any unifying strategy. Over the course of the ENE initiative, Springpoint tailored its supports to accommodate common growth areas across grantees while maintaining individualized supports for each school.

To support the first cohort's planning year, Springpoint led design teams through a structured design process defined by a series of milestones, such as drafting a mission statement and a grading policy. As part of this process, Springpoint organized fall and spring planning convenings and tours to innovative schools, but each grantee worked independently on their school designs supported by individual coaching from Springpoint. In identifying the two key levers for all grantees to address—instruction and advising—Springpoint was able to address common grantee needs more efficiently by hosting more frequent cohort learning convenings that focused on specific areas of need, including competency-based learning and TLEs. This approach facilitated schools in learning from one another during the convenings and enabled Springpoint staff to focus on more personalized needs during the individual leadership coaching sessions they provided throughout the year. A Barr Foundation program officer described the advantages of the hybrid approach: “[P]ersonalized support in addition to the structured overall supports, that combination has been really important to people. When it feels like it’s swaying [too far] in one direction, people feel less engaged in the work.”



Photo: Chelsea Opportunity Academy

## Provide Resources That Facilitate Adoption

Research on adopting and scaling new teaching practices suggests that providing ready-made tools enhances the likelihood of uptake, provided those tools can be adapted to local contexts and easily integrated into existing routines.<sup>xi</sup> From the start, the ENE initiative partners viewed school leadership as a key mechanism for school transformation. As the initiative prioritized instructional improvement over structural reform strategies, Springpoint's technical assistance deepened to include



development and coaching for instructional leadership teams (not only school leaders) as well as the provision of curricular units and accompanying teacher professional development. Springpoint developed tools and resources that schools could adapt and use: protocols for classroom observations, looking at student work, and academic case conferencing; example competencies and competency rubrics; and curriculum in the form of TLEs. These resources both embodied elements of the initiative priorities and provided a starting point so that each school did not need to create resources from scratch. A Springpoint coach explained how this approach enabled grantees to focus on practice rather than development:

Building tools is not the place for energy in, for example, a competency system. The place is in the practice of what are you doing with those tools. So that is what we are focusing on. Of course part of the operationalizing process is constantly iterating and improving, but you're not spending a year trying to make the perfect rubric. It is more important to [figure out], "Who needs to be at what meetings? And how are we going to make sure that happens? ... And how are we going to communicate what's possible with them?"

Educators need opportunities to discuss and experiment with tools to extract the knowledge embedded in them. The cohort learning convenings provided a structured forum for Springpoint to introduce the initiative resources and provided opportunities for school leaders to explore implementation questions. During the third and fourth years of the initiative, Springpoint convened TLE unpacking sessions and workgroups for primary person managers and instructional leads to provide facilitated forums for teachers and school leaders to make sense of the units and protocols.



## Grant Structures and Processes

For a vision to effectively guide a reform effort, all participants must embrace the vision.<sup>xii</sup> The way to gain this full support differs by type of school reform effort. In district-level efforts, for example, accountability systems are sometimes used as a lever for buy-in. Foundations more often work with a coalition of the willing. For the ENE initiative, the Barr Foundation sought to identify and develop grantees that could ultimately serve as exemplar alternative high schools. These schools did not have to be high-performing at the start of the initiative, but their leaders had to be committed to the work. As the initiative progressed, the foundation learned about how to communicate the vision and commitment needed to ensure grantees were a good fit. The foundation also recognized the need for a longer term investment to realize their goals for the initiative.

### Clearly Communicate Grant Priorities and Expectations

Transparency of grant priorities and expectations is critical to enacting a reform vision. Grantees must be aware of grant expectations so they can make sure they are willing and able to meet them. Three of the nine grantees in the first cohort did not continue past the

planning phase, in part because the design leads could not dedicate the time needed for the work. After defining the initiative’s key change levers, the Barr Foundation was able to more clearly communicate expectations and priorities so that applicants—both school leaders and the district or charter management organization (CMO) leaders who support them—could assess whether the ENE initiative was a good fit.



Photo: Evolve Academy

With the first cohort of grantees, the Barr Foundation’s expectations for the work were not explicit, particularly in terms of how much time this work required. Several grantees who received planning grants did not exhibit the level of buy-in or time needed and were not funded for implementation grants. Starting with the second cohort of grantees, the foundation emphasized up front the commitment required, enabling potential applicants in later cohorts to determine if the ENE initiative was right for them. The goal was for school leaders to understand the commitment required and for district and CMO leaders to support them in making time for the initiative. As one Springpoint staff member noted, “We’re not asking people to do surface [change]; it’s deep.” Specifically, the foundation articulated the expectation that design leads would need to devote 40% of their time to initiative design work during the planning year. Although the commitment proved unrealistic for many design leads who led existing schools, the expectation nonetheless provided a reference point to convey the intensity of the design work. The initiative partners also engaged district and CMO leaders to make sure they were on board with the initiative vision and could provide a conducive context for implementation. In some places, this required more frequent and regular meetings with district leaders, especially in cases where the superintendent who was part of the original application had left the district. Clearly communicating the initiative’s focus and expectations to prospective grantees enabled the foundation to select grantees they could be reasonably sure would be able to continue past the initial planning year, reducing in later cohorts the number of grantees that participated in the initiative for just one year.

Communication about grant expectations and priorities is particularly important when reform efforts shift over time. As the ENE initiative partners refined and prioritized the initiative’s key change levers, some schools decided not to continue into the initiative’s second phase, Beyond ENE. One reason for this decision was that they did not see aspects of these levers as aligned with their priorities. Specifically, several schools left the initiative in part because they prioritized having staff develop their own curriculum and were reluctant to adopt externally developed units. The process of refining and communicating the initiative expectations allowed the Barr Foundation to fund grantees for the Beyond ENE work whose goals were tightly aligned with those of the initiative and whose schools could serve as exemplars of the types of schools the foundation was trying to support.

### Select Leaders with Aligned Mindsets

Effective school leadership is a key determinant of student success.<sup>xiii</sup> One lesson that emerged from the ENE initiative was the importance of selecting leaders who could dedicate the time needed to lead change and who were committed to the initiative’s vision. A Barr Foundation leader described how the first cohort’s planning year reinforced the leader as the “lynchpin” of school reform work: In the first cohort, a third of the grantees were not funded beyond the planning phase because their leaders did not demonstrate the commitment or mindsets needed. As the initiative progressed, the initiative partners refined their selection criteria and process, with an emphasis on leader mindsets.



Photo: Evolve Academy

The Barr Foundation identified several key mindsets leaders needed to be successful: high expectations for students and an assets-based orientation; conviction that instructional improvement is central to transforming the student experience and that staff development is core to transforming instruction; and openness to coaching. Most importantly, the foundation pressed to make sure school leaders believed all students could succeed and were not dismissing any groups. Secondly, the foundation looked for leaders with high expectations for staff and a belief in what is possible to achieve through staff development. Leaders then needed to be willing to be coached in how to put that belief into practice. With a few exceptions, the ENE initiative partners came to prioritize these mindsets over specific leadership competencies in selecting grantees because, as one foundation staff member explained, leadership skills could be developed, but mindsets were harder to change.



The Barr Foundation made two key changes to the selection process to make sure it was funding leaders with the prioritized mindsets and skills. First, the foundation required applicants in later cohorts to identify a design lead in their initial ENE funding proposal. The foundation also added an interview day when staff from prospective grantees came to the foundation so that the initiative partners could assess leaders' mindsets and capacity for leading change. They also assessed leaders' skills and instincts related to instructional leadership, including coaching and hiring, and upholding a vision. Finally, the initiative partners used the interview day to confirm that the design lead was the planned school leader to provide continuity from the planning phase to the newly launched or redesigned school. The interview day enabled the foundation to get to know the leaders earlier in the process and ensure they were selecting leaders with aligned mindsets and skills.

### Interview Day

Starting with the selection of the second cohort of grantees, the Barr Foundation held an interview day to meet the candidates. Each potential grantee school had the design lead and one other staff member participate. Because the purpose of the interview day was to confirm alignment with the ENE initiative's vision, all invited attendees were from potential grantee schools and were not competing with one another for funding. Attendees were asked to reflect on a classroom video, share personal statements, discuss pre-readings, and respond to questions.

## Recognize That School Transformation Requires a Long-Term Investment

Studies of school design have shown the need for lengthened planning and funding timelines, several recognizing that planning is continuous and extends beyond the planning phase.<sup>xiv</sup> Throughout the ENE initiative, the Barr Foundation revised its expectations of the time horizon and investment needed to support change and create exemplary alternative schools. The shift

*“The first way we modeled out the funding structure and the timeline was based on an assumption that the planning could be done in 1 year and then ... moving from planning to implementation would be seamless but also there would be distinct phases. As we've adjusted over the years, the pace is different depending on the strengths that you're starting with and the context, and we've gotten comfortable with that.”*

—Barr Foundation leader

in the foundation's funding strategy was driven by the understanding that the ENE grantees had varying levels of readiness and progressed at different rates.

The Barr Foundation modified the proposal and funding timeline after the first year based on feedback from grantees. One change was small: moving up the award notification date based on the feedback that planning for the subsequent school year needs to start before June. Another change involved more substantial revisions to the

initiative design, as the foundation restructured the funding to be more incremental and customized by grantee. The foundation initially planned for two stages of funding for the ENE initiative: a planning year grant followed by a 3-year implementation grant. Because the schools entered the initiative in varying states of readiness to take on the work, however, the foundation awarded 1-year continued planning or pilot grants instead of 3-year implementation grants for schools that were not ready for full implementation.



Photo: Evolve Academy

Finally, the foundation added a second phase to the ENE initiative, Beyond ENE, to fund a subset of ENE grantees for an additional 3 years to develop their schools' instructional and advising systems and develop elements they had postponed in the first phase, such as postsecondary planning supports and external partnerships.

With the ENE initiative's extended funding timeline, the Barr Foundation acknowledged the reality that school reform is an iterative process that requires a long-term commitment. School design work does not end with planning—schools needed to be engaged in a continuous improvement process as they tried new approaches. A Springpoint coach noted



Photo: Chelsea Opportunity Academy

that design is not finished after school opens; rather, it enters a new phase of prototyping and testing. Foundation staff stressed that supporting schools in engaging in this kind of ongoing learning and development process requires significant and sustained resources. As one foundation program officer noted, "It is slow and deep and expensive work." The foundation sought to balance having high expectations for initiative progress with providing time for all the partners to learn and adjust.

# Conclusion

The Barr Foundation's experience during the first phase of the ENE initiative suggests several lessons about catalyzing change in alternative high schools. A clear vision for improving students' learning experiences is critical for ensuring all partners have a shared purpose. How that vision is achieved, however, may evolve over time based on the strengths and needs of the grantees. In ENE, the foundation realized it needed to prioritize instructional improvement and student support levers to more efficiently support schools in improving student learning experiences. To realize the initiative's goal of creating exemplary alternative high schools in New England, the foundation also found that they needed to refine their selection process to ensure that grantees had leaders with the right mindsets and that their district or CMO systems were conducive to the work. The technical assistance provider, Springpoint, then had to provide common supports for all grantees, including sequencing the steps to change, to make the implementation of those levers more manageable and focused for school leaders. At the same time, Springpoint had to provide customized supports for each of the grantees based on their specific contexts and student populations.

The evolving nature of the ENE initiative and associated supports underscores the need for funders and technical assistance providers to be open to ongoing learning and feedback to best support grantees. The Barr Foundation's experience also highlights the need for long-term investment of resources to enable grantees to try new approaches, assess their effectiveness, and refine them. Doing high school differently requires deep work and a sustained investment.



Photo: Chelsea Opportunity Academy



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