

SEATTLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS' INTERAGENCY RECOVERY CAMPUS BRIEF SERIES:

Student, Alumni, and Parent Experiences

Introduction

This is the third in a series of interconnected briefs detailing how recovery high schools are an evidence-based approach to supporting young people in completing high school and building a substance-free lifestyle. Recovery schools are designed specifically for students in recovery from substance use and co-occurring mental health disorders. While their structures and operations vary, all schools share the primary goal of providing a safe and sober environment where young people in recovery pursue their academic and career goals. Staff members typically include substance use counselors, teachers and mental health professionals.[i]



Together the briefs demonstrate the impact of a sober school setting for young people in recovery. The first brief documents the need for Seattle Public School's Interagency Recovery Campus and describes its history. The second brief highlights national and Washington data showing that students with substance use disorder have substantially higher rates of graduation and sobriety when attending a recovery high school.

Drawing from interviews and focus groups, this third brief reflects student, alumni and parent experiences in the program. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Four Dimensions of Recovery (see page 2) provides a framework documenting key services provided at the campus. SAMSHA defines recovery from mental health and substance use disorders as "a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential."[iii] **For a student to be in recovery means that they are building a sober lifestyle in and out of school which involves cultivating connections with sober peers, participating in prosocial activities, and engaging with the recovery community.**[iv] A stable and sustained recovery is built in each of the Dimensions.

Interagency Recovery Campus Brief Series developed in partnership with

Interagency Group Workers

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As the Recovery Campus is the only public sober school in Washington, interdistrict transfers aren't uncommon. One parent shared the story of the program facilitating an out of district transfer in one day. This level of rapid responsiveness is critical when a student's early sobriety might be delicate and uncertain.

Recovery Campus students and alumni value the sober learning environment, reflecting that alcohol and drug use were problems at the schools they previously attended. Sobriety is nurtured through daily recovery meetings facilitated by the substance use counselor and social worker. Students receive referrals to mental health and substance use providers and are encouraged to participate in community-based peer led sober support groups. As a campus under the umbrella of Interagency Academy, the Recovery Campus has access to a school nurse and special education services, as more than one-third of students qualify for disability accommodations.[v]

Students and staff create a culture of support balanced with accountability, establishing a clear recovery path. If an instance of relapse occurs, the substance use counselor and social worker partners with the student and their family, developing actionable steps, getting the student back on track. Students and alumni shared that their involvement with the program was instrumental to their health and well-being. One student reflected, **"To keep it straightforward, if it weren't for the school, I'd probably be dead. I was immersed in a community that was doing the work to stay sober, they did all the things we need to do, and I was taught how to do that."**

Health



The Interagency Recovery Campus provides a stable environment for students to build a happy, healthy, substance-free lifestyle.

When a student enters the Interagency Recovery Campus, the substance use counselor and social worker collaborates with the family to ensure a quick and smooth transition. While some Recovery Campus students begin their studies following inpatient treatment or a hospital stay, both the cost and access to residential treatment can present barriers to students and families. The Recovery Campus addresses these inequities by considering the holistic needs of each student and family. It is preferred that prospective students have a sustained period of sobriety upon enrollment. **However, the most important determinant for enrollment is a potential student's voluntary commitment to sobriety**.

Home



The Interagency Recovery Campus works to build bridges between students and their family members.

Multiple studies indicate that family involvement in substance use disorder treatment has positive effects on recovery.[vi] Staff members at the Interagency Recovery Campus communicate regularly with parents and caregivers, offering help,

information, and resources. Bridges, an Alternative Peer Group, provides after school programming for Recovery Campus students who are interested, and support groups for families.

Parents shared that the early days of transition can be especially fragile. During this tender period, the Recovery Campus staff provides frequent updates about how students are doing. One parent elaborated that after this transitional period, she was very thankful for the consistent communication around her child's whereabouts and schoolwork.

Parents and caregivers are able to access support services from Bridges Alternative Peer Group and appreciate the collaboration between both programs:

"Between the school and [Bridges, they have] kept my kid safe, to have something to do after school until I could get them…They're super connected. They always know what's going on with each other. Without the two of them working, hand in hand together, my child would not be where they're at today. Which is hopefully graduated in June."

While rebuilding familial relationships is a priority at the Recovery Campus, close to one in five students experience housing instability and are served by the district's McKinney Vento program.[v] For students who have conflicts with their families, the staff work to ensure that students are safe and can access a range of supports.



Purpose

The Interagency Recovery Campus offers a range of meaningful activities through its academic programs and opportunities for service.

Students and alumni described a classroom climate that is reminiscent of Carol Dweck's research about **growth mindset**.[vii] Individuals with a growth mindset believe that their talents and abilities can be cultivated through practice, persistence and good teaching. She explains, "The growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts" (p. 7). Dweck contrasts this with fixed mindsets in which individuals conclude that ability and intelligence are fixed traits. One student relates:

"They change the idea of 'Okay, I'm not smart. I can't do this. I'm never going to be able to do this' to 'your mind is just growing, and your mind is always evolving.' The more practice you put in, the more you'll feel it and see it. And that was really pivotal for me because every other teacher I'd ever had just made me feel stupid for not understanding right off the bat or for being unmotivated."

One mother shared that during the conference with her child and a teacher, the student presented an assessment of goals and the progress they made. The staff also invite students to join outreach efforts, present at legislative forums, and participate on conference panels. Parents have expressed how these activities have brought up their children's self-esteem. Students reflect that engagement in 12-Step programs also present opportunities for service and leadership. Many students with sustained recovery experience provide transportation for their peers and serve as mentors for youth who are earlier in their recovery.





Community

The Interagency Recovery Campus fosters relationships and social networks that cultivate friendship, love and hope.

Practices at the Interagency Recovery Campus are guided by the philosophy that **the opposite of addiction is connection and community.** Parents, students and alumni agreed that the Recovery Campus places a strong emphasis on community. Students appreciate that some staff were in recovery too. One parent shares,

> **"Each teacher takes on a role [as] a mentor and a family member. As far as their recovery and their success in school, these kids are so loved. It's the recovery community."**

Another explains:

> **"There's a lot of community. They have relationships and social networks that offer support, friendship, love and hope. The whole school is like that. I'm not going to say that every kid loves each other every day. They go through their regular teenage behavior of hating one person one day and 'this person did this to me.' That doesn't stop. But I will tell you, and [my child] will say it too and the other kids will say it too, that when it gets down, they're going to be there for each other. "**

To sustain community, staff foster a strong commitment to sobriety and recovery. Parents expressed that students must choose sobriety for themselves. This commitment contributes to the culture of shared accountability in each student's recovery journey. One student concludes:

> **"At the end of the day, we all understand that we're fighting the same battle, and we are trying very hard...That's something that we can all understand. It's just the community, the recovery support."**

SUMMARY

The shared experiences of students, alumni, and parents illustrate how recovery is built within the four dimensions. Their voices highlight essential components of a recovery high school model promoting sobriety and increasing graduation rates for students with co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders. The powerful impact Interagency Recovery Campus has had in the lives of students and families is clear through their own words.

REFERENCES

[i] Association of Recovery Schools Website (no date). Retrieved from https://recoveryschools.org/what-is-a-recovery-high-school/

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[iii] SAMHSA (n.d.) SAMHSA's working definition of recovery. Retrieved from https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep12-recdef.pdf

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