

SEATTLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS' INTERAGENCY RECOVERY CAMPUS BRIEF SERIES:

Mapping the Need for Washington's Only Public Recovery High School

This is the first of a series of three short reports that share how recovery high schools are an evidence-based approach to supporting high school graduation and abstinence from alcohol and drugs. The primary goal of Interagency Recovery Campus is to provide 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]

In this brief, we make the case for recovery schools generally and Seattle Public School's Recovery Campus specifically. The Interagency Recovery Campus is the only public school of its kind in Washington. Together these short reports share data and stories showing the value of sober learning spaces tailored for young people in recovery from substance use and co-occurring mental health disorders.

Why We Need Recovery Schools

Both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, young people's behavioral health has become a pressing concern. During this timeperiod, students' experiences of instability, isolation,and fear have been documented in multiple studies. The American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Children's Hospital Association have declared a national emergency in children's mental health, citing the serious toll of the COVID-19 pandemic on top of existing challenges.

According to the U.S. Surgeon General one in five children reported having a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder. [ii]

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Interagency Gray Wolves

Seattle Public Schools

King County DCHS Department of Community and Human Services

psesd Strategy, Evaluation and Learning Puget Sound Educational Service District



Mental health and substance use are connected:

- **Mental health issues can influence a person's use of drugs and alcohol.**
- **Substance use can impact the development of mental illness.**
- **Risk and protective factors for both conditions can contribute to one another.**
- **Research suggests that adolescents with substance use disorders also have high rates of co-occurring mental illness.[iii]**

Low high school graduation rates for youth impacted by co-occuring disorders underscore the need for recovery schools.

> **Only one in four Washington youth with substance use concerns graduated from high school within six years. For youth with co-occurring mental health and substance use needs, that number dropped to 17%.[iv]**

Without a high school diploma, individuals are more likely to have poor health and economic outcomes. They are also more commonly involved in the juvenile legal system.[v] Innovative post-treatment transitions like those offered at the Interagency Recovery Campus are critical to supporting student success.

Washington's Only Sober Public High School

Seattle Public School's Interagency Recovery Campus provides a singular and important service in King County. Hosted through the Interagency Academy network of specialized campuses across the city of Seattle, the Recovery Campus is the only one of its kind in Washington. The school offers programs and supports to address the Four Dimensions of Recovery: Health, Home, Purpose and Community.[vi] The Recovery Campus provides instructional programs for ninth through twelfth graders and daily sober support groups. It also partners with BRIDGES: Seattle Alternative Peer Group to offer fun and sober activities after school.

HISTORY The program was founded as a partnership between the King County Behavioral Health and Recovery Division of the Department of Community and Human Services (DCHS-BHRD) and Seattle Public Schools in 2014. Concerned about low high school graduation rates in Washington, DCHS-BHRD staff visited recovery high schools in Minnesota and Texas and then provided $250,000 in startup funds to launch the program.

CONNECTIONS The Recovery Campus attracts students from a number of referral sources, including peers, counselors, treatment programs and families. Interagency Academy's Orientation Team promotes access to the program by informing all Interagency students, consulting across campuses and the district, and supporting out-of-district students in the enrollment process.

To ensure that the Recovery Campus is the right place, prospective students visit and participate in an afternoon recovery group co-led by staff and students. These daily meetings build shared accountability among students who support each other in their progress through key milestones of sobriety.

Over three in five adolescents in community-based substance use disorder treatment programs also meet diagnostic criteria for another mental illness.[iii]



Seth Welch, the Recovery Campus substance use counselor and social worker, is engaged in the national Association of Recovery Schools, serving on the organization's board, presenting locally and nationally, providing recommendations to emerging schools, and preparing the program for accreditation.

STUDENTS The majority of the Recovery Campus students have co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders. Students commit to a program of sobriety during their attendance. Residential treatment for substance use and a sustained period of sobriety is recommended prior to enrollment. However, prospective students who have not completed treatment, and who are interested in starting their recovery journey, are welcome to meet with staff to develop a plan for enrollment.

This flexibility promotes equitable entry points to the Campus. Student placements are facilitated by Interagency Academy's Orientation Team with final approval granted by school administration.

Recovery Campus staff can refer students to residential treatment if needed. More than one-quarter (26%) of students completed residential substance use treatment while attending the Recovery Campus.



AFTERSCHOOL ACTIVITIES Abstaining from drugs and alcohol is just the beginning. Engagement in prosocial activities and a supportive peer community outside of school are important to successful post-treatment recovery. *Bridges* offers afterschool drop-in and field trip activities, student and parent support groups, and arts programs. As young leaders, Recovery Campus students develop a sense of self-efficacy and confidence as they create positive change beyond the walls of the school:

> **"The Recovery Campus placed tools in front of me that I would not have found on my own, allowing barriers to be broken and help to be accepted."**
>
> — Recovery Campus student

FUNDING It is a common model for recovery schools to be funded through partnerships. At Interagency Recovery Campus, Seattle Public Schools pays for the academic components, and King County DCHS-BHRD pays for the behavioral health portion.

Please see the next two briefs in the series to read about the program's outcomes, student characteristics, and the impact of the program as described through the words of students, parents, and alumni. You will learn that Recovery Campus students are more likely than other similar young people to complete high school and build a recovery lifestyle of health, home, community, and purpose.

REFERENCES

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