



The Road TO Recovery

New schools offer an educational alternative to addicted teens

Nationally, more than two million students meet the generally accepted criteria for specialty treatment for drug or alcohol abuse or addiction. Each year, fewer than 200,000 of these students receive the treatment they need. But what happens when a high school student with a drug or alcohol addiction gets out of treatment? Seventy-five to 80 percent of teenagers relapse within the first year following treatment. Many will be offered their previous drug of choice on their first day back in school.

To help support sobriety and prevent relapse, a new type of school has sprung up to offer students a continuum of post-treatment care. They are called recovery schools, and Peabody College's Andrew Finch has been studying them. Currently, there are about 30 recovery schools in 10 states. "Recovery schools are not treatment centers, but they support treatment gains," says Finch, assistant clinical professor of human and organizational development. "These schools benefit recovering students by enabling them to test increasing levels of responsibility and leadership gradually."

Secondary students in recovery schools, sometimes known as sober schools, face a number of common issues following treatment. These include working a recovery program and balancing that with school or remediation; continuing problems dealing with impulsivity; coping with co-occurring mental health problems, ADD, depression or anxiety; cross-addictions like gambling, sex or eating disorders; developing basic living skills; and becoming accountable and responsible.

As one of the founders of a recovery school in

Nashville, Finch has close-up experience with these issues. In 1996, he helped establish Community High School under the auspices of Nashville's Oasis Center. As a school counselor who earned his master's degree at Peabody, he and the school's teaching principal largely designed a program typically enrolling 20-25 students. When Oasis's start-up grant ran out, the school went independent. From 2003 to 2006, Finch served as director.

His involvement with establishing and running an independent high school led Finch to return to Peabody as a doctoral student in educational leadership and policy. "Robert Crowson, Steve Heyneman and Claire Smrekar," professors in the Department of Leadership, Policy and Organizations, "were incredible assets to me," he says. Finch's dissertation dealt with recovery schools.

In 2002, Finch was contacted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The agency was interested in the phenomena of recovery schools and wanted to learn more about them. They offered to host a meeting if he would do the legwork in identifying them. One outcome was the establishment of

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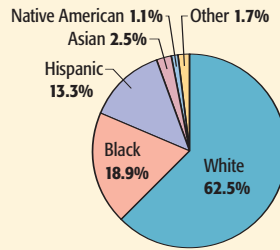
the Association of Recovery Schools, with Finch as its executive director. He plans to transition out of the position as the association builds its board of directors and begins raising funds.

Along with Paul Moberg, a professor at the University Wisconsin-Madison, Finch is trying to flesh out the picture of recovery schools. In 2005, the two received a grant from

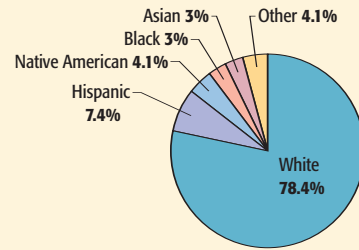
The Numbers: Youth Substance Abuse and Recovery Schools

- From 2000 to 2005, youth substance abuse and dependence (ages 12-17) increased from 7.7 percent to 8 percent, with a high of 8.9 percent in 2002 and 2003.
- In 2005, 2.1 million youths qualified for treatment for an illicit drug or alcohol problem.
- Of this number, only 181,000 youths (8.6 percent) received treatment at a specialty facility.
- Average enrollment in recovery schools studied is 21 students.
- Mean student tenure: 228 days (7.5 months)
- Gender: 54 percent male, 46 percent female
- Parents/Guardians: 54 percent from two-parent-in-home families
- Educational Attainment: 56 percent have parents with at least a college degree

U.S. Population Receiving Special Treatment by Race/Ethnicity



Recovery School Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity



Sources of referral to recovery school:

- 49% Treatment centers
- 25% Self
- 19% Friends/Family
- 16% Therapist
- 11% Probation/Parole
- 10% Previous School

Treatment histories:

- 77% Substance abuse (inpatient or outpatient)
- 48% Mental health (inpatient or outpatient)
- 48% Currently receiving counseling outside of school

Student opinions about recovery schools (agree or strongly agree):

- 86% Get more attention
- 85% School offers good clinical/therapeutic
- 69% Classes are easier

Students now feel better about:

- 81% Alcohol/Drug Issues
- 59% Emotions
- 70% Academics
- 59% Family
- 57% Peers

the National Institute on Drug Abuse to do a descriptive study of recovery schools in locations across the U.S.

"We had hoped to do an evaluative study," Finch said. "But on the advice of people at NIDA, we realized that was premature. There's a lack of an evidence base. So instead, we're trying to answer a more basic question: what is a recovery school? We're seeing some pretty wide differences."

Through site visits, surveys of staff and students, and review of secondary data, Finch and Moberg have studied 18 different schools in seven states. Their descriptive analysis examines organizational and fiscal structure, institution-

alization, educational programming, therapeutic/recovery programming, student characteristics, and contextual settings.

"Rather than a few typical models, what we're discovering are a number of aspects around which we can begin to build a picture of what recovery schools look like," Finch said. For example, all

but one of the 18 schools studied have public funding at some level. Most are co-located within or near another school. All are day schools. Most use a Twelve Step or Minnesota Model and include daily group meetings as well as one-to-one counseling.

Beyond these commonalities, the picture gets fuzzy. Therapeutic and counseling orientations employed by recovery schools range from variations on cognitive-behavioral therapy to family systems and psychopharmacology for mental health issues. Some schools enroll students who

have been through the juvenile justice system while others prefer only students who have a genuine desire to be there. Some accept students who are not yet in active recovery while others do not. Several frame their mission as transitional; others encourage students to remain enrolled for as long as it takes to build life skills and finish a degree.

In academics, some schools offer teachers for each core subject while others may use a modular curriculum and feel more like a one-room schoolhouse, with a single teacher guiding students along at various levels. Some do drug screening and some do not. Several are moving towards offering treatment as well as education.

The student surveys Finch and Moberg have gathered suggest considerable progress in students' substance use behaviors. Weekly substance use dropped from 90 percent to 8 percent. For students enrolled 90 days or longer, when compared with the 90 days prior to treatment or enrollment, alcohol use dropped from 34 days to 3.5 days; cannabis use from 47 days to 4 days, and the percent of days abstinent increased from 32 percent to 83 percent. Sixty-nine percent reported no alcohol use since starting recovery school, and 75 percent reported no cannabis use.

Finch says that he and Moberg have not lost sight of their longer-term objective of evaluating the effectiveness of recovery schools. They hope their descriptive study will enable them to develop an outcome research design and build an evidence base for what works and what doesn't in the growing number of such schools. "Ultimately," Finch said, "we'd like to be able to offer models others can use to meet the growing need for educational alternatives for students with histories of abuse and addiction."



Andrew Finch