

Association of Recovery Schools –

Presentation to the National Forum: Discovering Solutions to the Nation's Alcohol and Other Drug Problems

25 October 2002, Washington, D.C.

Good morning. First, I want to thank Johnny Allem for extending me an invitation to speak with you all this morning. I am so happy to have the opportunity to talk about the exciting developments in the area of education and recovery. Each of us in this room share a common interest in supporting alcohol and other drug addiction recovery. My background is as a counselor. I am a Nationally Certified Counselor currently finishing my Ph.D. in Educational Leadership at Vanderbilt University, and I helped create a recovery high school named Community High School five years ago. CHS is a private school in Nashville, Tennessee. Our maximum enrollment is 25 students, and we have 6 teachers, a director, and a counselor on-staff to work with them daily. Other than our population and our focus, our school operates like many other schools in the country. Students arrive at school each morning at 8:30 and are dismissed each day at 3. CHS is approved by the State of Tennessee, and our students receive certified diplomas upon graduation.

Tova Rubin interviewed a number of recovery high school students for her doctoral dissertation a couple of years ago. She turned their stories into poems. One of those students she called Simon, and part of his story goes like this:

And I really believed I could quit when I wanted to  
I would quit using the powder for a couple of days  
I would quit pot for a few weeks here and there  
And I felt like I was in control  
I am not an addict because I can quit if I want to  
I just never wanted to

And so there were years of a constant high  
I was drunk, high, tooted, and any other name you can think of  
Coke, crank, acid, weed, metha-amphetamines and any other name you can think of

And then when my friend found that credit card  
And we went on a shopping spree  
And then skipped town so we wouldn't get into trouble  
And when we ran out of money and drugs  
We headed back home

There are over 100,000 young people with stories like Simon's who enter treatment each year in the U.S. According to SAMSHA, the number of students aged 12-17 receiving treatment rose 20-percent from 1994-1999. Once these young people leave treatment, their options include returning to their regular school or enrolling in a recovery school designed specifically for recovering students. Studies have shown that 80-percent of students returning to their former schools following treatment begin using again. But, schools that assist students with special needs have grown in number in recent years. The burgeoning charter school movement, along with specialized private schools, has added to the possibilities for families desiring a therapeutic option to traditional schools and public "alternative" schools, which are often punitive in nature.

Thanks to the support of Randy Muck and the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, a representative of each recovery high school and college program was able to come here to Washington in July for three days to share information with each other, and from that conference came the Association of Recovery Schools, a consortium to serve the needs of existing schools and promote the creation of new ones. Today, we know of 19 high schools and three college programs in operation. There are also four more high schools set to open in the next two years. At that point, there will be recovery schools in 10 states and the District of Columbia.

*What is a "recovery school"?*

This is a question still being answered. You must understand, most of these schools developed on their own, with no blueprint and little guidance from other schools. Through trial and error, the current schools arrived at a structure that works. However, this means there is great organizational diversity in size, staffing, funding, and even

philosophy. Still, some trends run through these schools. Here are some of the key consistencies that emerged as I began to ask questions of each representative:

First, recovery schools are *schools* not treatment facilities. They are designed to support the recovery of young persons who have either already received treatment or who have made a conscious decision to live a sober lifestyle. Thus, recovery schools are not the “frontline” in the continuum of care. Additionally, almost all of the schools offer students a chance to receive a diploma.

Second, while some of these schools are located within larger schools, community centers, or colleges, they are not “pull-out programs” or services for “mainstreamed students” (such as student assistance programs). In each case, students receive the full-range of academic services and study everyday with students working on recovery. The high schools are self-contained schools (or schools within schools), and the colleges are actual departments or programs that help students find sober living arrangements, plan academic schedules, receive counseling, and, in the case of Texas Tech University, receive training as chemical dependency counselors.

And third, every student enrolled in a recovery school is expected to work a program to recover from chemical dependency. While AA traditions and state laws keep many schools from requiring students to work 12-step programs, most use the Minnesota or 12-step models of recovery. Most are spiritually-based and suggest students work steps, attend meetings, and utilize a sponsor. All require students to be drug and alcohol free, and many conduct random urine screens. In almost every case, honest reporting of a relapse will allow a student to remain enrolled, while dishonesty leads to removal.

Recovery Schools are holistic and promote strong family-involvement. Most are quite small, ranging from six students to 70 students. The average is about 40. This allows for small classes and individualized attention from teachers, counselors, and program staff. Every one of the school representatives would say that their goal is to build a supportive community. Adolescents who drop out of school have a higher risk of relapsing than those who finish school. Recovery schools attack this risk by providing the peer support vital to a young person’s attempts to avoid alcohol and drugs. Connecting with a peer who not only has struggled with many of the same life issues,

but also has found a way to both cope and *have fun* without alcohol and drugs is one of the most valuable accomplishments of these schools.

*So, what is needed?*

I know this may sound like a mantra of innovative programming, but there are two main things needed for these schools to flourish and expand: funding and research.

Almost across the board, the high school programs battle funding issues. While most receive some public support, almost all have to find ways to supplement that income through fundraising, parent-donations, and grants. In order to re-engage in the academic process, recovering students require individualized attention, small classes, and trained professionals teaching and supporting them.

Of course, funding is not only needed to support school operations, it is also needed to launch the research required to create awareness about and legitimize these schools. Other than a couple of doctoral dissertations, there has been no large scale, rigorous study about recovery schools. Ongoing *research* and *evaluation* is needed to describe the programming models for existing schools and define effective practices. Additionally, a better understanding of what is working in these schools will allow us to begin *training* educators and counselors to work in these environments. Courses could be designed to prepare professionals to enter these and other specialized school organizations. Every state and most major cities in the U.S. could populate a recovery school, and yet 40 states provide no such options for their citizens completing treatment.

Another one of Rubin's students, Jason, had this to say about his post-treatment services:

In treatment, they had me talk to counselors  
Who talked about the Program  
And I remembered a friend who used to use with me  
And she had talked about a school  
Where all the kids were in recovery  
And they were given a chance

And I did not want to spend my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday  
Marked off the calendar but never lived

And here I am  
Taking some steps forward  
A few steps backward  
But trying to learn  
That when reality closes in on me  
And all my instincts push me toward the escape,  
I need to remind myself  
That I am only escaping from my own life  
And that reality won't kill me.  
But trying to escape it will

The reality is that thanks to Augsburg College, Rutgers University, Texas Tech, and 19 known high schools nationwide, a few hundred students are receiving positive peer pressure at school to maintain sobriety. The goal of ARS is to help these schools thrive and open the doors to thousands of additional recovering students in the years to come. Thanks.