Accessing Recovery: An Ecological Analysis of Barriers and Opportunities for Adolescents through Recovery High Schools

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What is a recovery high school (RHS)?

- Academically focused with recovery support components structured in the school day
- Demographics:
  - Approximately 30 exist in the U.S., with 4 in both MN and MA
  - 6 – 75 students per school
- Settings:
  - Students often complete formal alcohol/other drug treatment prior to entry
  - Students must commit to sobriety while at the school
  - Recovery supports include: group therapy sessions, individual counseling sessions, peer support, intentional relationships with staff
- Structure and setting varies across schools and states (e.g., charter, alternative school, private school)

*Past 30-day Arrests*

**RHSs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>District 1</th>
<th>District 2</th>
<th>District 3</th>
<th>District 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RHS #1</td>
<td>30.6%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>RHS #2</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>RHS #3</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>RHS #4</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**All MA Students**

- Students of color: 76%
- Non-Hispanic White Students: 24%

**All MN Students**

- Students of color: 87%
- Non-Hispanic White Students: 13%

**Discussion**

- Incidence of dependence or abuse of illicit drugs or alcohol is high among 12-17 year-olds: 7.01% of students in Massachusetts and 6.76% of students in Minnesota[1]
- Recovery high schools are often not demographically representative of the communities in which they are located
- This disparity observed in recovery high schools, yet the systems that lead to this disparity can be traced back through the individual, family, and larger cultural and governmental systems

**Policy Recommendations**

- Increase availability and funding for treatment and aftercare resources for adolescents with substance use disorders
- Recognize that these seemingly separate systems do interact
- Broadly, we must address these intersections structurally to encourage new pathways of communication
  - Create new policies that assist the Education, Public Health, and Juvenile Justice sectors in communication
  - Enable funding mechanisms that encourage and support this cross-sector collaboration, including employees to help with implementation
- Consider juvenile court responses to first/second/third offenses for youth, including possible treatment mandates
- Recovery schools can play important roles in actively addressing these needs
- The Changing Tracks program seeks to improve life chances for African-American youth affected by substance abuse by being one of the many addressing some of these disparities through:
  - Building new stakeholder alliances
  - Building treatment awareness in schools and communities
  - Creating a school-based referral system
  - Creating a city-wide court diversion system
  - Expanding culturally appropriate treatment
  - Combining treatment with wrap-around supports

**Understanding the Ecological Model**

- Individual characteristics influence students’ likelihood of entering treatment and later a recovery school commitment to sobriety, perception of risk or norms, experiences with negative consequences of substance use, etc.
- Family financial situation, parents’ opinions about substance use, willingness to seek outside resources, parents’ histories with substance use, and other factors influence one’s likelihood of seeking treatment or alternative schooling options
- Educational experiences and school climate impact whether a student feels safe telling to school staff about substance use problems; school resources – e.g., availability of a chemical health counselor – influences school staff members’ ability to respond effectively to student concerns
- Department of Education disciplinary policies related to substance use in school determine one’s path: disciplinary consequences or treatment resources; availability of alternative school choices dictates students’ options
- Treatment Experiences: connect students with continuing care resources and can recommend recovery high schools; how consistently this happens determines students’ likelihood of accessing these resources post-treatment
- Public Health Department funding for treatment at a level commensurate with need and the presence of treatment centers with openings relatively close to students’ homes impacts who receives treatment

**References**

- Recovery high school enrollment data obtained from school staff members, February 2014
- Analysis of treatment data obtained from the NIDA Common Core of Data, 2009-2010
- Treatment data obtained from Treatment Inspector Data set – Adolescents (TID-A), 2011
- CRF, National Center for Education
- U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2013
- Minnesota Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2012
- United States Department of Health and Human Services
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

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**Further Information**

For more information, please contact Holly Karakos: holly.karakos@gmail.com
You are also invited to visit our project website at: https://my.vanderbilt.edu/recoveryhighschools