

Sober schools

Immersion program teaches sobriety to teens recovering from addiction

By Anna Gorman
Kaiser Health News

SEATTLE — It's the last class period of the day. The students lean back on couches and take turns describing the most important day of their lives: the day they became sober.

For Marques Martinez, that date was Nov. 15, 2016. Until then, he had used OxyContin, Xanax and nearly every other drug he could get his hands on, he said. He had been

"Unless these kids get engaged with other young people in recovery, they don't stand a chance. This becomes their new community."

Seth Welch, a recovery support counselor at Interagency Queen Anne

suspended from school for selling drugs. "I knew what I was doing was bad," he said. "But I didn't think there was another way."

Two years ago, Martinez's parents sent him to an inpatient treatment center and then enrolled him in this unusual high school, Interagency at Queen Anne, or IQA. Martinez, 17, learned about the school from an alumnus and knew it might be his last option. He was skeptical at first, but he knew one thing immediately: "I felt safe here."

The Seattle public school campus, known as a recovery school, is designed for students learning to lead lives of sobriety while they earn their diplomas. The roughly 20 students attend classes in math, language arts and physical education, and they complete other courses online. They meet regularly with a counselor and attend daily support group meetings based on Alcoholics Anonymous programs.

Recent research shows that recovery schools — also known as sober schools — help keep their students

off drugs and in class.

A 2017 study by Vanderbilt University associate professor Andy Finch and other researchers showed that students in recovery schools were significantly more likely than those not in such schools to report being off drugs and alcohol six months after they were first surveyed. And the average reported absences among the 134 recovery school students in the study was lower than the other students.

Recovery schools first appeared in the late 1970s and now about 40 exist nationwide, including in Minnesota, Texas and Massachusetts. More are likely to open as opioid overdoses continue to climb, said Finch, who is co-founder of the Association of Recovery Schools. "There has been a gap in adolescent treatment for many, many years," he said. "The schools are one of the programs that fill in that gap."

Finch said about 85 percent of the recovery schools are public or have some source of public funding, while some are private campuses or part of treatment centers.

New sober schools are planned in New York, Delaware and Oregon, Finch said.

Sober peers add support

Nationally, illicit drug use among middle and high school students is at record lows. Still, nearly 1 in 5 10th-graders reported using an illegal drug in the previous 30 days, according to the annual nationwide Monitoring the Future survey.

Like Martinez, many of the Interagency at Queen Anne students go there straight from treatment programs. They say they encounter less temptation than at traditional high schools. "There, people offer you drugs every day," said 15-year-old Coltrane

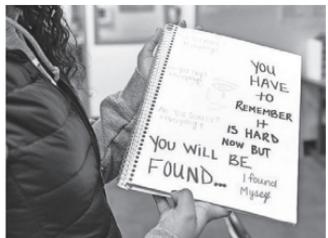
Fisher, who regularly used heroin, cocaine and other illegal drugs before coming to the school last March.

The success of recovery high schools is partly due to the fact that the students are among sober peers, as well as teachers and counselors who all



Students at Interagency at Queen Anne gather around the school lounge before school ends. Students meet regularly with a counselor and participate in daily group support meetings designed like Alcoholics Anonymous.

[Heidi De Marco/KHN PHOTOS]



Student Annika Laband holds her notebook, in which she writes about her feelings about sobriety.

support their sobriety.

"Unless these kids get engaged with other young people in recovery, they don't stand a chance," said Seth Welch, a recovery support counselor at Interagency Queen Anne. "This becomes their new community."

A challenging environment

But the going is not always easy.

Teachers at IQA say they believe the environment has been critical to the students' success, but it is sometimes a challenge to work there. Some students are way behind in their credits, and they don't always respond well to authority.

"The more we push them, the more they push back," said one of the teachers, Phyllis Coletta.

Sometimes classwork must be set aside, Coletta said. On a recent school day, one of the newer students was so upset that she spent most of the day crying, clutching a blanket. Coletta hugged her and they took a long walk.

"Mental health and sobriety come first," Coletta said.

Interagency at Queen Anne, which opened in late 2014, is part of a network of alternative public school campuses called Interagency Academy, which also serves homeless and incarcerated youths.

At first, the campus drew opposition from a group of elementary school parents who feared the students would sell drugs in the neighborhood.

But Melinda Leonard, the former vice principal who helped found the school, said those fears have now given way to community support.



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