

Recovery High Schools



Executive Summary

Recovery high schools are diploma-granting secondary schools that exclusively serve students recovering from substance abuse and dependency. There are less than fifty recovery schools in the United States, and only one in Missouri (St. Louis). Although per-student costs at recovery high schools are higher than traditional high schools, students who attend recovery high schools are more likely to graduate and less likely to relapse than their peers at district high schools. [Senate Bill 259](#) and [House Bill 322](#) would allow for the establishment of public recovery high school(s) in Missouri. Under SCS SB 259, up to four pilot programs could be established by school districts (or groups of school districts) in metropolitan areas. The resident (or sending) school district would be responsible for paying either the student tuition of the recovery school student or the state adequacy target plus local effort, whichever is lower.

Highlights

- Substance use during adolescence is more common among students who drop out of high school and has been associated with substance abuse later in life.
- Around 17,000 Missourians between ages 12-17 have a substance use disorder (SUD).
- Most recovery high schools are publicly funded. Missouri currently has one privately funded recovery high school in St. Louis.
- Recovery high schools can increase graduation rates and decrease relapse incidence among students.
- In order to provide the required staff and services, the cost per student tends to be higher at recovery schools. Because each school can only serve a relatively small number of students, there may be limited onsite course offerings.

Limitations

- Most information about adolescent drug use relies on self-reports (via surveys), which may underreport the prevalence of drug use (especially illegal drugs) and abuse.
- Because it has not been possible to randomly assign high school students recovering from substance use disorder to a specific type of high school, research in this area must rely on observational studies and may be influenced by selection bias. Additional studies in recovery schools across diverse regional contexts will be important to understand the magnitude of their impact.
- Most research about the effectiveness of recovery high schools has been performed by researchers affiliated with the [Association of Recovery Schools](#).

This science note was prepared by MOST Policy Initiative, Inc. a nonprofit organization aimed to improve the health, sustainability, and economic growth of Missouri communities by providing objective, non-partisan information to Missouri's decisionmakers. For more information, contact Dr. Brittany Whitley, Education & Workforce Development Fellow – brittany@mostpolicyinitiative.org. This was prepared on 3/23/21.

Research Background

Almost 4% of Missourians between the ages of 12 and 17 have a SUD.

Early substance use (e.g., alcohol, tobacco, opioids) is a risk factor for substance use disorders later in life.¹ According to the 2019 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#), one fifth of high school students in the United States had been offered, sold or given an illegal drug on school property in the past year.² Between 2017-2019, 7.5% of Missourians between ages 12 and 17 (~35,000), on average, reported past-month illicit drug use (predominantly marijuana), compared to 7.1% among neighboring states and 8.2% nationally.³

Consistent with national and regional trends, approximately 3.7% of Missouri adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 have substance use disorders or have recently received treatment for a substance use disorder.^{4,5} Illicit drug use, especially marijuana, in this age group is slightly higher in the Kansas City and St. Louis metro areas but there do not appear to be significant regional differences in the prevalence of SUD in this age group.⁴ Additional data specific to the Kansas City area, including student survey results and existing local recovery assets, was recently compiled by the State Targeted Response Technical Assistance Consortium.⁶ Substance use disorders are often co-occurring with other mental health disorders (e.g., depression, ADHD), both of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷

Recovery high schools are diploma-granting institutions that provide academic and recovery support for students who are committed to SUD recovery.

Recovery high schools (or “sober schools”) are designed for high school students who are committed to recovery from a substance abuse disorder. In addition to providing a supportive recovery environment, students at recovery high schools often have access to additional resources, including mental health professionals and staff with SUD recovery experience. Publicly funded recovery high schools (charter and non-charter) are the most common form of recovery school. These schools are rarely affiliated with a particular recovery program, but rather emphasize counseling and positive peer and staff support. Many provide drug tests and resources for students who relapse as opposed to immediate expulsion which is more common at schools affiliated with treatment centers and within correctional facilities.

There are currently around 45 recovery high schools in the United States (**Figure 1**), one of which is located in St. Louis ([Great Circle Academy](#)).⁸ The St. Louis recovery high school is privately run and charges tuition of approximately \$20,000. Michigan is opening a [recovery charter high school](#) in the SE region of the state. Some states (e.g., New Jersey, Pennsylvania) have passed bills to open public recovery schools but no schools currently exist due to a lack of funding.



Figure 1: Map of existing recovery high schools in the United States. Circles with numbers indicate the number of high schools within a more concentrated area.⁸

Recovery high schools are promising interventions to reduce relapse and increase high school graduation in students recovering from SUD.

Students who attend recovery high schools are less likely to relapse and more likely to graduate than students recovering from substance abuse disorders who attend non-recovery schools.⁹⁻¹¹ There is also evidence that peer accountability is an effective strategy to preventing relapse.¹² Many students in recovery report that several of their peers continue to use drugs, which presents a strong temptation to use at a traditional high school. Additionally, recovery high schools often are equipped to treat students with co-occurring mental health disorders, providing a level of specialization that is often not available in traditional public schools.

Per-pupil costs at recovery high schools tend to be higher than in traditional public schools.

Recovery high schools serve a relatively small number of students but the cost of educating each student is significantly higher than that at non-recovery schools, due in part to specialized staff/programs and high faculty to student ratios.¹¹ Depending on the location, per-student tuition difference between recovery and non-recovery high schools varies from \$1,000-\$16,000.

Because of the relatively small number of students served, these schools also may not be easily accessible in more rural areas of the state and tend to have limited onsite course offerings (fewer AP, or extra languages). It is not clear the extent to which supplementary virtual education in these settings may be able to provide additional academic rigor for some students. Finally, some community members where recovery high schools are opened have expressed concerns about the potential for an increased presence of drugs in the community; school advocates argue that recovery high schools are often more drug-free than traditional public schools.

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