



Association of Recovery Schools

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# Toolkit for Starting a Recovery High School

## Disclaimer

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## Authors & Acknowledgements

Morgan Thompson, MSW

Association of Recovery Schools

Shannon L Roberts, MPH

University of Missouri-Kansas City

Rebecca Bonner, MEd, MUPP

Association of Recovery Schools

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## Introduction

Recovery high schools (RHSs) are secondary schools designed specifically for students in recovery from substance use and co-occurring disorders. Although each school operates differently depending on available community resources and state standards, each recovery high school shares the following goals:

- The primary purpose of a recovery high school is **to educate and support students in recovery from substance use and/or co-occurring disorders.**
- **Meet state requirements for awarding a secondary school diploma**, i.e., school offers credits leading to a state-recognized high school diploma, and student is not just getting tutored or completing work from another school while there.
- **Intent that all students enrolled be in recovery and working a program of recovery from substance use and/or co-occurring disorders as determined by the student and the school.**
- **All students are working an abstinence-focused program of recovery** as agreed upon by the student and the school.

The staff of recovery high schools most often includes administrative staff, teachers, substance misuse counselors, and mental health professionals that each play a critical role in supporting their students. Additionally, recovery high schools provide support for families learning to how to live with, and provide support for, their teens entering into the recovery lifestyle.<sup>1</sup>

This Toolkit provides a broad overview of the core components of a thriving recovery high school, based on the *Accreditation Framework* developed by the Association of Recovery Schools (ARS). ARS is a nonprofit organization comprised of recovery high schools as well as associate members and individuals who support the integral growth of the recovery high school movement. ARS provides an array of services, including training, technical assistance, and accreditation, to existing and emerging RHSs. Communities seeking to bring a RHS to their community are encouraged to connect with ARS to learn more about the resources available. The information here can be a helpful starting point as you consider whether and how a RHS could benefit students and families in your area.

For more information about technical assistance (TA) for a new, emerging, or existing recovery high school, please visit our website <https://recoveryschools.org/>. You can also request TA from us through the PR CoE's website at <https://peerrecovery-now.org/technical-assistance/>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://recoveryschools.org/what-is-a-recovery-high-school/>



## School Organization and Business Planning

Successful recovery high schools (RHSs) are guided by a robust **strategic plan**, outlining the school's goals and initiatives for the coming 3 to 5 years. This plan aligns with realistic enrollment projections and includes a budget that supports financial sustainability and growth. All aspects of that strategic plan are guided by inclusion and accessibility to ensure all students who would benefit can participate in the RHS. **Community partnership** is paramount to RHS success. Through collaboration with local partners, including educators, treatment professionals, and community leaders, support for the RHS is cultivated and strengthened. This network of allies is dedicated to the well-being and success of RHS students. Moreover, these partnerships serve as vital channels for referrals, allowing students to access the resources and services necessary for their recovery journey.

A diverse and skilled **Board of Directors** is instrumental in guiding the vision and direction of a RHS. Comprised of individuals from varied backgrounds and expertise, the board reflects the richness and diversity of the community it serves. Drawing on their collective wisdom, the board provides invaluable insight and oversight, ensuring that the school remains responsive to the evolving needs of its students and stakeholders. Identifying strong leadership is essential to the school's success. **RHS leadership** comprises individuals with proven experience in recovery or therapeutic settings, as well as in education. Certified or licensed in their respective fields, they bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise to the table. Beyond their qualifications, they possess a passion for supporting student success and are adept at training and evaluating staff to maintain the highest standards of care and education.

RHSs are committed to **continuous improvement**. Regular evaluation of both academic and therapeutic programs is integral to RHS sustainability. For more information about the power of data in supporting Recovery High Schools, check out our [webinar](#). Through ongoing assessment and feedback, RHSs identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth, ensuring that programs remain dynamic, responsive, and effective in meeting the evolving needs of students. In all endeavors, RHSs strive to foster an environment that celebrates diversity and inclusivity. Promotional materials reflect the rich tapestry of the student body, representing diversity in race, ethnicity, gender, and lived experiences. By embracing and honoring the unique identities and backgrounds of students, RHSs create a culture of acceptance, belonging, and empowerment.

## School Organization and Business Planning Checklist

- Develop a 3- to 5-year strategic plan that includes a budget that is reasonable, attainable, and reflects realistic enrollment projections.
- Form a Board of Directors that reflects the diversity of the community and has members with divergent backgrounds and skill sets.
- Work with community partners to build support for a recovery high school in the community.
- Identify school leadership with proven experience in (recovery/therapeutic) or educational settings, who are certified or licensed in their field, and who can train and evaluate staff.
- Develop established collaborative partnerships with local schools, treatment centers, and other community resources to create a coordinated system of support for students when needed and as a mechanism for referrals to the school from the community.
- Promote the school and its programs with materials that represent diversity in race, ethnicity, and gender.
- Implement regular evaluation of the academic and therapeutic programs for continuous program improvement.

## School Community

At the heart of the RHS model is a commitment to creating a nurturing and **inclusive environment** where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered on their journey to recovery. Guided by a clear vision and mission, RHSs are dedicated to serving a **target population** of students in recovery from substance use and co-occurring challenges, providing academic and recovery support programs tailored to their individual needs. RHS vision and mission statements serve as guiding principles, reflecting an unwavering dedication to assisting students in their recovery from substance use and co-occurring disorders. These statements not only articulate RHSs commitment to academic excellence but also underscore their commitment to fostering a culture of acceptance, respect, and belonging for all members of our school community. (See the ARS and PR CoE Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion webinar series: <https://vimeo.com/910876079>, <https://vimeo.com/917973174>, <https://vimeo.com/927161822>).

In alignment with their mission, RHSs ensure that their eligibility criteria clearly define who can benefit from their comprehensive services. Admission materials are thoughtfully designed and available in multiple languages, removing barriers to access and ensuring equitable opportunities for all prospective students. RHSs recognize the importance of representation and strive to cultivate a student body and staff that mirror the diversity and composition of their local community. **Embracing diversity** enriches collective RHS experience and fosters a sense of belonging and understanding among all members of the school community.

A clear **orientation process** welcomes new students into the RHS community, providing them with the tools and resources they need to acclimate and thrive. Behavior policies are designed to promote positive behavior and well-being, focusing on **restorative practices** rather than punishment, and fostering a sense of accountability and growth among students and staff alike. RHSs actively **engage parents, guardians, and family** members in the education and recovery process, recognizing the integral role they play in supporting student success. Through open communication, partnership, and collaboration, RHS staff work together to ensure that students receive the holistic support they need to succeed academically and in their recovery journey.

The Association of Recovery Schools (ARS) participated in the development of, and is committed to, Faces and Voices of Recovery's Race and Equity North Star Guide for Recovery Leaders, **promoting acceptance, diversity, and equity** as an association.<sup>2</sup> Member schools are expected to share in this commitment, which is reinforced by the practices described above, as well as regular diversity, equity, and inclusion training for staff. These practices foster a culture of respect, understanding, and empathy within the RHS community.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://recoveryschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Race-Equity-in-Recovery-North-Star.pdf>

## School Community Checklist

- Develop clear vision and mission statements for the school that reflect a commitment to serve a diverse population of students with academic and recovery support programs that assist students in their recovery from substance use and co-occurring disorders.
- Ensure that eligibility criteria align with the school's mission.
- Provide admission materials that are available in multiple languages.
- Strive to have a student body and staff that are reflective of the diversity and composition of the local community.
- Develop a clear orientation process for new students to best acculturate them to the school community.
- Design constructive rather than punitive behavior policies and practices that aim to generate and restore a sense of well-being among students and staff.
- Actively engage parents/guardians/family members in the education and recovery process.
- Have policies in place that align with Faces and Voices of Recovery's [Race and Equity North Star Guide for Recovery Leaders](#) and promote the acceptance of diversity among students, including gender identity, culture, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.
- Require all staff to receive annual diversity, equity, and inclusion training.



## Recovery Practices

Recovery practices are the defining elements that set recovery high schools apart from other types of supportive environments for youth with substance use and co-occurring conditions. These practices are integrated and infused throughout every aspect of a student's enrollment, from admission through graduation, and beyond. A distinct **recovery climate** that promotes collegial relationships among staff, students, and their families is the foundation of a school's recovery practices. This climate is driven by many factors, including but not limited to communication, policies, the physical environment, collaboration, and values. Recovery support personnel must be appropriately qualified and credentialed to deliver recovery services. This will vary dependent on each school's structure and local requirements around licensing, credentialing, etc. Ongoing **recovery/therapeutic staff evaluation and professional development** is necessary to ensure RHS students receive high quality, effective support.

A thriving recovery climate creates the conditions for each student to succeed, both academically and in their recovery.

**Recovery supports** are services and structures that are designed to assist students in building and maintaining recovery capital — the resources that help someone to initiate and sustain recovery. These supports are delivered in a variety of formats, including group and individual, and by a variety of professionals, including licensed clinicians and peer recovery specialists. These supports are delivered in the context of individual **recovery planning**. A recovery plan provides students with a roadmap for success in the recovery process. It identifies their self-defined goals across a variety of domains and identifies the supports within and outside of the RHS that will enable them to achieve those goals. The recovery plan addresses students' real time needs and goals, and plans for successful **recovery transitions**. As students prepare to leave the RHS environment — whether due to graduation, a return to their home school, or moving to a new school environment — RHS staff work with students to develop plans to support their recovery upon their departure.

**Recovery assessment** is critical to evaluating a student's initial and ongoing suitability for the recovery high school environment. It also identifies what changes, if any, may need to be made to a student's recovery plan to support their recovery stability and success. In addition to assessment and monitoring, the Systematic Evaluation of the Association of Recovery Schools (SEARS) provides a reliable and valid measure to assess student progress. The data gleaned from SEARS can also serve to evaluate the effectiveness of the school's recovery practices and identify opportunities to improve the program. (See ARS and PR CoE webinar on the Power of Data in RHS's: <https://recoveryschools.org/the-power-of-data-in-supporting-recovery-high-schools-webinar/> and the ARS presentation on supporting adolescents in recovery: <https://recoveryschools.org/supporting-adolescents-in-recovery-high-schools/>)

All elements of a RHSs recovery practices described here must be responsive to, and informed by, the individualized strengths, needs, culture, and identity of each student. It is important to note that recovery high schools emphasize an abstinence-focused approach to recovery. That approach honors and values the multiple pathways of recovery through which students find support and understand the non-linear nature of the recovery journey, especially for adolescents. While continuous abstinence is not always the norm, it is the standard which students are supported in striving toward.

## Recovery Practices Checklist

- Provide abstinence-focused recovery support practices that meet the needs of the students and recognize multiple pathways to abstinence-focused recovery.
- Clearly define abstinence-focused recovery policies for students and their families.
- Connect students and their families to resources in the local recovery community.
- Provide access to mental health services as needed, either on staff or in the community.
- Collect reliable screening data from admission throughout the student's enrollment and use these data to inform student recovery plans.
- Measure student outcomes using screening data and their self-reported progress building recovery capital.
- Use these data to assess and improve individual and collective recovery support services.
- Employ appropriately licensed and certified recovery support providers in sufficient numbers to contribute meaningfully to students.
- Conduct regular performance reviews of recovery support staff and provide professional development in current substance use and co-occurring disorder emerging and best practices, including annual diversity, equity, and inclusion training.
- Work with students to design a transition plan for abstinence-focused recovery support after leaving the recovery high school.
- Invite students to maintain contact with the school after graduating or withdrawing to receive support or provide mentorship.

## Educational Practices

Recovery high schools (RHSs) are dedicated to providing a rigorous and inclusive educational experience that empowers students to achieve their full potential academically and personally. Grounded in evidence-based educational practices, educational programs are designed to meet the diverse needs of RHS students and prepare them for success beyond high school. RHS curriculum offers credits leading to a **state-recognized high school diploma**, ensuring that students have access to all courses needed for graduation. Aligned with existing state and local standards, a **quality curriculum** provides a solid foundation in core subjects while offering opportunities for advanced coursework and accelerated learning for high-achieving students. (See ARS and PR CoE webinar on Academic Practices <https://vimeo.com/938228077/e5e10267ac>).

Recognizing that each student learns at their own pace and may require additional support or remediation at times, teaching staff conduct systematic reviews of curriculum to identify and address any gaps in student knowledge. Lessons are carefully planned and differentiated to meet the diverse needs of learners, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed. RHSs utilize a variety of assessment tools, both standardized and classroom-based, to inform **data-driven instruction**. Assessments are administered frequently, varied in format, and reviewed in a timely manner to gauge student progress and tailor instruction accordingly. Teachers who are appropriately licensed in their fields are supported with **regular performance evaluations and professional development** to continuously improve their practice.

In addition to academic support, RHSs are committed to preparing students for post-secondary opportunities and career success. School counselors provide guidance and support in exploring career pathways, accessing post-secondary education options, and preparing for standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT. RHSs maintain a **special education** staff to ensure that all student Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are complete and up to date, supporting students with diverse learning needs. The commitment to student success extends beyond graduation. While enrolled, RHS staff assist students in the development of a **post-secondary transition** plan, including college and workforce opportunities, that align with the students' goals. By fostering a supportive community and providing ongoing support, RHSs empower students to thrive academically and personally long after they transition out of the school.

## Educational Practices Checklist

- Offer credits leading to a state-recognized high school diploma and access to all courses needed to graduate.
- Align school curriculum to existing state and local standards.
- Provide accelerated coursework and opportunities to advanced students.
- Provide appropriate remediation for students who are struggling academically or who are behind on credits.
- Conduct a systematic review of the curriculum to ensure that there are no gaps in student knowledge.
- Review teacher lessons to ensure that they have clear goals and objectives and are differentiated according to student needs.
- Utilize standardized and classroom assessments that are sufficiently frequent, varied, and timely in order to inform instructional decisions effectively.
- Employ teachers who are appropriately licensed in their fields in sufficient numbers and positions to maximize their contributions to the school.
- Evaluate teacher performance regularly and provide regular feedback.
- Offer professional development, either internally or externally, in current evidence-based educational best-practice.
- Maintain a special education staff and ensure that all student Individual Education Plans are complete and up to date.
- Offer career and postsecondary opportunities through a school counselor.
- Provide access to SAT and ACT preparation.
- Invite students to maintain contact with the school after graduating or withdrawing in order to receive assistance or provide academic mentorship.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, recovery high schools (RHSs) serve as specialized educational institutions aimed at supporting students in recovery from substance use and co-occurring disorders. While each RHS operates uniquely based on community resources and state standards, they all share common goals: providing education and support for students in recovery, meeting state requirements for awarding diplomas, ensuring all enrolled students are actively engaged in recovery programs, and fostering an environment focused on abstinence-based recovery. The staff of RHSs, including administrators, teachers, counselors, and mental health professionals, play pivotal roles in facilitating student support and success. Moreover, RHSs extend support to families navigating the challenges of having a teen in recovery.

This Toolkit offers a comprehensive overview of the essential components of successful RHSs, as outlined by the Accreditation Framework developed by the Association of Recovery Schools (ARS). ARS, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the growth of the recovery high school movement, provides valuable resources such as training, technical assistance, and accreditation to both existing and emerging RHSs. Communities interested in establishing a RHS are encouraged to connect with ARS to explore available resources and support. The information provided serves as a valuable starting point for communities considering the implementation of RHSs to benefit students and families in their area.

For further information on technical assistance for new, emerging, or existing recovery high schools, please visit the website <https://recoveryschools.org/>.

For additional information on ARS accreditation standards, see <https://recovery-schools.org/association-of-recovery-schools-ars-accreditation/>.



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