

Recovery High Schools Information

June 24, 2026

Recovery high schools **have growing interest from policymakers and funders**. Multiple National Drug Control Strategies since 2010 and the 2016 Surgeon General's report have specifically discussed the role of recovery schools in fostering community and peer-based approaches. In addition, many states have now passed legislation authorizing and/or funding recovery high schools, and *ONDCP called for a 10% increase in the number of schools from 2021 to 2025 - a growth rate that did, in fact, occur. There were 40 schools operating at the start of 2021, and by the end of 2025, there were 46 in operation. When the fall 2026 school year begins, there will be 52 recovery high schools in operation, the most ever open at any one time.*

What does recovery look like for an adolescent?

- ARS presented an Adolescent Recovery definition at the annual ARHE/ARS/AAPG Conference in 2025 (ARS, 2025): ***Recovery is a personal journey of healing and growth that helps young people build a healthy, fulfilling life. For adolescents, whose brains are still developing, substance use can disrupt emotional, mental, and physical growth, making it harder to manage challenges and achieve future goals. Recovery involves creating stability—a consistent state of well-being supported by positive routines, healthy coping skills, and strong support systems. Taking a break from substances allows the brain to heal and supports these changes. Recovery for adolescents is about progress, connection, and discovering new opportunities in a supportive environment.***

What is a recovery high school?

- In short, recovery high schools are *secondary schools designed specifically for students in recovery from substance use or co-occurring disorders*. Although each school operates differently depending on available community resources and state standards, the primary purpose of each recovery high school is **to educate and support students in recovery from substance use or co-occurring disorders**. Recovery high schools **meet state requirements for awarding a secondary school diploma**. All students are **working a program of recovery** as agreed upon by the student and the school. And recovery high schools are **available to any student in recovery who meets state or district eligibility requirements for attendance**, i.e., students do not have to go through a particular treatment program to enroll, and the school is not simply the academic component of a primary or extended-care treatment facility or therapeutic boarding school. Additional clarifications include:
 - o Recovery high schools provide an alcohol and drug-free setting to support the recovery for all youth who choose to attend.
 - o Recovery high schools are not treatment programs and are not designed to provide primary treatment for substance use or co-occurring disorders.
 - o Recovery high schools do not supplant or replace substance use or mental health treatment.
 - o Where adolescents face a scarcity of treatment options and inequitable access to care, participation in any form of treatment for SUD should not be an RHS entrance requirement.
 - o Some students may not benefit from an RHS, based on where they are in their stages of change.
 - o Recovery high schools are uniquely situated to refer youth to the services they need.
 - o Recovery high schools are places youth enroll voluntarily.
 - o Recovery schools value student leadership, ownership, & voice in the development of programming.

Why do we need recovery high schools?

- There is **compelling evidence** suggesting that recovery high schools not only save lives, but dramatically improve the academic trajectory for some of the nation's most vulnerable youth.
- Those outcomes can only be achieved **if a sufficient number of recovery schools are available** across the country and operating in compliance with best practices outlined in the ARS accreditation standards.
- This can only happen **if ARS has sufficient resources and capacity** to accredit schools across the nation while supporting local efforts to open new schools that are designed and implemented with model fidelity.

How many recovery high schools are there in the U.S.?

- As of fall 2026, there will be 52 recovery high schools in 20 states.

Who attends recovery high schools?

- Jurinsky and colleagues (2025) analyzed data collected from 416 students across 20 recovery high schools participating in the Systematic Evaluation of Adolescent Recovery Services (SEARS). Demographic data included **gender** (46% female, 47% male, 30% self-identify); **age** (mean = 16); and **race/ethnicity** (60% White/non-Hispanic, 22% Hispanic, 9% Black/non-Hispanic, 9% Other/non-Hispanic).
- Tanner-Smith and colleagues (2018) analyzed data collected from 171 students as part of a national comparative outcomes study and found 49% were from single-parent households, 86% had a family history of substance use, and 60% had a mental health diagnosis in the past year.

When did the first recovery high school open?

- Recovery High Schools operated differently in the early days of recovery-based education, but the **Freedom Road school in Charleston (SC)**, which opened in October 1973, was the earliest school to closely represent today's standards. Operated as a partnership between the Fetter family health center and the Charleston Public School district, Freedom Road was the first publicly funded high school for students with SUD not located in a treatment facility. John Cates started a private **GED school in Houston** in 1976, which later merged with PDAP, the original alternative peer group (APG), making it the first independent recovery school program. And the **Phoenix School in Silver Spring, Maryland**, which opened in 1979, was the first RHS run entirely by a school district. Phoenix is widely considered the first actual recovery high school. The book [*Salvaging a Teenage Wasteland: Origins of the Recovery High School Movement*](#) provides a comprehensive history of the first recovery high schools.

Are recovery high schools publicly funded?

- While almost all **52 recovery high schools** rely on multiple sources of funding, most are publicly funded:
 - o Public/Contracted Alternative School – 30
 - o Public/Charter School – 12
 - o Private – 10

Are there any standards governing recovery high schools?

The Association of Recovery Schools has established standards for the accreditation of recovery high schools, and ARS accredited its first school in 2014. There are now **13 accredited recovery high schools**, and it is expected that 3-5 more schools will be accredited by 2027. The schools currently accredited are:

- Archway Academy, Houston, TX
- Chesterfield Recovery Academy, Chesterfield, VA
- Emerald School of Excellence, Charlotte, NC
- Fortis Academy, Houston, TX
- Harmony Academy, Marylhurst, OR
- Hope Academy, Indianapolis, IN
- Insight Program, White Bear Lake, MN
- Seattle Public Schools Interagency Recovery Campus, Seattle, WA
- Mission Academy, Oklahoma City, OK
- P.E.A.S.E. Academy, Minneapolis, MN
- Raymond J. Lesniak Experience, Strength, & Hope (ESH) Recovery High School, Roselle, NJ
- University High School, Austin, TX
- William J. Ostiguy High School, Boston, MA

What does the evidence say about recovery high schools?

- **ARS launched a SEARS national data collection initiative in 2022.** The project has revised its name over time and is now called the *Systematic Evaluation of Adolescent Recovery Services*. Conceived by RHS administrators with support from researchers at Vanderbilt University, the University of Oregon, Tufts University, and the Recovery

Research Institute, SEARS is an iterative project and assessment tool that captures student experiences and program-level practices to improve the supports, accessibility, and effectiveness of adolescent recovery services.

- SEARS surveys **school administrators** annually about the programmatic elements of their schools.
- SEARS surveys **students** three-times per year using recovery capital and positive youth development measures.
- A study from Jurinsky, George, Riccio, Finch, Kelly, and Hennessy (2025) analyzed SEARS data collected from 416 students across 20 RHSs - the largest-ever sample of RHS students - and the data reflected the positive findings from earlier studies. In the first-ever published study of the **recovery capital** impact at an RHS, every one-unit increase in the recovery capital score was linked to 7% **fewer days of alcohol use** and 5% **fewer days of cannabis use**. Additionally, being enrolled for at least 90 days was associated with:
 - (a) 68% higher odds of **alcohol abstinence**
 - (b) 101% higher odds of **cannabis abstinence**
- Many articles have been published from the data produced by **two federally-funded studies** of recovery high schools. Research has shown, compared to students in non-recovery high schools who have received substance use treatment, *students in recovery high schools*:
 - (a) have higher **graduation rates**;
 - (b) report significantly lower **absenteeism**;
 - (c) are more likely to **abstain** from using substances; and
 - (d) have significantly **fewer days using** marijuana and other drugs
- A study from Finch, Tanner-Smith, Hennessy, & Moberg (2017)¹ demonstrated the effectiveness of Recovery High School (RHS) attendance in improving student outcomes. Results from this provide strong evidence of a positive effect of RHSs for adolescents who have received treatment for SUDs.
 - This article emerges from an **NIH-funded study of recovery high schools** (RHS). This study followed students for six months to examine the effects of RHS attendance compared to statistically similar recovering students who attend school in other settings.
 - A cost-benefit analysis indicated that the **high school graduation rate** for recovery high school (RHS) students is at least 20 percentage points higher than the graduation rate for similar students who have had SUD treatment but did not participate in a RHS for at least 30 days.
 - Students who attended RHSs had **significantly lower odds of dropping out** of high school compared to students attending non-RHSs. The predicted probability of high school dropout was 10% for RHS students and 27% for non-RHS students.
 - Students who attended RHSs reported **significantly less overall absenteeism**. RHS attendance was thus associated with over one-half a standard deviation improvement in absenteeism—an effect equivalent to 5 fewer absences from school over the past 90 days.
 - Recovery high school students were significantly more likely to report being completely **abstinent from alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs** at the 6-month and 12-month follow-ups. At 6-month follow-up, RHS students were twice as likely (59% versus 30%) to report complete abstinence from alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs.
 - Over the 12-month follow-up period of the study, adolescents who attended RHSs had **significantly greater declines in alcohol, marijuana, and other drug use**, compared to non-RHS students.

What are the biggest challenges for recovery high schools?

- **Treatment variability.** According to the [annual NSDUH report](#), **two million (7.8%) adolescents met the criteria for a substance use disorder in 2024, but only 732,000 (2.8%) received SUD treatment in 2024**. This leaves a **treatment gap of 1,268,000**, some of whom are referred to and choose to attend recovery high schools. Additionally, about **26.7% of adolescents diagnosed with a substance use disorder have a severe SUD**. Studies have shown the typical RHS student has a severe substance use history, so those with a severe SUD would be a target population. Many of those students enroll in recovery high schools without having received prior

¹ This work was supported by Grant Number R01DA029785 from the National Institute on Drug Abuse. This project has benefited from the Clinical and Translational Science Award (CTSA) program, through the NIH National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS) grant UL1TR000427. Funding was also provided by the U.S. Department of Education.

treatment (either by choice or due to lack of treatment options), which places a strain on RHS staff, policies, and student dynamics.

- **Enrollment uncertainty** and **smaller school size** makes the schools challenging and potentially more expensive to budget for than traditional schools.
- Changing enrollments also lead to large turnover in student populations, and with an average of 30 students per school, this means the **school culture is frequently changing**.

How stable are recovery high schools?

- The **average lifespan of a recovery high school** is about 10 ½ years. Three recovery high schools have provided services over 30 years. While two of those are no longer open, the oldest RHS is PEASE Academy in Minneapolis, which opened in January 1989. In January 2024, PEASE Academy became the first RHS to operate for 35 years.
- To date, there has not been a systematic study of why RHSs have closed over the last 45 years, but the most common reasons why some schools survive volatile funding and others do not:
 - **Mergers.** Merging a recovery high school with a non-recovery high school (i.e., a general alternative school). The reasons for mergers have varied, but the main two are **philosophical differences** and **sharing resources**.
 - **Enrollment uncertainty.** Often because referrals decline (either due to treatment facilities closing or treatment centers no longer making referrals to the school). Can also happen due to shifting populations, poor marketing, or in the case of private schools, high tuition rates.
 - **Leadership changes.** When founders leave, boards change, or superintendents are replaced, schools often lose their support.
 - **Expansion.** Some schools are so successful that they add campuses. This can stretch resources leading to enrollment uncertainty (see above) and variable leadership (see above).

What are some potential funding options to support recovery high schools?

- Seed funding for staff expansion/development
- Model legislation (such as MN, NJ, OR, or MA)
- Technical assistance/training
- Support of the SEARS research and evaluation program
- Allow block grant funding of recovery high schools

For more information:

- **Association of Recovery Schools:** www.recoveryschools.org
- The 25th Annual **ARS Conference** will be held in June 2026, in Denver, Colorado.
- The **Recovery School Reference** website (www.recovery-school-reference.com) is dedicated to comprehensively documenting recovery high schools by offering quick access to school datelines, locations, and descriptions, along with other historical documents. The site was created in 2026 and is actively under construction.

Please cite this document as:

Finch, A.J., Thompson, M., and Durchslag, M. (2026). *Recovery high schools information*. Association of Recovery Schools. <https://tinyurl.com/bdz4anc9>