

# A Secondary School Cooperative: Recovery at Solace Academy, Chaska, Minnesota

Monique Bourgeois, BS, LADC

**ABSTRACT.** The recovery school movement exploded across the nation in the late nineties and early part of the twenty-first century. Secondary and postsecondary recovery schools have become a vital part of the chemical dependency continuum of care and our nation's educational system. Solace Academy is a restorative practices high school designed for recovering chemically dependent students. Through the collaboration of professionals in Carver and Scott Counties, the Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative's Solace Academy recovery high school opened its' doors in the fall of 2001. Appropriately colocated with other programs provided by the Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative, Solace Academy provides a high school education, life skills and support for its recovering chemically dependent students. Colocation has insulated the existence of Solace Academy by shared staff, increased academic opportunities and financial stability. A typical day at Solace Academy is like and unlike many high schools across the nation. These similarities and differences have provided many lessons during Solace Academy's tenure.

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Monique Bourgeois, BS, LADC, currently works for the Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative's (CSEC) Solace Academy recovery high school program. She is also the Department Head of Chemical Health with Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative school district. She has been involved with the Association of Recovery Schools (ARS) since its inception in 2003 as a committee member, Vice-Chair, Chair and Past Chair of the ARS Operating Committee (E-mail: [mbourgeois@cseced.org](mailto:mbourgeois@cseced.org)).

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

Recovery high schools are a relatively new concept in the educational and chemical dependency systems, but they have become a vital part of the chemical dependency continuum of care and our nation's educational system. In this article, I will share a personal perspective of a recovery high school, how we began, what a typical day is like, and what I have learned through my experiences at Solace Academy.

## ***SOLACE ACADEMY***

Solace Academy is a high school designed for students in recovery from chemical dependency. Located in Chaska, a Minneapolis suburb and open since the fall of 2001, Solace Academy is a part of District 930, the Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative, or "Co-Op." The Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative is a "joint-power" school district within Carver and Scott Counties in Minnesota. The cooperative serves a diverse range of people who need individualized or customized education and support and includes a broad range of alternative and special education offerings from early childhood through adulthood. Programs include Area Learning Centers, career and technical education, and special education programs.

Solace Academy is considered part of an Area Learning Center, and it is colocated with other Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative programs, primarily a secondary school alternative program called LINK. The mission of Solace Academy is to provide a safe, sober environment for chemically dependent students to meet their educational goals while encouraging healthy life choices. Solace provides a supportive, educational environment for up to 40 students in grades 9–12, who have successfully completed a chemical dependency treatment program. Consideration is given to students who have not had any treatment experience but are working on a program of recovery. Solace Academy requires adherence to continuing care plans, attendance of a minimum of two 12-step meetings weekly, ongoing contact with a sponsor, participation in random urinalysis and compliance with an enrollment contract.

Solace Academy adheres to the philosophy that

recovering students have a desire to maintain sobriety;  
they need time in a chemically free environment to strengthen healthy living skills;  
they need a safe group to practice coping skills;  
they need a specialized learning environment to improve academic performance as well as academic credits; and  
they need to experience positive, sober peer and community interaction to build success and create a vision for their future.

### ***PROGRAM ORIGINS***

A few years prior to the opening of Solace Academy, professionals in Carver and Scott Counties were struggling with how to address the recovery needs of high school aged students. Returning to the community after completing treatment, adolescent clients in Carver and Scott Counties had little or no support beyond a once-a-week aftercare program at the local treatment centers. According to Mike Coyne (personal communication, January 16, 2007), a former county social worker, "There were limited resources for students coming out of treatment." He adds that the professionals working with these students were seeing high rates of relapse and a return to active addiction. This gap in service spawned hopelessness for all involved: the client, the family, professionals, the community and the school systems.

Educational settings are designed to be safe, sober environments. Unfortunately, many students returning from chemical dependency treatment find that their educational settings are not safe, sober environments for them. Consider that for many students their school was the location of their heaviest substance access, use, and peer influence. The experience for a recovering teenage student, thus, has been described as being similar to asking an alcoholic adult to sit in a bar 7 hours a day, 7 days a week and not to drink. This is obviously a set-up for relapse; yet, this is what students were facing in Carver and Scott Counties when they would return from treatment to their schools. Sara Sones (personal communication, February 6, 2007), a Solace Academy alumnus, stated that after 3 days of returning to her home high school she "wanted to drink. I didn't want to stay at the home school and not be with those people." According to Sara, those "people" to whom she refers were her "using friends."

Over a two-year period, collaborative efforts began between Carver and Scott County's key stakeholders. The key stakeholders included human services, corrections, schools districts, and community members. A needs assessment and data from Drug and Alcohol Abuse Normative Evaluation System were utilized to support this exploration and to verify the gap in services for adolescents addressing their recovery. It was determined that the Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative would be the best vehicle to launch the new recovery school program, because it already provided multiple alternative high school programs within the two counties. Approval was sought from and given by the Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative member school districts to go ahead with the recovery high school, and professionals from those counties continued collaborating to create programming.

With other recovery high schools located within the Twin Cities, the recovery high school wheel did not need to be reinvented. Ideas from the other recovery high schools were utilized and adjusted to fit with the vision of the collaborative efforts. On September 10, 2001, "Dry High" was born. The name was later changed to Solace Academy.

### ***INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE: THE VALUE OF A COOPERATIVE***

If starting a recovery high school was as simple as collaboration between two counties' professionals and key stakeholders, more recovery high schools and college programs likely would exist throughout the United States today. Many recovery high school programs, however, have come and gone. Jeff Theis, Director of Development for the Carver Scott Educational Cooperative, attributes Solace Academy's survival to its being part of a cooperative. As previously noted, the Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative is a joint-powers school district. This means it has nine member districts throughout Carver and Scott Counties, and these member districts play an important role in determining what programs are needed, created, and maintained.

#### ***Cooperative Advantage #1—Ability to Share Staff and Resources***

A main advantage of being part of a cooperative is the colocation with other programming that serves secondary school students. This allows staff to be shared between the programs, which enhances Solace's

financial viability. Co-location has also resulted in availability of daily special education services and broader curricular offerings, such as physical education, art, music, a leadership class, T'ai Chi, senior seminar, service learning, and mentoring. These subject areas would be limited, at best, if Solace Academy were in a solitary location. The approximate student-to-professional ratio is 15 to 1, which is allowed to decrease based on the number of certified special education students in the program.

During the first 3 years of its existence, Solace Academy was colocated in the same building as a secondary alternative school called "LINK," an adult English Language Learners (ELL) program, an adult developmentally disabled program called "Living Skills," and an independent study program for students of all ages who were finishing their high school diplomas or working toward a GED. Unlike a typical school, these programs were all housed under the one roof of a single-story office building located in a business park.

Initially those involved in the planning of Solace Academy were concerned about its colocation with the alternative program called LINK. Because the purpose of having a recovery high school was to provide a safe, sober environment for students in recovery, planners wondered about the ability to support abstinence from alcohol and drugs if Solace Academy was located in the same building as another alternative program educating at-risk students. For this reason, boundaries were clearly laid with each student population to maintain the safest environment. As LINK, like Solace Academy, is an alternative program based in restorative practices, the staff who teach in Solace Academy also teach in the LINK program. The students, however, do not intermingle. When, for example, a subject is being taught in Solace Academy, it only contains Solace Academy students. Staff noticed, interestingly, that the students in the Solace Academy and LINK programs were not very interested in one another. On occasion, students in either program have known students in the opposite program, but rarely has this caused any concerns. When issues have risen, they have been handled in a restorative manner (to be addressed in more detail later).

Expansion and growth at the start of the fourth year of operation created an opportunity for Solace Academy to move to an adjoining building. The new, larger facility, created room for a gym, larger classrooms, and more office space. Solace Academy still utilizes the former building for art, the computer lab, and a conference room, but now there is more distinction between Solace and other programs.

## ***Cooperative Advantage #2—Continuum of Care***

Another advantage to being part of an educational cooperative is the connection to a continuum of care with Carver and Scott Counties to address substance use issues in Carver and Scott Counties. At approximately the same time Solace Academy came into existence in 2001, the educational cooperative along with Carver and Scott Counties began developing a model for a continuum of care to address substance use, abuse, and dependence within the two counties. The Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative identified gaps in service delivery, including a lack of chemical health services within the mainstream and alternative high school programs. With the increased accountability of school districts due to No Child Left Behind, there was an increased need to address issues that impeded students from graduating. Student substance use was identified as one of those issues. The cooperative felt that if students with chemical health issues could be reached and provided appropriate services, their chances of graduation would also increase, therefore helping their home school district to be more accountable.

The cooperative sought and obtained grant funding to add Chemical Health Specialists to the mainstream and alternative high schools within Carver and Scott Counties to provide prevention, intervention, and referrals related to substance use issues. Along with the placement of Chemical Health Specialists in the schools, the local chemical dependency treatment providers, and Solace Academy, the counties are slowly closing the gaps in chemical health services for adolescents. For Solace Academy students, this allows for a more seamless flow from intervention through treatment and then continuing care. Future expansion of this continuum of care will include the development of community coalitions to further address substance use in Carver and Scott Counties.

## ***INSTITUTIONAL PHILOSOPHY: RESTORATIVE PRACTICES***

During Solace Academy's development, current program manager Heather Bantle introduced the idea of implementing the philosophy of restorative practices as a basis within the school. Ms. Bantle was certified as a Family Group Conferencing Facilitator and Trainer through the International Institute for Restorative Practices. The institute's Web site (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2007) describes

restorative practices as being rooted “in ‘restorative justice,’ a new way of looking at criminal justice that focuses on repairing the harm done to people and relationships rather than on punishing offenders (although restorative justice does not preclude incarceration of offenders or other sanctions).”

The philosophy of restorative practices was born from the family group conferencing process that has been utilized by New Zealand’s indigenous people, the Maori, for centuries. In the Maori ritual, the extended network of family and friends share the responsibility for a young person’s behavior while involving the victims of that behavior in the process of resolution. Many other native tribes around the world use “circles,” similar to the family group conferencing process of the Maori tribe, as a way to heal the community when harm has been done. The formalized ideas of family group conferencing or restorative justice and practices were introduced in the United States around 1994. According to the International Institute:

The most critical function of restorative practices is restoring and building relationships. Because informal and formal restorative processes foster the expression of affect or emotion, they also foster emotional bonds. The late Silvan S. Tomkins’s writings about psychology of affect (Tomkins, 1962, 1963, 1991) assert that human relationships are best and healthiest when there is free expression of affect— or emotion—minimizing the negative, maximizing the positive, but allowing for free expression. Donald Nathanson, director of the Silvan S. Tomkins Institute, adds that it is through the mutual exchange of expressed affect that we build community, creating the emotional bonds that tie us all together (Nathanson, 1998). Restorative practices such as conferences and circles provide a safe environment for people to express and exchange intense emotion. . . . Restorative practices are the science of building social capital and achieving social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making.” (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2007)

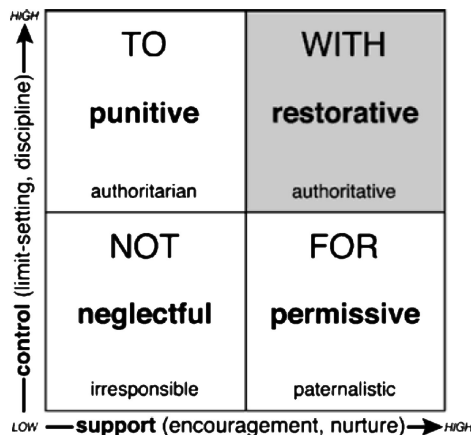
At Solace Academy, the use of restorative practices develops a sense of community. As stated by Ted Wachtel (1997) in *Real Justice*, “Community is not a place. Rather, it is a feeling, a perception. When people see themselves as belonging to a community, they feel connected. They have a sense of ownership and responsibility. They feel that they have a say in how things are run and a stake in the outcome.”

Restorative practices, furthermore, align well with the 12-step model’s focus on admitting, accepting, and taking responsibility for the care of one’s disease and encouraging the development of bonds with other recovering addicts to improve and maintain a healthier, chemical-free lifestyle. As Solace Academy emphasizes the 12-step model of recovery and restorative practices readily fit that model, the two have fit together well in the school. All staff have been trained in restorative practices. It is integrated through everything we do. Solace Academy was the first recovery high school based on the principles of restorative practices. At least one other recovery high school, PEASE Academy in Minneapolis (described in this volume by Angela Wilcox), has integrated the principles into its program as well.

The social discipline window (Figure 1) is a simple but useful framework for understanding the implementation of restorative practices at Solace Academy. The window describes four basic approaches to maintaining *social norms* and *behavioral boundaries*. The four are represented as different combinations of high or low control and high or low support. The restorative domain combines both high control and high support and is characterized by doing things *with* people rather than *to* them or *for* them.

Figure 2 shows how restorative measures are utilized within in a continuum from informal to formal activities. Restorative practices can be

FIGURE 1. Social Discipline Window.



SOURCE: (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2007)



FIGURE 2. Restorative Practices Continuum.



SOURCE: (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2007)

as simple as addressing a disruptive student in class by using affective statements and questions to addressing a more serious issue such as relapse. We have found the best thing about the use of restorative practices at Solace Academy is how it allows for problems to be addressed in a respectful, solution-oriented manner, with a large emphasis on the student *owning* his or her problem and then finding solutions to resolve it.

### ***Restorative Practices at Solace Academy: A Case Involving Relapse***

This example of a relapse will demonstrate the utilization of restorative practices. For this example, the term “relapse” means the use of a nonprescribed mood-altering chemical after a period of sobriety. “Cindy,” a student, has come forward and stated that she has relapsed. An individual session is held between Cindy and Solace’s licensed alcohol and drug counselor to discuss what led to the relapse and how she would like to move forward, if indeed that is what she wants to do. If a Solace Academy student is interested in advancing his or her recovery by remaining at the school, and it is determined that a referral to treatment is not needed, the student is placed “out of program.” This means relapsed students take time out of their classes to reflect upon and address their relapse/recovery issues.

Cindy agrees with the counselor to remain at Solace, and thus is placed out of program for a time of reflection. During this time, she restoratively addresses her relapse through restorative questions: What happened? Who has been affected and how? How can I repair harm? What is my plan? After careful review and discussion with the counselor or Solace program manager, Cindy is then brought into a “circle” containing the Solace Academy community members. A talking piece is used to symbolize who has the floor to speak, and it always moves to the left in the circle. Cindy shares

her restorative assignment with the community. As the talking piece moves left through the circle, the community has the opportunity to share how they have been affected and what they would like to see result from this experience. The talking piece continues to move around the circle until everyone has said what he or she needs to say regarding the relapse. By coming to the circle, sharing, and receiving feedback, Cindy is “restored” back into the community. This process also provides the community the opportunity to share how *they* have been affected by the student’s relapse.

In using restorative practices at Solace Academy, our goal is to give the problem back to the person responsible for it in the first place. As Figure 1 identifies, giving the problem back does not imply neglecting of the issue, solving the issue for the person, or punishing someone for his or her issue. Restorative is about *resolving* issues with the student. At Solace Academy, we see these as valuable life skills that students can take with them for the rest of their lives.

## ***OPERATIONAL STRUCTURE***

### ***Finances and Budgeting***

Similar to any recovery school, Solace Academy has its challenges when it comes to its operating budget. Original start-up funding for Solace Academy was granted for 2 years by Carver and Scott Counties’ Family and Children’s Mental Health Collaboratives. These collaboratives consisted of county agencies and school districts. This funding allowed Solace Academy to begin with a budget that accommodated eight students the first year of operation and 15 students the second year. While the initial stated enrollments were small—and thus more costly—those collaborating on the development of Solace Academy wanted to ensure its success and sustainability over time. It was agreed that having a smaller student population the first 2 years would allow for the newly hired staff to familiarize themselves with students in recovery and the school’s practical philosophy. The small size also provided staff the ability to adapt program needs with fewer variables.

The Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative develops its program budgets for the upcoming school year months before the actual school year starts. Budgeting is based on the number of students currently in the program and the anticipated return of students from one year to the next. Unfortunately, these estimates are not guarantees and can complicate the

budgeting process. In reality, students may not return as expected for a variety of reasons, including graduation, a return to active using, or a transition back to their home schools or other programs. During its first 6 years, Solace Academy operated in the red and the black. Should Solace Academy student numbers fall below budget projections, the Solace Academy program budget can be supported by other, more financially stable programs within the educational cooperative.

Funding for Solace Academy comes from a variety of resources, including the following:

General Education revenue or Minnesota state “tuition” dollars;  
Special Education funds;  
Scott Family Net, the Family Services and Children’s Mental Health Collaborative in Scott County; and  
Grant funding from the Mdewakanton Sioux Community, the Park Nicollet Foundation, and the Minnesota Department of Health.

Additionally, the school has the flexibility to add or subtract staff based on the number of students currently in the program.

### ***Admissions Process***

Referrals to Solace Academy come from a variety of avenues such as treatment centers, social services, corrections, school personnel, and word of mouth. To enroll at Solace Academy, a prospective student needs to complete an application and interview. The application paperwork includes agreeing to the enrollment contract, signing of releases of information, completing a referral form, and writing a brief essay on the student’s history, educational goals, and why he or she wants to be at Solace Academy. Once the application is received by Solace Academy, it is reviewed and an interview is scheduled.

The interview is held with the prospective student and parent(s), along with the licensed alcohol and drug counselor, the Program Manager, and an outside professional. A typical interview lasts 45–60 minutes and consists of (a) reviewing the application and (b) the potential student answering questions pertaining to his or her current state. The interview team then determines if the student is accepted or not. A large part of determining acceptance is a student’s willingness to be at Solace Academy. That does not mean the student has to be overjoyed about attending Solace Academy,

but he or she needs to convey a willingness to follow the enrollment contract and program expectations.

Potential students usually are not accepted to Solace Academy (1) if they are currently using or (2) they demonstrate an unwillingness to enroll at Solace Academy. The latter of the two is typically seen when students feel forced to apply by parents, probation officers, social workers, or treatment center staff.

If a student is accepted, the student, family, and home school district determine a start date. Solace always tries to have a student start as soon as possible, thus the school accepts students at any time throughout the quarter or semester. The process of completing an application and interviewing often indicates a student's willingness to be at Solace Academy. Virtually all students that apply and interview, therefore, are accepted. The school believes a student's desire to attend Solace is a key to success for the school and the student.

### ***Academic Class and Therapeutic Group Schedule***

Students at Solace Academy attend school Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Class periods are approximately 50 minutes long. The school has a closed lunch, meaning students do not leave to get lunch elsewhere. There are the obvious reasons for having a closed campus, including that fact that our location makes it difficult for students to leave, get lunch, and return to school within the 25 minutes allotted. The school does offer a hot lunch program available for purchase. The Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative's main campus—located only five miles away—prepares and delivers the hot lunches, which is another advantage of being a part of a cooperative. Students also run a store with “nonnutritional” foods, and there are a refrigerator, a toaster, and microwaves available for students to use. Proceeds from the school store go back into the program for activities such as field trips, prom, and graduation.

Solace Academy has seven class periods. Typically, the school has at least two classes offered each period. As the counselor, I facilitate a therapeutic group with the students on an every-third-day rotation. Students receive academic credit for their group participation. While one third of the students are in group with me, other students are in a class such as current events or physical education. I determine the group composition, which lasts one quarter of the school year. Students, thus, change groups four times per year. This has not always been the case. In the school's first year, groups occurred twice daily with a longer, more

therapeutic group in the morning and a short check-out group at the end of the day. As we have evolved, the current group schedule has worked well. The groups at Solace Academy have always been focused on supporting students' recovery. We do not do 12-step work or present assignments related to recovery but we do talk about all aspects of recovery and life.

### ***Parental Involvement***

Parental involvement and communication is highly encouraged while students are attending Solace Academy. There are two main ways this occurs. First, there are bimonthly parent support and educational groups that are just for parents. These groups provide an opportunity for parents not only to receive education and support but also to connect with the parents of the other recovering students at Solace Academy. Parents making this connection strengthen the supportive nature of the school. Second, quarterly conferences are held with the parent(s), student, and staff. Attendance is required for both parents and students. Additionally, communication takes place through midquarter and final quarter report cards, e-mail, and phone conversations.

### ***Academic Goals***

Solace Academy wants to work with students to best meet their academic goals. Students may choose to stay with us until they graduate, or they may choose to transition to another academic setting. Transitional possibilities include returning to their home school, other programming within the educational cooperative, or postsecondary educational options. The Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative, which is Solace Academy's school district, is *not* a diploma-granting school district. All students attending the cooperative's programs, therefore, follow their home school district's requirements for graduation. This does not lessen the academic rigor, but it does require strong collaboration between the Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative and a student's home school district to ensure requirements are being met.

If a student finishes his or her graduation requirements while attending a Carver-Scott Educational Cooperative program, the diploma is granted by the home school district, and it states the home school district's name on the diploma. Solace Academy does, however, hold its own graduation ceremony. On average, five students graduate each year. For students graduating from Solace Academy, or any recovery high school, it is about more than just getting a diploma. By the time students and families get

to graduation day, most have endured an incredible amount of heartache. Graduation represents what recovery is all about: healing, serenity and gratitude. As Solace graduate, Sara Sones, stated, “The graduation ceremony was designed by us, and it was about us.”

## ***PERSONAL REFLECTIONS: LESSONS LEARNED***

### ***Education and Advocacy***

Solace Academy has faced a constant need to educate and advocate. In Solace Academy’s first years, education centered on helping school administrators understand the disease of chemical dependency and recovery and educating professionals, treatment centers, and the general public about what Solace Academy is and what it is not. Solace is not a treatment center and cannot be substituted for one. First and foremost, Solace Academy is a school that supports students in recovery, and it serves a niche in the education world. To legitimize our continued existence, we must continue to address the need to educate and advocate beyond our own system.

### ***Importance of Connection with Other Schools***

Initially, a board consisting of chemical dependency professionals from both Carver and Scott Counties provided advisory support. As the program developed and gained experience, the need for advisory support diminished. With Solace Academy located so close to several recovery high school programs in Minnesota, though, we began to connect with other recovery high school professionals. We have relied on this connection to share experiences and receive guidance and support. Because of our relationship with other recovery school professionals, the school did not have to “reinvent the wheel” each time a new situation was encountered. At the same time, we felt a sense of excitement to be on the cutting edge of an emerging concept in the world of education.

### ***Enrollment and Fiscal Uncertainty***

A huge lesson learned throughout our tenure is that there is an ebb and flow to the student population. The number of adolescent clients currently being served at local chemical dependency treatment programs directly impacts the enrollment at Solace Academy. When the treatment centers

are busy, our demand increases, and when they are not busy, our demand decreases. We have noticed a tendency for the local adolescent treatment center population to be lower at the start of the school year, even though the progression of a person's chemical dependency will continue regardless of the school calendar. As a result, we begin to see an increase in referrals around November 1, as students begin completing treatment and start looking for other schooling options.

Another factor impacting our enrollment is relapse. Depending on the circumstances, some students *are asked to leave* the school after relapsing, some students *choose to leave*, and some return to treatment. This instability in student population translates into uncertain operating budgets relative to the rest of the educational system. Such enrollment and fiscal uncertainty contributes to financial difficulties for recovery high schools.

The impact of enrollment variability is felt in school operations as well. The number of students enrolled at Solace Academy can range from 15 to 30; and, like any group's dynamics, when group members are added or taken away, the group can struggle to adjust and return to homeostasis. One way Solace Academy has tried to handle this is by controlling the number of new students who can enroll during any given week. Once this limit was placed, we found that new students and current students both adjusted better, therefore creating a more stable, welcoming environment.

Countless times I have joked with potential and current students about the following statement: "The great thing about Solace Academy is that we are a small school; the bad thing about Solace Academy is that we are a small school." In truth, the small size has proven to be much more of an asset than a liability. A small school community fosters compassion and it creates opportunities for students to develop sober relationships in a safe, nurturing environment. The small size allows a student to develop a sense of responsibility and accountability to others that can get lost in a large school setting. At Solace Academy, everyone knows you, whether you like it or not; but ultimately, this is one of the school's strengths.

### ***Relapse: Honesty, Integrity, and Boundaries***

Two primary goals of Solace Academy are (a) to keep the program safe and (b) to maintain a high level of integrity. We feel these goals require both a staff committed to maintaining firm, consistent boundaries and a community based on honesty. Solace Academy recognizes that for some people, relapse is part of the recovery process. Thus, with integrity being an integral part of our community, it is expected that a student who has

relapsed will be honest about it immediately. Such honesty ensures that the student can remain enrolled at Solace Academy. If a student needs further treatment services to address his or her relapse, appropriate referrals are made.

When a student hides his or her use or another student's use, we have seen that this secrecy begins deterioration in multiple life areas and negatively impacts the community at Solace Academy. These can be difficult situations to handle, because there is a fine line between what is best for the community and what is best for the individual student. Chemical dependency can lead to death, but recovery school staff can neither "fix" students nor guarantee sobriety. Sometimes, students relapse and never come back without explanation. This proves to be difficult for the community of staff and students because of the lack of closure. Solace Academy has let students go for dishonesty about their substance use or for enabling another student's use. There is always an underlying question, though, of what a staff person could have done differently to help this student. In hindsight, most of the time we have made the right decision, but it remains one of the most difficult things about my job.

On occasion, students will reapply for enrollment after they have left or been asked to leave. There have been some students who have left and come back a few times. When previous students return, however, they are not the same. Prior notions about these students can be thrown out the window—some students flourish their second, third, or even their fourth time around.

### ***Student Sobriety***

When Solace Academy opened, all of our students had approximately the same amount of sobriety. They were going through the recovery milestones and pitfalls at the same time. Yes, they were obtaining their medallions or key tags, but then they would question the necessity of having a sponsor or going to meetings. It is difficult to convey the wisdom that comes from varying stages of recovery without having *current* students at various stages of recovery. This was an eye-opening discovery, and since then, we have had students with varying sobriety lengths.

### ***School Name***

As mentioned above, Solace Academy was originally called "Dry High." While the name was catchy, during the school's second year, our students felt the name of the school did not represent their recovery. Students also



wanted a name they could use in the community that did not scream, “Sober School!” I remember feeling very proud of their ability to recognize that being in recovery was more than being dry or sober and that they wanted the choice of maintaining their anonymity. As a school, we began the process of finding a name that represented them. After a couple months, the students and staff chose “Solace Academy.” This process was important for the students because it demonstrated ownership and pride in their community.

### ***Students and Young People in Recovery Are Still Students and Young People***

Adolescent students in recovery have unique characteristics, yet they are still similar to non-chemically-dependent students. Students in recovery high schools have the same aspirations for their futures as students in mainstream schools. They are individuals with a variety of needs, which change as they grow and mature. They still need time to be kids. This can be challenging for Solace Academy students, because their experiences can force them to operate in both adolescent and adult worlds. Through their experiences in treatment and 12-step groups, students in recovery are handed many adults skills. However, they have adolescent brains that may be developmentally stunted due to their chemical use.

Through my experiences, I have found students in recovery high schools to be very talented. Solace Academy students usually have a large amount of creative energy, whether it is for the arts or music or theater. During Solace’s development, there was a strong push to include art and music as a part of the programming. Thus, since our inception we have had art and music as a part of our program. In the second year, the cooperative received a grant to start a drama troupe. Students from several of the cooperative’s programs, including Solace Academy, were trained by professionals to create and perform improvisational skits. The students loved it. Most of the skits that Solace Academy created centered around chemical use and its impact on various life situations. They have performed for local schools, businesses, and community organizations. Each year, a new training takes place for the new recruits. This has been an invaluable outlet for students. It has also been a way for students to give back to their community.

## CONCLUSION

When chemically dependent students enter the world of recovery, they are given back the freedom of choice and, once again, all things become possible. Although not all at once, life areas begin to stabilize. Sometimes other issues arise, but recovery high schools like Solace Academy can and do provide an environment that acknowledges the importance of addressing recovery and related issues for students with chemical dependency. Recovery high schools recognize and are equipped to handle their unique needs. They can and do provide a transition for students in recovery to become productive, healthy, and contributing members of society. To me, there is no greater success than when working with students in recovery.

Throughout my career, people have commented on how difficult it must be to work with adolescents with chemically dependency. Yes, at times the work is difficult; but more notably, it is important work that is rewarding and worthwhile. In spite of the difficulties, I get to go to work every day and participate in miracles. Not everyone can say that.

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