

Restorative Justice

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ABSTRACT. This article provides a first person narrative of one teacher's experience in three different recovery schools over more than a decade of teaching. The author discusses some of the recurring challenges and successes encountered by many recovery high schools and discusses key concepts such as the importance of a clear school mission, the role of restorative practices in recovery education, successful classroom methods, and the importance of communication and support between recovery schools.

KEYWORDS. 12-step program, addiction, academics, Association of Recovery Schools, chemical dependency counselor, circles, community, culture, director, Individualized Education Plan, leadership, mission, prolapse, restorative discipline, recovery, recovery school, relapse, sober school, stories, special education, and teacher

If you don't know the trees you may be lost in the forest, but if you don't know the stories you may be lost in life. —Siberian Elder

There is emerging research about recovery schools that provides stakeholders with the data necessary to demonstrate their effectiveness. At the same time, there are stories flowing from these schools; they are the stories of students who say their lives were saved, of tearful parents who are grateful that their children are alive, of teachers and administrators gratified by

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Journal of Groups in Addiction & Recovery, Vol. 2(2–4), 2007

Available online at <http://jgar.haworthpress.com>

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doi: 10.1080/15560350802080670

student successes and healthy workplaces. This is the story of one teacher's decade in recovery schools. It is a story of schools and classrooms, politics and disappointments, and difficult lessons learned. It is a story of revelation and transcendence. Mostly, it is a story about young people in recovery, for it was hearing their stories that drew me to this work and helping them tell their stories that has been the heart of it. Sometimes, working in recovery schools has felt like being lost in the forest, without guide or landmark, but with each story shared, each mistake admitted and success celebrated, we learn to recognize the trees, and eventually, someday, create field guides that will allow future travelers to make their own way.

THE BEGINNING

My story begins, as many do, with a happy accident. A friend who worked at a "sober" school asked, offhand, if I knew any English teachers looking for a part-time teaching job. As it happened, I was, and her phone call secured me an interview. When I was shown to my English classroom after accepting the job, I looked around curiously and asked where they stored the books. Imagine how my wheels started spinning when I found out there weren't any. No materials, no library, thirty-five students in grades 9–12, and one English teacher. I had recently come from a position teaching in a large, wealthy public high school where I was part of a department of more than a dozen teachers. The curriculum was pre-approved by a committee and my course work was handed to me in nicely color-coordinated stacks of paper. I was terrified and exhilarated by the challenge before me. I haunted libraries and used bookstores, and bought armfuls of notebooks and pens. I drew on past experiences and created lesson plans from patchworks of other people's ideas that I thought might work in this setting. I wrote our daily classroom agenda on the blackboard, and I waited to see what would happen.

Initially, students were in shock; in this school, they hadn't had a teacher who required them to come to class every day, or to write things down, or to turn in homework. In years past, they had earned English credit for talking in group counseling sessions, under the heading of Interpersonal Communication. My first year was riddled with conflict and resistance. "This ain't no public school" was the frequent refrain as students demanded a return to their right to exercise self-care by leaving the classroom, playing computer solitaire, or ping-pong in the student lounge rather than attending

classes. But there were also moments that transcended the battle: there were stories. I heard stories that students told in their writing and poetry, stories they told in response to reading assignments, and even fascinating stories they told to explain why they hadn't done their homework at all. Students came to me before and after school, bubbling over with stories that demanded being told and being heard. I discovered that my most important resource wasn't a new curriculum library but a willingness to listen, take these stories, and build my classroom around them.

As a young teacher, I was fortunate to attend several SEED workshops (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) and through them was introduced to an article by Emily Style called "Curriculum as Window and Mirror" (Style, 1988). This simple essay spoke deep truth to my experiences in the classroom. Style asserts that students need to be exposed to worlds outside of their own, the windows that schools can provide into things beyond their daily lives. But, she says, they also need mirrors that reflect their own life experiences back to them. Students learn best when the curriculum shows them something of themselves, as well as showing them places they might one day go. I began to realize, in my first year teaching at a recovery school, that there was a special set of mirrors that I would need to create to help my students find their place in my classroom. I needed to understand addiction, sobriety, and recovery so that I could find ways to reflect this back to them, and how those windows and mirrors could best help them grow into the people they wanted to become. It wasn't easy, and I often felt conflicted about how little I seemed to be accomplishing, but I loved working with these young people and was determined to find some way through.

In addition to the struggles over the shift in the academic culture, there were also battles about sobriety. How did we define it, why did we enforce it, and whose business was it, anyway? Why wasn't it okay, they wondered, to have a glass of wine with a parent on their birthday? Why did that have to count as a "relapse" if an adult gave permission and they didn't get drunk? Wasn't it enough, some wondered, that they didn't "wake and bake" every day? They wanted harm reduction. We wanted them to want recovery.

Our school had no template, no model, no Association of Recovery Schools, no chemical dependency counselor, no known peers in the field to call on for advice. We were building something that we knew was essential, but we didn't have the resources, the time, or the knowledge to do it the way it needed to be done—not yet. There were others doing the work we were doing, but we didn't know who or where they were and didn't understand

the profound implications that making those connections would eventually have on our work.

One staff person, a woman who started teaching the same fall that I did, was in recovery herself. She started an AA meeting for students after school one day a week, and from this seed a small culture of recovery started to grow in our school. Students started to talk openly about the 12 steps. Phrases like “practice these principles in all our affairs” and “progress, not perfection” made their way into our community. Over time, it no longer felt like all my energy went into the song and dance of getting them to show up; more often now they were present, ready, and willing to figure out where this journey was going to take them. They wanted to write. And write they did.

Creative writing became one of the centerpieces of my English curriculum. It didn't require textbooks, and it was flexible. Students working at the third-grade or thirteenth-grade level could work together, learn from each other, and accomplish something meaningful. Most importantly, they loved it. They loved writing about themselves. They loved discovering the texture and variety of emotion that was part of a sober life. Rather than covering up all of their feelings by drinking or drugging, they were naming emotions. They were turning them over, personifying them, facing them down, and running after them. Things in the classroom were starting to hum. I had found one of the mirrors I needed to help my classroom make sense.

The changes that were taking place in the school community became clearer to the director, and he supported what I was trying to accomplish in my classroom in material ways. He ordered books: textbooks, workbooks, writing curriculum, and anything else he could find that he thought would be helpful. He allowed teachers to create policies that required students to maintain classroom attendance in order to earn credit. He cut out smoke breaks for students between classes. He added an hour to the school day in order to enrich class offerings to students. He refused to operate under a “poverty mentality,” insisting that we bring in and use every resource we thought we needed in order to make the school a quality institution, both academically and culturally. He lead without ego, asking for advice and help, and then using his power to enact what he saw as best for students and teachers.

The range of ability levels in my classroom ran from barely literate to college level, and I talked to the director about how to meet the varying needs in an authentic way. One student in particular was a constant behavior problem in my classroom and refused to write *anything*. He was incredibly

bright, verbally articulate, and read voraciously above his grade level, but he would not pick up a pen to save his life (or his grade). Eventually, I gave him the assignment of making a list of everything he had in his beloved and ever-present backpack, and when he did it, I realized that the reason he didn't write was because he couldn't write—the scrawl on the page looked like a kindergartener's work. He was unable to complete even that most basic task when it came to writing, and the coping mechanism he'd developed, which had helped him make it through grade school and junior high, was to act out until he got kicked out rather than admit his problem to his teachers. This felt beyond my ability to address in a classroom full of other struggling learners. We had no special education department, no liaison from the school district, and no services to address those with learning disabilities. Parents who enrolled their children were informed of this and had to make the decision about which was more important to them: special education or a sober school. I strongly advocated for bringing in a specialist who could work a few hours a week with students who needed to learn very basic reading and math skills. Immediately, our director put out a search and contracted with a woman who worked a few hours a week with our lowest-skilled students. Within months, the brilliant young man who could not write was writing. He was still far below grade level, but he was now openly discussing his struggles and being provided tools that helped him overcome something that had plagued him his entire school career. Eventually, his writing progressed and he was able to function with other students in my English classroom, turning in written work that I could read and respond to. The consultant was able to work with a small pull-out group of students in both English and math, and this addition to our school program made an enormous difference in how we were able to serve students. Over the years, that position evolved from a four-hours-a-week contract to a full-time special education teacher, serving up to 20 students with individualized education plans and working in conjunction with teams from their home schools to provide services, sometimes even transportation to and from our school.

The culture was taking shape in wonderful ways. Our students were learning and talking openly about enjoying school for the first time in their memories. They talked to us about it, they talked to their parents, and they talked to their friends—a lot of their friends. We were faced with a decision to start a waiting list, or to consider increasing the number of students we served. When I started teaching at the school in the fall of 1996, there were about 35 students. That number increased each year, until we had to consider renting additional space from the church and adding staff in order

to keep class sizes small and continue to offer the model we'd created. We felt committed to serving as many students as we could, feeling that no one who wanted a safe, sober education should be turned away. However, when we increased to 75 students, it became quickly and painfully apparent that we had grown too large to feel the sense of community that had defined us. Our classrooms were no longer connected by one hallway, leaving some teachers and classrooms isolated from the main body of the school. We had grown too large to gather in one room in a way that allowed everyone to be seen and heard easily. After one year of operation with 75 students, we agreed that 60 to 65 students was the magic number for us, given our space and our staff; it provided us sufficient funding to maintain our current staff but kept the school small enough that we still felt like a community. We knew from this experience that it was better to ask a student to wait to be admitted than to compromise the integrity of our program.

A YEAR OF TRANSITION

After my third year at the school and many positive changes, the original and much-loved director made the decision to move on and was hired as the principal of a public school. We faced a new set of challenges but felt optimistic that with all we had accomplished, we could carry on the mission of the school under new leadership. The staff had played such an active and integral role in crafting the culture and vision, and we looked forward to what new energy and ideas this transition might bring.

Our new director came on board at the start of the next school year, armed with experience and a set of philosophies honed in to the alternative school world. This could have been a real asset to our community, as many of the elements that are successful in alternative schools work marvelously in recovery schools; but in the end, the conflict in understanding about the mission of our school deepened to a real crisis. The director insisted that the large public school we contracted with required us to admit any student who met the seven "alternative school" criteria, including being behind in credits, pregnant, or in legal trouble. It is significant that "committed to recovery" and "sober" are not on that list of criteria. Those of us who believed in a recovery school fought hard to maintain the expectation that students live a sober lifestyle, in or out of school. The director admitted many students to the program who had never been through treatment and thus didn't understand the basic principles of addiction and recovery. At the same time, we retained a core group of students who were committed

to recovery and their 12-step program. The lack of clarity about the mission of the school within the staff had a profound impact on the culture. When one student came forward saying that she had been harassed by peers for being in recovery and didn't feel safe at the school, the director assured her we'd help her find a different school. When a student was accused of selling drugs in the boy's bathroom, the director argued that students didn't have to buy if they didn't want to and that they'd have to toughen up a bit if they were going to survive in the "real" world. Students, undoubtedly feeling the tension and responding as they must, acted out. There were physical fights, weapons threats, failing grades, and a general sense of malaise. Staff meetings, formerly one of our most cherished times to reflect and support each other in our work, became unbearably tense, to the point of open conflict and hostility. With a new baby and a toddler at home, my energy was already stretched thin, and the stress at work was taking a toll. I was ready to walk away from the whole thing, convinced that it had been a noble but ultimately unworkable dream. I was devastated.

Several of us on staff who had already seen the school through some difficult transitions had, over the course of the year, been trying to find a way to save the school we loved. My trusted colleagues encouraged me to hang on for a little while longer. We told our stories to the board in letters, in meetings, and in phone calls. Eventually, the accumulated power of our words made them realize what was at stake, and they asked us to work with them. Together, we crafted a written statement that would make our central mission concrete. The board was able to convince most of the core teaching staff to return for another year, assuring us that our voices would be honored and that the mission of the school protected. They found another director, making certain that he would support the recovery mission of the school. Skeptical but unable to let go of the glimpses I had seen of what could be, I stuck it out.

This transition year was a year of invaluable lessons. We learned that it is vital for the school to have a clear central mission and philosophy in writing, and that anyone hired in a position of power be committed to that mission. It sounds so obvious in retrospect, yet at the time the board was hiring a new director, the school's mission was understood and practiced by the founding director and the staff but not made explicit in any written form to facilitate the major transition that hiring a new director implied. The board, a group of dedicated community volunteers with little understanding of either addiction or recovery or of the education world, was not equipped to fill in these gaps on its own. In addition, there was no

pool of experienced recovery school directors to draw from, so we had to hope that qualified candidates from the education world would be willing to learn about addiction and recovery as part of their new role. The first time, it didn't work. The second time, we got lucky.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Soon after the start of the next school year, it was clear that this new director had a heart of gold and a commitment to the sober mission of our school. He worked hard to earn our trust and to understand what had caused rifts between staff. Listening to our needs, he set aside staff time and searched out people who could foster healing and help us move forward together. As our staff rebuilt trust, the students responded again, this time in positive ways.

The issues that we faced became clearer as we were able to move past the basic struggle to protect the recovery mission of our school. We didn't have anyone on staff with professional training or experience working in a recovery community. The director approached the board of directors to convince them that having a chemical dependency counselor was vital to building a healthy recovery community in our school. There were some concerns that had to be addressed. Some wondered whether having a chemical dependency counselor on staff would confuse the mission, making it seem more like treatment than an educational program. I was one of those people. I felt we had worked so hard to create a solid program based around academics, and I worried that bringing in someone from the treatment world might dilute our mission to educate our students. We had tried being an "alternative" school and it had almost destroyed us. I was worried about what might happen if we became a treatment center/school and what kind of students it might attract. Our concerns and opinions were weighed, and the process felt open and respectful, but in the end the director felt strongly that to serve our students well, we needed someone who understood this central aspect of their lives.

He convinced the board to hire a licensed chemical dependency counselor on a part-time basis. Her job would be to work with individual students to support them in their recovery and to help the staff understand new ways we could work effectively with this population of students. Once the decision was made, I willingly dropped my skepticism and waited to see what this person could teach us that we hadn't already figured out on our own.

Quickly, I came to see the new chemical dependency counselor as an invaluable resource for both students and staff. In four years, I had learned that my instincts were often right, but now I had someone with many years experience who was eager to talk about how what I saw and taught in the classroom could support students in their recovery. Some of our policies and procedures, she pointed out, enabled students or undermined our goal of creating a healthy recovery community. She created a contract that challenged students to become totally honest without consequences; we needed to know who was really sober, for how long, and whether or not they really wanted to be in recovery. Students amazed us by rising to the challenge. We gathered the entire community—65 students—in a large circle and asked each one to state out loud what their sobriety date was and what their level of commitment to sobriety, and thus our school, would be. A few students admitted that they were using and were only attending this school to stave off the consequences that they would face if adults in their lives suspected. They were asked to consider, and then commit to, a lifestyle and to honor what we were trying to build by their choice. Others proudly stated their sobriety date and their firm commitment to living a life of recovery. It wasn't perfect, but it was a start, and most importantly, it was honest. We had given students a clear message: this is a program built around honesty. We will respect your choices, but we will also ask you to respect what we're trying to build.

Students and staff were taught new ways of understanding recovery in communities. We knew the term "relapse," but our new chemical dependency counselor taught us about "prolapse," as well. Not every incident of use, she showed us, necessarily means that someone has returned to active addiction. The chemical dependency counselor explained that when people use and immediately understand that this not what they want—they are honest about it with all the important people in their lives, and they show a renewed commitment to their recovery—that it is a prolapse. She asked us to set a policy at our school that would reflect the difference between the two kinds of "lapses." If students were immediately honest about their use and were able to articulate what changes they were going to make to remain sober, they would be welcome to stay in the community. If a student's use was discovered, or a confession was coerced by police, a parent, or a friend after the fact, the student would be asked to leave the community until he or she could gain a stable recovery.

The chemical dependency counselor also asked that we modify our policy about students revealing use by others in the community. As it was, we assured students that their concerns would be held in confidence if they

came forward about another student. An honesty program included being willing to admit your concerns, she said, and told us she wouldn't act on "anonymous" information. We were very worried that this would have a negative impact on our community; if students didn't feel safe coming forward anonymously, one of our most important sources of information about what was really going on in the community would dry up. She assured us that this was common practice in recovery communities and that it would work. Once again, she was right, and it proved to be vital in helping build more authenticity into our community. Students felt safe. They felt trusted, and they felt a stake in this school. They proved they were willing to stand up and protect both the school and their own recovery by being honest about what was going on, even with their close friends. Students learned to talk directly to each other. They would offer their friend a chance to go confess to the chemical dependency counselor on their own, and if they chose not to, the person with concerns would go forward. Contrary to our fears, the number of students coming forward actually increased.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

The policy about asking students who relapsed to leave the school, though clearer now, was still very complicated. In a small community, one student's departure could have a major impact. Students always wanted to know exactly what happened and why this person had been asked to leave the school, but rules about confidentiality prevented us from sharing any of that information with students. Gossip in the hallways or classrooms would fill in the gaps, usually inaccurately, and often, it would create further drama and chaos. Students struggled to find ways to understand and have a voice in who remained in the community and who was asked to leave. They accused us of racism, favoritism, and bias, grieving the loss of each of their friends in ways that constantly disrupted our small community. They appealed to the staff to include a select group of students in the process of making decisions about discharges.

That winter, at an alternative education conference, the chemical dependency counselor and I attended a workshop on restorative justice. Immediately, it was clear that the tools that restorative justice would offer our school, especially talking circles, could be the missing piece in the puzzle of how to maintain a healthy recovery community that felt safe for everyone. The workshop was offered by the Minnesota Department of Education,

which was providing grants to schools who would volunteer to serve as pilot sites for restorative justice in schools. I took an application, and with the backing of the board and school director, we became one of those pilot sites. This meant that our entire staff could go through a multiple-day training, with periodic follow-up training, for free. We also collected data at our site, documenting how often we used restorative practices instead of traditional disciplinary measures, like detention or suspension, and how our rates of student misbehavior changed as a result.

Restorative justice is a philosophy that is built on the idea that when there is harm done to someone in a community, it affects everyone. Each member of a community needs to find ways to heal, to have his or her voice heard, and to discern what his or her role should be in making things better. We had seen how much each student was affected when someone relapsed, when there was stealing, gossip, or drama, but usually those types of behaviors were dealt with in the office, behind closed doors with the perpetrators. Even the victim was often shut out of the process of responding to the transgression, with the assurance that it was being dealt with by the people in power. Restorative justice, through a variety of methods, offers everyone in the community a chance to say what happened, how they were impacted, what they need, and what they are willing to do to help make things better. Even people who seem to be peripherally involved in an incident can have important insight into how it has impacted the community. Often, the perpetrators have a story to tell about what led up to their actions that can give vital perspective to a community that hopes these people will change their harmful behavior. The stories shared and insight gained can be profoundly important in transforming and healing for everyone, not just those directly involved in the harm.

The most important change in the community after incorporating restorative circles was that we now had a tool to communicate with students if someone had relapsed and was going to have to leave the community. Students who were in the position of leaving the school were offered and encouraged to hold a circle with the community in order to tell them what they were planning to do to next, and to receive support and feedback. Remarkably, almost every student took advantage of this opportunity. They wanted the chance to say goodbye, make amends, and get support from the community. We quickly saw the benefits of this new model for our community; drama, gossip, and blame evaporated as students gained a voice in the processes that a healthy community required.

Circles gave our community a crucial tool that assured that every voice was heard and every story had a chance to be told. Each relapse or prolapse

circle offered lessons that we could not teach in other ways. Students told, for example, the familiar story of what happened when they started spending time with their friends who still used drugs and alcohol. Many of these stories shared the common themes of teens who didn't believe a friend would put their recovery at risk, or who thought they could handle it or that they could walk away; they believed that they could control their desire to return to using. We all learned lessons about powerlessness from these stories, and soon students talked openly about incorporating the lessons learned from these circles into their own program of recovery.

One particularly powerful circle was called for a student who had made a conscious decision that he wanted to start using drugs again. He wanted to honor the community by leaving before he used, and to thank and say goodbye to each person who had touched him while he was a student there. It was a heartbreaking circle, with many tears shed and many who struggled to find the right words to help this young man see how frightened everyone was for him. A teacher stood, removed his shirt, and standing in his undershirt, tearfully told the story of the tattoo on his biceps—praying hands, which he had put there after the death of his younger brother from an overdose. He fiercely told this young man that he wasn't willing to watch him walk away, possibly to die, without telling him this story of the pain his brother's death had caused in the lives of everyone who loved him. Days later, the student returned to us, saying that he had been so moved by this circle, and especially by the story told by his teacher, that he had decided he had to find the strength to get sober again and remain with us. He graduated with almost a year of sobriety. I cannot think of any other appropriate way that this teacher could have shared this story in such a moving and powerful way but in the context of the circle, where every person is there not as his or her title but as another human being in the community; it was perfect.

Restorative practices shaped many elements of our school. We offered a circle to a parent who was struggling to feel heard and had been trying to play staff off of each other, even talking about mounting a law suit, in order to feel her child's needs were being addressed. The staff gathered in a circle and offered her a chance to tell her story to all of us and then to hear our stories about working with her child. The tension and anger was immediately replaced by a sense of calmness and respect, and all parties gained important perspective on what the problems were and agreed to move forward together for the student's benefit. The circle transformed the way we were able to work with the parent, and thus the student.

As the English teacher, I saw an opportunity to use circles to teach writing. For several years, I had attempted to incorporate the writer's workshop into my classroom, a model that puts student writing at the center of the curriculum and allows them opportunities to present their work to other writers and get feedback from them. The variety of learning disabilities and social difficulties in the student population prevented this model from working the way I wanted it to, but the idea of gathering in the now-familiar circle with a talking piece presented a new possibility. Using the work of teachers like Nanci Atwell (Atwell, 1998) and Linda Christensen (Christensen, 2000), who have successfully developed writing workshop models with a variety of students of all levels, and Roseanne Bane (Bane, 2005), who offers a brilliant concept about how to structure the process of giving feedback, I added the talking piece and came up with a highly successful model for my English classroom. Because the circle was already a place of trust, and the talking piece is a tangible symbol of permission to speak and assurance of being heard, students were able to take the enormous leap of presenting their work to peers and accepting concrete feedback on their writing. Students strove to create pieces they felt proud to present to their fellow writers, pushing the quality of writing to new levels. They wrote during lunch hours. Some snuck into the bathrooms of their group homes to share poetry after hours. A handful started reading at open-mike poetry readings, and one student even became a member of the Minnesota Poetry Slam team. Students who had long-refused to write, let alone share their writing with others, began to fill notebooks. The "read-around" (a phrase borrowed from Christensen and perfect to describe our circle gatherings) became so popular that I offered a read-around class as an after school elective. We had visitors from all over the world, including a U.S. Representative and a restorative justice expert from Australia, come to our classroom and leave with tears in their eyes, moved by the risks these young people took and the stories they told.

In the math classroom, similar leaps and bounds were occurring. Our new director had hired a math teacher with experience teaching College Prep Math (CPM),¹ a program developed by math teachers in conjunction with the University of California at Davis. The program focuses on taking abstract mathematical concepts, from pre-algebra to calculus, and making them visual and concrete for students. Classroom work is done in small groups; students ask questions and find answers together, rather than by individuals in desks watching the teacher at the board. These elements of the program, unusual in math classrooms, were highly successful with our students. Students were overcoming one of the most prevalent and

powerful phobias in their academic history: fear of math. As they found success with the hands-on curriculum, and the support and engagement a group-centered classroom offered them, they began to believe in a new way that they could actually succeed as students. We were seeing gains in confidence and academic success that we had only dreamed about that first year I had started teaching.

MIX IT UP

Like all urban schools, we faced the challenge of understanding how our classrooms were impacted by the many differences between our students. There were differences of race and culture, of age and developmental level, of academic successes or failures, of family situation, socioeconomics, and the many other dividers that polarize students and make it challenging to create and sustain authentic communities and effective learning environments. Here again, the read-around and circles both played a vital role in helping us grow and learn. We were discovering, especially as deeper and more authentic stories emerged and the level of trust increased between members of the community, that all of those differences could melt away in the face of the disease of addiction and the power of recovery. With every read-around, with each pass of the talking piece around a circle, they would express surprise, amazement, and relief at hearing the experiences and feelings they had imagined too strange or shameful to admit come out of others' mouths. Often, these discovered connections would appear between the most unlikely pairs. Out of these unexpected connections, friendships emerged. Students marveled aloud at the experience of becoming close to someone who looked so different from themselves. I would smile in wonder myself as the preppy cheerleader from the suburbs bent her blonde head close to the girl with a pierced lip and a green Mohawk, sharing secrets between classes. With the common ground of their battle against addiction and the rewards of recovery, they were learning what this community had to offer them.

Now, when we asked students why they came to our school, or what kept them coming back every day, they said it was because this school was their family. They felt a deep connection that went far beyond what any traditional academic institution had ever offered them. Even when they were ill, tired, furious, jittery, or frustrated, when they drove each other (and us) crazy, when they disagreed with the rules or chafed against the ever-higher standards we tried to push them to achieve, they returned

day after day, surpassing attendance requirements and the patterns of their own histories. Like family, we were the people who had to take them in when no one else would. Unlike many of their families, we actually did.

ASSOCIATION OF RECOVERY SCHOOLS

It was during this period of deep joy in our healthy community that the director and chemical dependency counselor were contacted about a new organization, an association of those working in schools dedicated to serving adolescents and young adults in recovery. A dozen or so representatives of those schools would gather in Washington, DC, in July of 2002 to make connections, talk about what worked, what didn't, and the possibility of building an organization that could support existing schools and promote the establishment of new schools around the country. When we returned to school that fall, the chemical dependency counselor was buzzing with excitement about the connections she had made and the possibilities she saw growing out of this fledgling group of counselors, administrators, and educators. Much of what we had learned, other schools had also discovered. We were not alone in this. Positive connections were forged with schools we had previously only heard about as competitors for our students. We began to feel that we were all colleagues in a growing field, rather than a few crazy people in a church basement. We started calling our school a "recovery" school, rather than a sober school, in order to accurately describe the intention of our program and to be consistent with other programs around the country doing similar work.

The formation of the Association of Recovery Schools (ARS) was a very important moment for all of us. Suddenly, the work we were doing took on new dimensions, as we realized we could take what we were learning and share it with others. Even more profound, we could turn to others to see what else was working and ask for advice, support, and perspective. In 5 years, the ARS has grown to include more than two dozen schools; and the summer conference, from that original 12 people, has grown 10 times. For me, the ARS has been the touchstone; as I have now worked at three different recovery schools, I can see the importance of building bridges between schools, and of reaching out to each other as colleagues rather than as competitors. The ARS provides a way for educators, administrators, and counselors to unite behind our common mission.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

As all of us who had worked so hard to create a healthy recovery community enjoyed the fruits of our work and dug in to learn with our students, our director was facing struggles of his own. We were only able to fund about 70% of the operating budget of the school with the money we got from the state, so fundraising was crucial. Yet the demands of being the school administrator and the sole fundraiser for the school were much more than a full-time job. He shielded the staff from these struggles but talked openly and often with the board about the need for support in fundraising. After two years of strong, capable leadership, he chose to take a job in another district. He was clear with the board that he was leaving because, without committed fundraisers working in conjunction with the director, the school could not be sustained. He was no longer willing to live with the stress of trying to wear so many different hats, knowing that he couldn't succeed and that the school would suffer as a result. He respected the school and its mission, and hoped, he said, that his departure would spur the board to rethink the role of director and the vital question of who would work to raise funds to sustain the school.

He left us hoping that another lesson had been learned. Good leadership, devoted and experienced teaching staff, students who are actually in recovery, and solid programming can come together to create an excellent, safe, sober school; but without wise leadership and support from the agencies charged with sustaining the long-term health of the school, it will founder. A director in a school of our size, even one who is highly competent and committed, could not be expected to oversee the day-to-day operations of the school and also be charged with its long-term financial survival through fundraising and other related activities.

A PATTERN EMERGES

The departure of this wise leader ushered in a new series of challenges and successes. Subsequent directors faced the same difficulties of wearing too many hats, and the board continued to struggle to find the right leaders for a nearly impossible job. Through it all, dedicated people continued striving to offer the very best in recovery education they could, graduating increasing numbers of students and sending more and more of them on to post-secondary education. In my 11 years of work in recovery schools, I have taught at three different schools under seven different directors. At

each school, I have seen the same elements succeed: small classes; innovative teaching staff, who are flexible and understand the basic concepts of working with young people in recovery; restorative practices to build and sustain a sense of community; and a clear and intentional dedication to the mission of the school to help students in recovery learn in a supportive environment. In a school like this, even students in very early recovery can thrive and succeed, both academically and interpersonally.

By the same token, the same challenges emerge at each school. Again and again, finding the right person to act as the director, and finding the right board of directors to support and guide that person through the running of the school, has proved crucial. The school cannot survive without a board that is willing to acquire an understanding of the complexity of the director's job, a commitment to supporting that role, and thus the school, through active ongoing fundraising. Whatever the funding source, whether it be tuition or public dollars, schools will be hard pressed to support the small classrooms and provide the necessary materials and support without additional funding in the form of grants, scholarships, and private donations.

Vision, energy, compassion, and experience are vital to the creation and sustenance of a school that can truly support students in recovery. And yet, as I have experienced both firsthand and through hearing the stories of others in the field, these are not enough. Creating a truly functional organizational structure for recovery schools is a constant challenge. There is no preexisting template for schools to follow. People trained in school administration aren't always able to understand the dynamics of working in a recovery school culture, and those from the recovery world are often at a loss when it comes to the complex politics of school administration. To function well, our classrooms need to have a low student-teacher ratio, and yet with smaller classrooms comes less funding from the state. How, then, can recovery schools hire and maintain adequate staffing with very limited funding? All of these challenges trickle down and have a profound impact on the day-to-day functioning of the school and the classroom culture. Many people with good intentions and a wide range of skills can still struggle to maintain sustainable schools.

And yet many schools continue, day by day and year by year, to overcome these obstacles, graduate increasing numbers of well-educated students, and turn the statistics about young people in recovery on their heads. All of the schools I have worked in are still thriving, though some in very different forms than they began. In a field where questions are still far more prevalent than answers, one thing is certain: it is through telling our

stories, being honest about our struggles and failures, and celebrating our successes that we will continue to move closer to the day when every student who needs a recovery school can find one and that every student in a recovery school has the opportunity to thrive, both academically and in their recovery. That would be the happiest ending I could imagine.

NOTE

1. College Preparatory Mathematics (CPM). 1233 Noonan Drive, Sacramento, CA 95822, <http://www.cpm.org>

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