

Joint Committee on Ways and Means Hearing
Friday, March 15: 10:00 a.m.
Gardner Auditorium
Ryan Morgan, Principal
Independence Academy Recovery High School

DESE Line Item# 7061-9607

Good Morning thank you madam chair and members of the committee,

My name is Ryan Morgan and I am the principal of Independence Academy in Brockton one of the five Recovery High Schools in the state. We serve the entire southeastern region. I appreciate your time today and the opportunity to provide my testimony on behalf of my school, my students and the other four schools and their students.

Capable learners fail because of addiction. Good parents suffer because of addiction. Brothers lose their sisters because of addiction. Healthy families fall apart because of addiction. Homes go into foreclosure because of addiction. Children as well as adults die because of addiction. We all have family members who have struggled because of addiction. All of us, every one of us has felt the terrible impact of addiction.

At the MA Recovery High Schools we are constantly in the process of developing an appropriate school and service continuum for children struggling with addiction. Our vision for this model is becoming more and more clear, and we have made significant strides towards our goals. But the truth is, if you simply took a snapshot of what we currently provide for our students, it is not enough. This is a desperate population of children who deserve to get a more appropriate education. We believe that addiction is a learned behavior and, when we consider the most up-to-date brain research around substance use and addiction, it clear that substance use alters a person's brain. Therefore, we believe that each student who attends a Recovery High School needs specialized instruction and an individualized approach given their own unique emotional, cognitive and behavioral (substance use) profile. Although it is not recognized as such; addiction is a disability and that is how it needs to be addressed. We are appreciative that the Governor, in House 2, has shifted the Recovery High Schools under DESE which is a move that we support.

The Massachusetts Recovery Schools are an essential piece to the adolescent continuum of care in the Commonwealth. While we are academic institutions, we provide direct services around substance use and addiction to our students and their families. The students who attend our schools are addicted and/dependent which is a disability preventing them from progressing socially, emotionally and academically. When funding is cut, these schools are turned into "programs" within schools, where resources are limited and inadequate and students are marginalized. The Recovery High Schools are unique in many ways but perhaps the most significant component of what separates us from a traditional high school is that Recovery High Schools allow adolescents newly in recovery to be surrounded by a peer group supportive of recovery efforts and attitudes. Recovery schools can serve as an adjunct to formal substance use treatment, with students often referred by treatment providers and enrolled in concurrent treatment for other mental health problems (NIDA,2014). Among this population there is a general trend of high rates of substance relapse and subsequent treatment readmission. We know that the difficult work of recovery *begins* when an adolescent returns to his or her pre-treatment environment. Our job is to:

- Educate students in recovery from substance use and/or co-occurring disorders
- Meet state requirements for awarding a secondary school diploma

- Encourage all students enrolled be in recovery and working a program of recovery from SUD
And...
- Make RHS enrollment available to any student in MA who is in recovery and who meets eligibility requirements for attendance.

In each of the last three years, the five schools have been funded under DPH in the amounts of \$3.1M, \$3.1M and \$3.6M, respectively. Every dollar that was released by DPH in each of those years has been spent out. The evidence is clear, Recovery High Schools need the funding in order to sustain the level of service that we are providing right now which arguably, is still not enough. Costs associated with the transportation of students to and from our schools are extraordinary and the average student at my school travels 40 miles per day just to attend school. Any cuts to this funding would be detrimental and threaten the sustainability of our schools.

The average daily rate that the state pays for an adolescent to go to treatment is approximately \$571/day. The average daily rate that the state pays for an adolescent to attend a Recovery High School is \$65/day. The average length of stay for a student at Independence Academy is 278 days. When a student stays for at least 90 days their average length of stay jumps to 385 days. We currently have two students who have been with us for over 1000 days. Recovery High Schools are the long-term, developmentally appropriate solution to addressing the issue of addiction.

From an educational perspective schools currently spend \$11,046/year for a student to attend our school which is just over \$61/day. This funding formula using the state average per pupil expenditure rate is flawed. The students we service have significant trauma histories, co-occurring disorders, special education needs and challenging circumstances outside of school and...they're addicted to substances with no way of getting to the school that can undoubtedly meet their needs better than any other academic option.

These are some of the most complex children to work with and they need a fair shot at getting a quality education while simultaneously being taught coping skills and learning about and understanding themselves so that they can simply engage in the process of change. The cost of running a comprehensive school addressing all of these factors isn't extraordinary but we can't educate, counsel and transport students to and from school for \$126/day.

Without the support from champions like Representative Malia, Chairwoman Peisch, Senator Keenan, Senator Chang-Diaz and others, adolescent substance use doesn't attract the legislative attention that is warranted because, quite frankly, adolescents do not make up a significant population of people who are using and overdosing on opioids. Our students are learning at a young age that accessible substances like marijuana, dextromethorphan, Xanax, alcohol and Adderall make them feel better or different or nothing...Their brains are learning that this is the solution. Unfortunately, there are many adolescents who use substances, however only somewhere around 17% become addicted. Those students need specialized instruction, peer support and the comprehensive approach that only Recovery High Schools can offer. I know that in Plymouth County the 0-19 age demographic accounts for just 3% of all overdoses while the 20-29 demographic jumps to 38%. The opioid epidemic starts long before the use of opioids. We are the proactive measure that is aiming to prevent more people from falling in the river.

The Governor's FY19 budget has proposed to cut funding to Recovery High Schools by more than \$1.1M from the FY18 budget. I personally believe this proposal is based on erroneous information.

The current proposal has also eliminated language that would allow for the opening of any new recovery high schools despite areas like the Cape and northwestern MA being completely without services.

The MA Recovery Schools are not requesting any additional funding from the state to fight the opioid epidemic and we believe that we are the foundation to fighting this state and national crisis.

We are appreciative that the Governor has shifted our line over to DESE and we are asking that the state:

- ❖ **LEVEL FUND** line item **DESE 7061-9607** (formerly DPH 4512-0211) in the amount of **\$3,600,000**.
 - **Legislative Funding History (formerly DPH 4512-0211):**
 - **FY18 Final: \$3,600,000 – FY18 Request: \$3,600,000**
 - **FY17 Final: \$3,100,000 – FY17 Request: \$3,100,000**
 - **FY16 Final: \$3,100,000 – FY17 Request: \$3,100,000**
 - **The Governor’s budget proposes \$2.475M (= \$495,000/School)**

We also believe that moving to oversight by DESE makes sense it does warrant some specific language within the line that would delineate and make clear how that money should be spent as this is new territory for them. Therefore, we also ask that we:

- ❖ **ADD LANGUAGE** within **DESE 7601-9607** (formerly DPH 4512-0211) respective to the \$3,600,000 which reads, “For the administrative and programmatic costs of recovery high schools; provided, that not less than \$620,000 shall be expended to each of the existing recovery high schools in the commonwealth, and provided further, that \$500,000 shall be expended to open 1 new high school in an underserved region of the commonwealth, that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education shall submit a report not later than April 16, 2019 to the house and senate committees on ways and means on: (i) the number of youth served per high school; (ii) outcomes measured for youth; and (iii) recommendations for new recovery high schools in fiscal year 2020.”