

Chalkboard: School for sober kids gets funding boost from Madison school district

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A drug testing kit held by Traci Goll, director at Horizon High School, photographed on Monday, May 10, 2010. Pictured in background is student Amy Sanchez. MIKE DEVRIES

For students who have been treated for addiction, going back to a conventional high school is like sending an alcoholic into a bar, experts say. But, they add, it's extremely hard to find a safe, nurturing educational option for teens who are struggling to stay drug or alcohol-free.

Horizon High School is a tiny, non-profit, Madison-based recovery school where students learn and help keep each other on track and sober, day in and day out. It's one of only three recovery schools in Wisconsin.

Horizon High School serves about a dozen mostly local kids each year, employs a handful of teachers and counselors and operates out of rented space at Neighborhood House on Mills Street in Madison. For the students, it means close relationships with their teachers and each other, and routine, random drug tests as a fact of life.

"They have to be ready to pee in a cup and be tested. Being able to prove you're constantly sober is just a given," says Traci Goll, Horizon's program director.

In March, the Madison school district and the board of Horizon finalized an agreement that immediately brings some district funding to Horizon to support its operations through the spring semester. According to Horizon officials, the majority of the school's students were formerly enrolled in Madison public schools, although some have also come from other Dane County public

schools, Edgewood and other schools farther afield. Over the six and a half years the program has existed, scrambling for funding has been a constant.

"We don't want to shut doors for any kids, and this is a program that reaches students who would likely struggle or fail in a conventional school setting," says Erik Kass, Madison's assistant superintendent for business services, in explaining the school district's support.

In a fund-raising letter sent to Horizon supporters at the beginning of April, John Fournelle, board president and co-founder of the school, wrote about the "very good news" regarding Madison's funding assistance, which could continue beyond the immediate semester.

"Last week we received word that MMSD wanted to discuss a plan for providing some assistance for the 2011-2012 school year, for MMSD students enrolled in Horizon on the 3rd Friday in September," Fournelle wrote.

School Board member Marj Passman, who told me earlier this year that she would like to see a charter school in Madison for students in recovery, says she's delighted with the news about the local district helping support Horizon.

"I really have to praise Erik and Dan (Nerad, Madison superintendent) on this. These are kids from our district who would fall through the cracks and likely not get through school without help from a school like Horizon," Passman says.

According to Goll, three students will graduate from Horizon in May, something neither they nor their parents would have imagined a very likely possibility at one time.

"Unfortunately, we're seeing younger kids in middle school with addiction problems. In the last five to 10 years, more kids at younger ages are willing to try the more dangerous drugs, including heroin. They come to us after they've made the commitment to get help, get sober and stay sober. But they need a lot of support," Goll says.

Fournelle notes in his letter that even with support from the school district, Horizon will continue to have some significant ongoing expenses that won't be met through the new partnership with Madison.

To raise money, Horizon High School is looking for sponsors for "A Conversation with Dr. Richard Davidson: Cultivating Emotional Balance and the Adolescent Brain," a fundraiser on May 16 at 7 p.m. at the Lussier Family Heritage Center. Davidson is a University of Wisconsin-Madison expert on brain functioning and youth behavior.

Will this new financial relationship lead to a more formal charter school arrangement between the Horizon High School folks and the Madison administration and school board in the coming year or two?

Obviously, there are advantages for both sides already. Horizon benefits from the revenue stream provided from the school district and Madison needs to keep enrollment up in order to leverage state funding. Most important of all, students who are struggling with addiction need a place to go where they can stay drug-free and eventually graduate with a high school diploma.