

School helps teens with school, sobriety, life

host.madison.com/news/local/education/local_schools/school-helps-teens-with-school-sobriety-life/article_0f379722-003c-54d0-9e3b-f5eb607f3c17.html

By GENA KITTNER gkittner@madison.com 608-252-6139

Connor Johnson, 16, credit his months of sobriety to the private, non-profit Horizon High School that operates in two rooms of a Madison community center.

"If I didn't have to come to Horizon, I don't think I'd be alive right now," said Johnson, who at 15 overdosed on heroin and was thrown into a cold shower by friends to get his heart beating.

All nine students at Horizon, located within the Neighborhood House Community Center in Downtown Madison, are recovering from either a drug or alcohol addiction or both. Before being accepted into the school, each student is interviewed with their parents and must fill out an application. In addition to studying a curriculum that meets state standards, each student receives counseling for an hour every day and is randomly drug tested weekly, said Lori Battista LaFond, the school's director of outreach and marketing.



Since the little-known school opened in January 2005, more than 50 students from around Dane County have attended, 11 of whom graduated with a diploma. Others returned to a traditional high school or got their General Equivalency Degree.

Now advocates say they want to grow the school to serve students struggling with substance abuse. But officials say fundraising dollars are limited and not all parents can afford the \$6,000 tuition each semester.

"We've been living on the edge ... pretty much since day one," said Steve Caldwell, a Horizon board member and treasurer.

Dane County students with substance abuse problems can get services in area schools.

For example, the Madison School District offers in-school intervention, counseling and group discussions for students suffering from substance abuse or mental health problems, said Jeannette Deloya, a district social worker. School staff may refer students to an alternative program within the district or to an outside program as needed, and also provides support for parents, she said.

'Keeping them alive'

Shelly Dutch, director of Connections Counseling in Madison, started Horizon with a handful of parents with teens who struggled with relapses after receiving treatment.

"The relapse rate is so high and it's so hard for kids to maintain their sobriety" when they return to their schools, said Dutch, who still serves on the Horizon board.

At Horizon, teens can enroll at any point during the year. Nearly all of them have gone through inpatient treatment for drugs or alcohol.

"This school is a place for kids who want to learn in a sober, clean environment," said director Traci Goll. Graduation is the academic goal, but "our bigger goal is keeping them alive."

As a private school, it receives no state, federal or local tax dollars. This semester more than half of the students received financial aid through donations to the school.

The school's annual operating budget for 2009-2010 is \$129,000, with 42 percent coming from tuition and 58 percent coming from donations. It's running a \$30,000 deficit.

"It's a struggle and it makes it difficult to plan," Caldwell said of the deficit. "All of the implications of not being able to have a predictable funding stream is a reality."

Horizon leaders and board members see several options to continuing and expanding the school's mission, including partnering with the Madison schools or another Dane County district.

"We're certainly always open to discussing possibilities as far as partnering with Horizon," said Ken Syke, Madison School District spokesman. "But it would take a lot more conversation."

Even recovery schools that receive some tax dollars are struggling. At Project Change, a public charter recovery high school in the Waukesha School District, seven students are graduating this year and officials hope to have four underclassmen return in the fall.

"We have a lot of similarities and same challenges and the same goals as Horizon High School," said Tracy Mitchell, the school's director.

Another option for Horizon is to seek state or county tax dollars, advocates said.

Wisconsin has three recovery schools. Nationwide there are about 40 recovery schools in 12 states.

Making a difference

This year, Amanda Lawton Krupp, a Horizon board member, and others started contacting Horizon alumni to better track how they're doing after graduation to gauge the school's effectiveness, provide data for grant applications and discuss potential partnerships with districts, she said.

Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk refers to Horizon as a "jewel" in the county.

"I am one of their fans," she said, adding she's personally donated to the program and spoken at fundraisers. "When you meet some of these students in the program you just instantly fall in love with what a difference this is making in their ability to get a high school degree."

Copyright 2014 madison.com. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.