

Why America's First Recovery School Closed in 2013

This account is based on recollections of its founder and Phoenix School and Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Alternative Programs teachers and administrators, supplemented by posts on the MCPS website (links provided when cited). Content in Calibri font graciously provided by Dr. Andrew Finch (<https://my.vanderbilt.edu/recoveryhighschools/project-staff/>).

History

The Phoenix School opened in 1979 when Brian Berthiaume was asked to start a school for students whose education was disrupted by alcohol-or-other-drug abuse. The model was originally designed to help teens who were in recovery and voluntarily committed to maintaining their sobriety as they completed their high school diploma requirements.

The model was successful because:

1. Both locations (Phoenix I and II) were isolated from other schools and programs that would have exposed recovery students to peers using and/or selling drugs, thereby minimizing the former's risk of relapse.
2. It was a self-contained supportive community, akin to a surrogate family for these teens, of 25 – 35 students and 4 – 5 staff where everyone knew what was going on with each student, and students could feel safe to be proud of their sobriety and get help when relapsing.
3. Students who relapsed were removed and referred to inpatient treatment centers; they could reapply after achieving sobriety and renewing their commitment to it.
4. Parent involvement was required, as it was essential to help these teens sustain their sobriety.

The Beginning of the End

1988 - Phoenix 2 moves into new facility on Hadley Farms Drive, built by MCPS construction trades students. The building is dedicated on June 1, and 13 students graduate on June 3.

2001 -

- Phoenix 2 facility on Hadley Farms Drive is destroyed by an arson fire on Sunday night, May 6. On Monday morning, May 7, school is held in the Longview School in Gaithersburg. Longview had a storied history in the county, opening in 1950 as one of the first all-black schools in Montgomery County, the Emory Grove Consolidated Colored Elementary School. A committee had later renamed the school "Longview" to "represent the 'long' distance traveled by the students and the beautiful view seen from the school" in the shadow of Sugarloaf Mountain

(<http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/schools/longview/about/>). In 1961, Longview had transitioned from a general education school to a school for children with disabilities.

- In September 2001, the Longview School moves to Germantown, and the Gaithersburg site adopts the name, “Emory Grove Center”. Phoenix 2 remains at the Emory Grove Center and is joined by the Journey/Gateway alternative programs, making Emory Grove Center a consolidated, regional alternative high school center, the first in the “upcounty” area of Montgomery County. Though the County rebuilt the facility on Hadley Farms Drive, Phoenix 2 never did move back in. Instead, it remained a “school-within-a school”. Lisa Baker would ultimately become “Team Leader of Phoenix at Emory Grove Center”.

This section is from a 2002 memo from Superintendent Weast to the Board of Education (<http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/boe/meetings/agenda/2002-03/2002-1112/ALTERNATIVE.pdf>):

“In February 1999* the Board of Education received a report from the Work Group on Alternative Programs that was charged with the responsibility of conducting a comprehensive analysis of existing alternative program services. This work group produced a report that made several recommendations to refine the entry/exit process, develop a continuum of alternative program services, and establish regional facilities to meet the needs of some of the students served by the various alternative programs. All of the aforementioned recommendations, with the exception of the establishment of regional facilities, have been implemented. The recommendation for regional centers has not yet been implemented, due to a lack of appropriate facilities.

In September 2001 the former Longview facility, renamed the Emory Grove Center, became the first regional alternative high school center located in the upcounty area. The facility houses the Phoenix II program and the Journey/Gateway alternative programs. To provide students in the downcounty area with access to the same services, a similar program was approved by the Board of Education as part of the FY 2003–2008 Capital Improvements Program request for the McKenney Hills Center.

“The programs to be consolidated in the McKenney Hills Center include Phoenix I, currently located in the Spring Mill Center; the NEW School, housed in the Takoma Park Elementary School annex; and Tahoma, housed in the Lynnbrook Center annex in Bethesda. By consolidating these programs, a more rigorous instructional program can be implemented and a more comprehensive curriculum will be available...

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This line of thought showed a lack of understanding of the support teens in recovery need.

2003 -

- A similar consolidated program was approved by the Board of Education in 2002 as part of the FY 2003–2008 Capital Improvements Program request for the McKenney Hills Center, in order to provide students in the “downcounty” with a regional alternative high school. The programs to

be consolidated in the McKenney Hills Center were to include Phoenix 1, the NEW School, and Tahoma. The county believed "by consolidating these programs, a more rigorous instructional program can be implemented and a more comprehensive curriculum will be available." (MCPS Memo, 11-12-2002). Six other programs that had been operating at McKenney Hills at the time were to be moved to another consolidated site.

- In September 2003, the MCPS Department of Materials Management completed the relocation of Phoenix 1, the NEW School, and Tahoma to the McKenney Hills Center (MCPS Memo, 8-25-2003).

2008 - MCPS releases a report stating that enrollment on October 31, 2008, for Phoenix at McKenney Hills Center (Phoenix 1) was only 5 students, and for Phoenix at Emory Grove Center (Phoenix 2) was only 7 students. (MCPS Memo, 11-07-2008).

2009 - MCPS consolidated a number of alternative school programs into the existing Mark Twain school in Rockville. The two Phoenix programs were combined, moved to Mark Twain, and absorbed into the Needwood Academy High School Alternative Program. In fall 2009, Mark Twain was renamed the "Blair G. Ewing Center".

By September, 2009, both Phoenix I and II were moved to the Blair Ewing Center in Rockville, along with three other alternative programs and absorbed into the Needwood Academy (<http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/boe/meetings/SPEDdocs/2010-11/2010-1206/Alternative%20Programs%20Description%202010-2011.pdf>, page 2).

*The original notes are at

<http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/boe/meetings/minutes/1999/minutes.020999.pdf>, pp. 7 – 15.

Other Factors Contributing to the Closing

1. Policies, hiring staff, and registration requirements that were originally handled by the Program Coordinator were eventually defined by a central office administrator, resulting in students abusing or selling drugs being allowed into The Phoenix School.
2. Some principals referred students using or selling drugs to Phoenix.
3. Funding initially provided for staff training was ended.
4. Funding initially provided for outdoor excursions with staff and wilderness experts was ended. These field trips contributed heavily to students' self-esteem and motivation to stay sober, and helped staff stay charged.
5. County and state test scores became a higher priority within MCPS and the Department of Alternative Programs and resources went towards the consolidation of alternative programs, losing the integrity of the Phoenix program and its successes.

Phoenix 2 always had teachers certified in their subject area, and were "highly qualified" according to No Child Left Behind.

The End

Consequently, the tight community was no longer intact, and students striving to live drug-free shared school buses, cafeteria time, and gym, laboratory, and other classes with peers who were not.

The net effect over time was that both school personnel who had been referring families and students to Phoenix and families needing a recovery school saw that the critical pieces of the original successful model were lost in the co-location model, and so were not willing to try it.

Referrals and enrollment predictably dropped until only three students were enrolled in the 2012-2013 school year, and so it was closed (see <http://mcpsmd.swagit.com/play/02272017-1499/#2>, Agenda Item 4, 11'17").

This summary of why The Phoenix School closed was prepared by Patty Winters, Team Leader, Phoenix Rising: Maryland Recovery School Advocates with input from former Phoenix School teachers and MCPS staff.

June 16, 2017

Revised June 18, 26, 29, 30, and July 7, 2017

Remarks to the State DOE Substance Abuse Workgroup

Aug 25, 2017

My name is Mike Bucci and I thought I would introduce myself. Many in this group I have spoken to by phone. I had the blessing of teaching for 20 of my 37 year career with Montgomery County Public Schools at Phoenix School, an alternative school for students whose problems with substance abuse interfered with their education. Over that 20 year period I was a witness to students turning their lives around; not only raising their GPA and earning diplomas, but learning to live life on life's terms in a healthy manner. Most are now productive members of their communities.

I want to speak about Phoenix as a prevention tool. We had a continual demand for our students to share their stories with others. We would go to classes from elementary to high school; to PTAs, even assemblies in auditoriums. Their experience, strength and hope had an important and valuable message. I know it helped the students giving the talk-that's one of the principles of 12 step programs. But I also know that teenagers don't often listen to the adults in their lives, but will listen to another teenager. Especially if they know that person understands what they are going through. In those days we didn't collect data, but my sense from the response to those talks is that the message was heard and made a difference.

We are in the business of meeting children's needs. I was surprised when I began working at Phoenix in 1985 at the extent of substance abuse, pain, and hopelessness that was in the youth of Montgomery County. I saw the difference a positive peer culture bonded around recovery could make for those students. And so I am currently a member of Phoenix Rising, an advocacy group formed to resurrect a recovery school in Montgomery County and throughout the state. I am available to help in any way, and have many contacts with alumni and parents who would gladly speak with you.

I thank you for your work here and urge you to take the opportunity given you to recommend each county in our state have a school where students can go and be understood, confronted, and listened to; a school where hopelessness turns into hope.

Mike Bucci

Phoenix teacher 1985-2005

240-780-6235

Proposal to Establish Recovery School

Introduction

We hope to have a school that provides a highly structured drug free academic environment for students whose problems with substance abuse have interfered with their education.

Phoenix Rising: Maryland Recovery Schools Advocates (PRMDRSA) formed in January, 2016, with the assistance of Kristin Harper, (then) Executive Director of the Association of Recovery Schools (ARS).¹ Our membership includes people with lived experience², teachers and students from the Phoenix School (1979-2013), a peer recovery counselor, an Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Board of Education member, prevention alliance leaders, and ARS leaders.

Planning

Planning needs to include stakeholder forums to share expertise and experience at the core of each stage of development. Forum participants should include citizens with lived experience, Phoenix School staff, alumni, and parents, representatives from MCPS, the Board of Education, the County Council, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Recreation, recovery therapists, and community prevention leaders as a base group.

The School as Envisioned by Phoenix Rising: Maryland Recovery School Advocates

1. Location

- A. Housed separately from other schools, removed as much as possible from opportunistic sites that enable risky behaviors.
- B. Accessible by public transportation.
- C. Located in Montgomery County, serving Montgomery County families. This school can be a pilot or template for other school districts.

2. Enrollment

- A. Up to 50 students committed to maintain sobriety.
- B. Students can be enrolled directly from their treatment program or referred by self, parent, school.
- C. Many students will have a dual diagnosis.
- D. Enrollment is voluntary.
- E. Students will comply with a contract composed by Education and Therapy staff, allowing for individual needs; also requiring participation in recovery support-aftercare with a 12 step programs and parents/guardians to participate in weekly family therapy.
- F. As relapse is recognized as a part of the recovery process³, students who experience this setback will be voluntarily re-enrolled after completing a determined time of sobriety and with a revised contract including extra measures for support.

3. Staffing⁴

A. One Education Coordinator, as head of school, to oversee academic requirements for students to complete their high school diploma requirements, including student service hours which can be supported by the Department of Recreation. This position requires sufficient experience, training, and graduate education in high school administrative leadership and supporting students with a substance use disorder or co-occurring disorders/dual diagnoses.

B. One Counseling Coordinator to oversee peer support groups and professional counseling, intakes, and referrals to inpatient or outpatient programs or treatment as necessary. This position requires certification as an addiction therapist.

C. Teachers, counselors, and support staff, such as paraeducators and recreation staff, will have required training, certification or education in working with students with a substance use disorder or a dual diagnosis, along with subject matter certification or other specific training where applicable.

D. The School Nurse (can be part time) will have appropriate training and experience.

E. Graduate student interns under appropriate supervision can be a cost-free source of staffing to earn experience hours toward their degree.

4. Operations

A. Random drug-testing.

B. Classroom size of five to fifteen students.

C. Lunch and transportation to and from school will be provided by MCPS.

E. Students will demonstrate progress in recovery, academics, and attendance through regular staff and peer evaluations.

F. Students will have daily class in life skills/recovery.

G. “Outward Bound”^{5,6} – type experiences for students to act out their adolescent risk-taking developmental trait in a safe and structured venue; to be implemented in collaboration with the Department of Recreation.

5. Funding

A. Local, State, and Federal sources for capital and operations budgets.

B. Community and corporate partnerships can provide supplies and services to defray costs.

6. Miscellaneous

A. Our school will be accredited by the Maryland State Department of Education and the Association of Recovery Schools so students can earn a valid Maryland high school diploma. Unless the student requests otherwise, the diploma will be from the student’s home school.

B. Staff will work with the community (Department of Recreation, places of worship, etc.) to form alternative peer groups (APGs)⁷ for sober, social activities for evenings, weekends, and holidays.

Patty Winters, Team Leader, Phoenix Rising: Maryland Recovery School Advocates
Mike Bucci, Former Phoenix School Teacher
Including feedback from other PRMDRSA members.

November 21, 2016; Revised May 15, June 12, August 24, 2017

Footnotes

¹The Association for Recovery Schools website: <https://recoveryschools.org/>

²“Lived experience” in this context references an individual in recovery, has a loved one struggling with addiction or is in recovery, or has lost a loved one to a drug overdose.

³The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), “Drugs, Brains, and Behavior: The Science of Addiction,” <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugs-brains-behavior-science-addiction/treatment-recovery>, July, 2014.

⁴ARS Board of Directors (<https://recoveryschools.org/our-team/>) members Sasha McLean, Roger Oser, and Andrew Finch have shared with PRMDRSA that a successful model requires education and addiction therapists to collaborate and respect each other’s roles in recovery education. Source: unpublished conversations from PRMDRSA meetings, 2016 – 2017.

⁵Outward Bound (Non-profit), “Intercept Expeditions for Struggling Teens & Young Adults,” <http://www.outwardbound.org/intercept/intercept/>, March, 2015.

⁶Former Phoenix School staff and students, and MCPS administrator comments on the sustainable positive impact of Outward Bound-type experiences on students’ sobriety, academic engagement, graduation rate, and self-esteem. Source: unpublished conversations from PRMDRSA meetings, 2016 – 2017.

⁷ NIDA, “Principles of Adolescent Substance Use Disorder Treatment: A Research-Based Guide,” <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-adolescent-substance-use-disorder-treatment-research-based-guide/evidence-based-approaches-to-treating-adolescent-substance-use-disorders/recovery-support-services>, January, 2014.

To: Start Talking Maryland Workgroup
Re: Public Comments, August 25 meeting

The Montgomery County Public School system is currently investigating the re-establishment of a recovery high school, using a regional, multi-county model in order to reduce the budgetary burden on any one district. It concerns me that MCPS is not now participating in the proceedings of this workgroup and I am wondering how that can be remedied. I am also concerned about the MCPS focus on a regional approach, since it undermines the closely knit community that is so essential to the recovery process and the ability to help students participate in after-school activities with a healthy, supportive peer group. I encourage this group to look at ways to encourage inter-agency cooperation within counties to defray the costs of local recovery schools, rather than trying to distribute expenses more broadly to the detriment of successful outcomes for students. I am interested in ways to stay involved in the planning processes of this workgroup and would like to know how these sessions are being shared with concerned parties.

Sincerely,

Izzy Kovach
Member, Phoenix Rising
Retired MCPS teacher, Phoenix II (MCPS Recovery High School)