

Broome-Tioga BOCES launches New York's first recovery high school

By George Basler
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Officials at the Broome-Tioga BOCES can tick off the facts about drug use and addiction in Broome County, each as upsetting as the last.

- The county has been federally identified as a “high intensity drug trafficking area.”
- Drug deaths, mostly from heroin and opiates, claimed 66 lives in the county in 2017.
- Nearly 36 percent of county students in grades seven through 12 have used alcohol in their lifetimes, a higher percentage than the national average. Nearly 21 percent have used alcohol in the past 30 days, also higher than the national average.
- Marijuana use among students grades 9 through 12 is also higher than the national average.

So when Gov. Andrew Cuomo proposed in early 2017 that the state create recovery high schools in areas around the state that have been hit hardest by alcohol and drug addiction, Broome-Tioga BOCES (B-T BOCES) wanted to be at the front of the line.

“It gave us the incentive to move along in our conversations about what to do with kids who are experiencing substance use disorder,” said Doug Titus, supervisor of the Office of Communications and Development at the BOCES, which covers 15 school districts in Broome and Tioga counties.

The result is a program – the first of its kind in the state – that will enable students to receive treatment and counseling while also continuing their work to earn a high school diploma.

BOCES officials readily acknowledge the program is starting small. As of December, two students had qualified for the program by going through a screening process that includes a comprehensive clinical assessment administered by the Addiction Center of Broome County (ACBC), a non-profit agency that provides intensive outpatient treatment.

Called Compass Academy, the program has two components. During the school day, the students travel to the BOCES center to take courses at Evertech High School, an existing alternative education program. Then, when the school day ends, students stay at BOCES



Alicia Grunder, a licensed creative arts therapist, serves as primary clinician for the Broome-Tioga BOCES' new recovery high school, called Compass Academy. The dog's name is Sal.

❖ Photo courtesy of Broome-Tioga BOCES

for three hours of treatment/recovery-oriented programs run by the ACBC.

ACBC hopes to get a location at BOCES certified as a substance abuse treatment clinic. That would make the program eligible for Medicaid reimbursement and private insurance.

During the three hours, students take part in individual and group therapy sessions and mental health counseling as well as physical education, art and drama therapy. Two part-time “peer advocates” who have been in recovery from addictions will also be available to provide support. Students receive dinner and are transported home by ACBC staff.

“We’re trying to create an environment for kids to be with other kids like them where they can feel safe and connected and support each other,” said Alicia Grunder, a licensed creative arts therapist who coordinates the program and runs therapy sessions along with a licensed clinician.

Students must agree to be drug tested periodically to participate in the program. The goal is to provide early intervention and have students reach a stable recovery situation. While some may want to return to traditional high schools, others will stay until graduation.

Although the program received other referrals for potential enrollees, the students did not qualify or parents preferred other options, said Carmela Pirich, executive director of the Addiction Center of Broome County.

“I think we’re off to a good start, but we want more referrals,” Pirich said. Officials

estimate 10 to 15 students could be in the recovery high school program by the end of the school year.

If enrollment reaches 35 to 40 students, B-T BOCES would consider moving the recovery program to its own location, according to BOCES officials. Until then, officials will be gauging the program’s effectiveness and working to maintain long-term funding.

The idea of a recovery high school is not a new concept. They can operate as charter schools, schools within schools or stand-alone schools. The website of the Association of Recovery Schools, a national organization, lists 40 such schools in 15 states. But none are in New York.

In August 2017, the New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS) began work to change that by querying BOCES agencies across the state about their interest in creating partnerships to support the development of recovery high schools. B-T BOCES was one of 11 that responded.

“We want to use the BOCES model because we feel it’s more likely to succeed,” said Rob Kent, OASAS’ general counsel. He noted that BOCES agencies have a broad reach and can draw students from all their component school districts.

Broome-Tioga’s plan “seems to have all the right elements for success,” Kent added. OASAS will fund the treatment side of the program with a \$330,000 allocation to the Addiction Center of Broome County. Reimbursement from state BOCES aid will cover the educational costs.

OASAS spokesman Edison Alban said his agency is not aware of any additional programs opening in the first part of 2019. “OASAS will continue to work with any BOCES or OASAS provider interested in discussing the feasibility of developing a recovery high school,” he said.

“We were a little ahead of the curve,” said Sandra Ruffo, president of the B-T BOCES and NYSSBA’s Area 4 Director. “We recognized our need and reached out to agencies. We had the ground work going.”

“It’s another opportunity for kids to be successful” she said. “There could be bumps in the road, but we can’t see this as anything but win-win.”