

Massachusetts Recovery High Schools

Framework for Effective Delivery and Evaluation of
Academic & Programmatic Services

December 2024



Overview of Massachusetts Recovery High Schools

Who We Are

Massachusetts Recovery High Schools are DESE-supported, state-funded grant programs, operated by a school district or an education collaborative. They exist to provide academic and social-emotional support to students in grades 9-12 whose lives have been impacted by substance use/misuse. Recovery High Schools offer places where:

- Students can continue their education;
- The accrual of *recovery capital* (defined below) animates each day, and shapes a student's progress through school;
- A culture exists to support engagement in a process of change that includes improving health and wellness, living a self-directed life, and striving to reach their full potential, and;
- Supportive professionals co-design a personalized program of academic and personal growth tailored to the needs – and dreams – of each student.

The RHS Mission

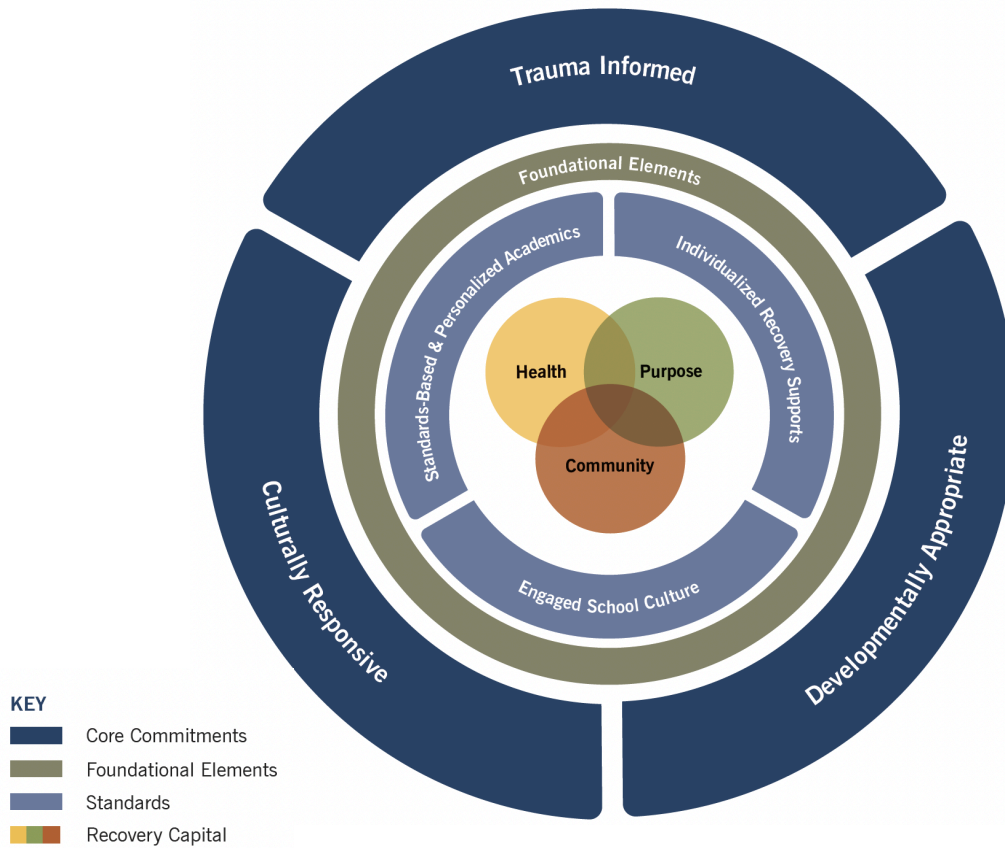
The overriding mission of Recovery High Schools is to engage students in a process of growth and development so that they can continue their education and lead healthy lives of meaning and purpose. As a result, recovery is central to their mission, and Recovery High Schools use a research-based, government-supported definition of the term "recovery": *a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.*

Recovery High Schools co-design plans and pathways that are personalized to each student's needs and goals. Their commitment is to provide a high-quality academic experience while supporting the development of students' **recovery capital** – assets such as knowledge, dispositions, abilities, and relationships within each of the broad domains of **health, purpose, and community**. The goal of Recovery High Schools is to stabilize students, build their recovery capital, and help transition them to their next steps with a healthy accumulation of internal and external resources that will fortify them along their path to meaning and purpose.

RHS Theory of Action

When all RHS activities and operations are guided by
Core Commitments to being developmentally appropriate, trauma informed, and culturally responsive, **and...**
Foundational Elements are in place to ensure strong capacity for program development and delivery, **and...**
RHS Standards (culture, academics, recovery supports) are enacted with a high degree of integrity, **then...** students will accrue
Recovery Capital so they are equipped to live healthy self-directed lives and reach their full potential.

Figure 1. Overview of RHS Theory of Action



Core Commitments

Recovery High Schools are committed to being trauma informed, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate.

RHS Commitments

We commit to being trauma informed	A trauma-informed school “provides trauma awareness, knowledge, and skills as part of the fabric of the school culture, practices, and policies and acts in collaboration with those who are involved with the child, including students’ families, community agencies, leaders, and law enforcement, using the best available science to facilitate and support the recovery and resiliency of the school community.” ¹
We commit to being culturally responsive	Staff can better support students by learning about and respecting their students’ cultures, using culture as a basis for learning, and understanding their implications for communications and relationships.
We commit to being developmentally appropriate	Because adolescents’ brains are still developing, they have unique cognitive and social needs that differ from those of young children and adults. For educators of RHS students, “developmentally appropriate” practices are those intended to help support accrual of recovery capital for adolescents.

¹ See the National Child Traumatic Stress Network at nctsn.org.

Foundational Elements

Foundational elements describe the institutional context and structures that enable schools to deliver high-quality programming, and to meet the expectations of state, local, and federal requirements. These elements describe basic expectations for program leadership, staffing, student support, physical space needs, and network collaboration.

RHS Standards

Recovery High Schools use three main approaches to support students in building their recovery capital (these are called the RHS “standards”):

Standards-based and personalized academics taught by staff who provide students with individualized support and personalized pathways to graduation.

Engaged school cultures that foster meaningful connections and support individual growth in all recovery capital domains.

Individualized recovery support tailored to each student’s areas of strength and challenges. This includes a variety of group and individual activities aimed at building both internal and external assets (social-emotional groups, individual wellness plans, and a range of self-awareness activities).

Recovery Capital

Recovery capital is the central driving idea of Recovery High Schools in Massachusetts. Recovery capital can be thought of as the “resources and capacities that enable growth and human flourishing.”² Massachusetts Recovery High Schools use a three-domain model of recovery that is aligned with Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and is appropriate for adolescents in a school environment. The three domains—health, purpose, and community—center the work of self exploration and personal growth. The table below summarizes how these domains are currently understood for the purposes of Recovery High Schools:

Summary of Recovery Capital

Health	Purpose	Community
Awareness of, and strategies to monitor and manage, physical and emotional needs; access to providers; basic needs are met.	Self-esteem and growing self-efficacy; resilience, connections with longer-term plans and articulation of goals; involvement with hobbies/interests.	Connection to peers, positive adult role models, community groups; strong and positive social networks.

² Best, D., & Ivers, J. H. (2022). Inkspots and ice cream cones: a model of recovery contagion and growth. *Addiction Research & Theory*, 30(3), 155-161., as cited in Best, D., & Hennessy, E. A. (2022). The science of recovery capital: where do we go from here?. *Addiction*, 117(4), 1139-1145.

Development of the RHS Framework

In 2020, the results from an 18-month-long study of the five programs recommended, among other measures, clarifying and refining the overall theory of change and program model that unifies the state's Recovery High Schools. During the 2021-2022 school year, personnel from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and Recovery High Schools conducted a year of modified instructional rounds (observation, data collection, analysis of data), during which innovative and effective practices – and less effective or unclear practices – were described and discussed. This resulted in a refined theory of action and enabled the network to collaboratively engage in an iterative cycle of framework development centered around the questions: *What are the most essential and effective elements of the Massachusetts RHS programs? How would we redesign a unified RHS program using our collective best practices? What is the mission of recovery high schools today?* The resulting framework underwent two years of systematic revisions before becoming final in 2025. This work was conducted in partnership with the **Collaborative for Educational Services** (CES), with additional support from the **Education Development Center** (EDC).

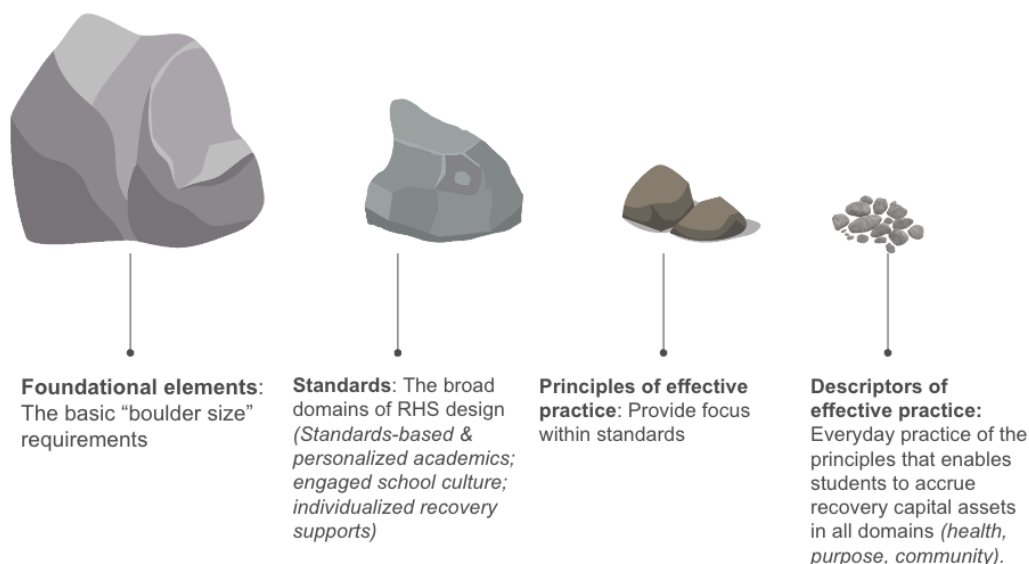
Alignment with DESE's Educational Vision

This framework was developed to align with DESE's **educational vision**, which articulates a path forward for all students in the Commonwealth to attain academic knowledge and skills, understand and value self, understand and value others, and engage with the world. Recovery High Schools play a critical role in bringing this vision to life. In particular, RHS programs are most closely aligned with DESE's Strategic Objective One: **Cultivate systems to support the whole student and foster joyful, healthy, and supportive learning environments so that all students feel valued, connected, nourished, and ready to learn.**

Framework Architecture³

At the heart of the RHS theory of action is the idea that when students are provided with an environment designed to help them engage in a process of change and accrue recovery capital, then they will be more likely to improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential. The framework contained in this document is intended to help operationalize that theory. It contains four “levels”:

Four Levels of the RHS Framework



1. Foundational elements are the basic institution-level features of RHS program design that enable the schools to function well. *All schools are expected to exhibit these elements.*

2. Standards are broad domains that RHS programs must attend to carefully as they seek to ensure that all students accrue recovery capital. The three standards are: standards-based and personalized academics; engaged school culture; and individualized recovery supports.

3. Each standard is built around **principles** of effective practice. These principles were distilled from existing research, theory and practice from a range of traditions including the recovery movement, positive youth development, and the learning sciences. *All schools are expected to demonstrate that these principles are central to program design, and meaningfully animate school life.*

4. Each principle has at least two **descriptors** of effective practice. These are intended to help operationalize the associated principle, and to point school leaders and communities toward harnessing the power of the principle.

³ The framework architecture described here was adapted from the 2020 Standards of Accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC).

Foundational Elements

Leadership

Principal is licensed and fully qualified to lead a secondary educational program, and understands the needs of students whose lives have been impacted by substance use.

Principal's responsibilities are limited to the development of the RHS program, and to carrying out its mission.

Principal effectively and transparently develops and maintains a dedicated RHS budget aligned with the program's mission and goals.

Staffing

There is a dedicated full-time licensed clinician.

Hiring practices are designed to identify candidates who are experienced in trauma-informed practices, and in developing meaningful and appropriate relationships with students who are impacted by substance use.

All staff cultivate and demonstrate understanding of recovery capital and the role it plays in enabling students to lead lives of purpose and meaning.

Staff, teachers and clinicians receive regular professional development, including (but not limited to) clinical collaboration, consultation and supervision.

Physical Space

The space is distinctly separate from other programs to ensure a supportive, recovery-focused environment and cohesive culture that minimizes potential negative and/or disruptive influences on students' well-being.

Student Support

The Recovery High School and the District of Residence collaborate to ensure special education services described in a student's IEP are provided in a manner that minimizes disruption of the student's recovery program, as outlined in [DESE regulations](#).

Low student-to-staff ratio (roughly 3:1) is maintained.

Written policies lay out expectations related to behavior, school attendance and classroom presence and participation.

Behavioral approaches prioritize restorative practices.

Structures and routines exist to ensure that student behavior is always observable and interruptible by staff to ensure physical and emotional safety.

Drug testing is regular, randomized and follows a procedure consistent with local, state and federal regulation, including those related to health and safety (e.g. OSHA).

Meaningful two-way communication with caregivers and/or outside supports is conducted at intervals appropriate to the needs of each student.

Programs work with students to develop individualized after-hours support protocols that draw on community-based resources, such as crisis support lines and emergency rooms.

Network Collaboration

The network engages in an ongoing process of reflection and innovation towards commitment to, and the development of, this framework.

The network works collaboratively to develop best practices for supporting and monitoring students' accrual of recovery capital.

Standard 1 – Engaged School Culture

Principle 1.1 Sense Of Place

School activities build relationships and add to a "sense of place" among students and staff.

Descriptors

Frequent structured meetings provide a shared space for students to focus on their social and emotional learning and recovery capital accrual.

School-wide behavioral norms and boundaries are modeled and reinforced by all members of the school community.

There are opportunities to connect with community and culture (e.g., guest speakers, community services and resources, community service; giving of themselves back to the community).

Milestones and contributions of individuals are celebrated and valued.

School-wide special events allow for in-depth exploration of topics, and connection to community/cultural resources.

Principle 1.2 Environment

Schools provide a safe, welcoming and respectful environment that is appropriate for a uniquely vulnerable population.

Descriptors

The layouts of schools are inviting, comfortable, calming and conducive towards learning, self-reflection, growth and development.

The physical space signals belonging and co-creation; for example, displaying student-created artwork and culturally responsive/sustaining messaging.

Comfortable areas are provided for self-soothing, de-escalation, mindfulness, reflection, etc.

Clothing/dress policies are gender inclusive, equitable, and acknowledge the need to maintain an environment free of violence and reference to drugs, alcohol, hate speech, etc.

**Principle 1.3
Teacher-Student
Relationships**

Descriptors

Supportive teacher-student relationships are the norm, and they are governed by clear boundaries that support emotional and physical safety for all.

Staff develop rapport with students and build strong knowledge of students' individual academic and social-emotional needs.

Staff uphold consistent boundaries that are trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate.

Staff model and reinforce positive and constructive talk about substance use that is informed by norms of consent and mutual respect.

Standard 2 – Standards-Based & Personalized Academics

Principle 2.1

Personalized Curricular Pathways

Academic experiences are engaging, relevant, and standards-aligned.

Descriptors

The school and student collaborate to design educational pathways and goals that are personalized to each student's strengths, challenges, and vision for their lives.

Interdisciplinary learning, project-based learning, and authentic learning experiences provide opportunities for deeper understanding.

Creative expression and student interests and hobbies are supported and have a featured place in the student's school experience.

Principle 2.2

Instructional Practices

Differentiation enables students to access the curriculum and demonstrate their knowledge.

Descriptors

Student-centered and inquiry-based approaches are dominant.

Instruction is framed by trauma-informed practices.

Flexible accommodations and supplemental support strategies are responsive to the needs of individual students.

Principle 2.3

Classroom Management

Classroom management is aligned with school-wide expectations and tailored for the unique needs of the RHS setting.

Descriptors

Students' physical and emotional safety are prioritized.

Classrooms are engaging and collaborative spaces of learning that accommodate individual student behavioral profiles.

Trauma-informed principles and practices influence classroom management choices.

Restorative practices are prioritized.

Principle 2.4
Coordination With Home
Districts

Descriptors

RHS communicates with sending districts as appropriate.

School staff coordinate coursework and credit histories with sending districts.

Staff coordinate closely with sending districts to ensure students' academic experience is coherent and aligned with district requirements.

Standard 3 – Individualized Recovery Supports

Principle 3.1 Comprehensive Recovery Planning	Descriptors
All students develop and regularly engage with a comprehensive individual recovery plan that builds and monitors all domains of recovery capital (i.e., health, purpose, community).	<p>Comprehensive recovery plans are strengths-based, culturally affirming, trauma-informed and developed collaboratively with each student and their caregivers as appropriate.</p> <p>Schools use a range of formal and informal assessments to determine a student's level of need and coordinate related interventions and programming.</p> <p>In collaboration with the recovery counselor, students continuously review and refine their plans.</p>
Principle 3.2 Self Exploration And Growth	Descriptors
All students engage in ongoing self exploration and personal growth.	<p>Students receive counseling supports including, but not limited to, individual and group interventions reflective of individual and collective student needs.</p> <p>Social and emotional learning is emphasized throughout the RHS school day, including in classrooms, counseling, and social settings.</p>
Principle 3.3 Substance Use/Misuse Supports	Descriptors
All students have access to individual and group counseling and support to manage substance-related recovery needs.	<p>Community-based substance use supports (e.g. AA, in-person or online) will be made available to students based on individual need, appropriateness and safety of the group, and the program's ability to transport and coordinate.</p> <p>When possible, drug testing is leveled to provide students with fine-grained empirical feedback about their substance use.</p>

Principle 3.4
Transition Supports

Descriptors

Strong structures are in place to support transition into and out of the school.

School engages students and families/caregivers in conversations about students' short- and long-term goals, including those related to transition back to a sending district, or to post-secondary opportunities.

Recovery plans include anticipated supports needed for transition goals, including community-based recovery supports when possible.

School communicates and coordinates with outside districts and agencies to support transition needs.

Using this Framework as a Program Evaluation Tool

This framework will form the core of an **ongoing cycle of reflection and improvement** that all Recovery High Schools are expected to engage in. Part of that cycle involves regular self-assessment as well as periodic site visits by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

When using this framework as a program evaluation tool, each foundational element and principle of effective practice will be assessed on a continuum of four implementation levels to indicate the quality of evidence available. The framework represents “best practices” for operating a Recovery High School, as distilled over time by RHS leaders, staff, and partners.

Programs at different stages of development may enact the standards and principles with different levels of consistency and sophistication.

Limited Evidence	Developing	Implementing	Excelling
Organizational practices, structures, and/or processes are nonexistent, evidence is limited, or practices are so infrequent that their impact is negligible.	Organizational practices, structures, and/or processes exist on paper or are being tried but are not yet fully developed or implemented consistently.	Organizational practices, structures, and/or processes are functional, and their structures and processes are implemented consistently throughout the school.	Organizational practices, structures, and/or processes are highly functional, and their structures and processes are deeply embedded in the school culture, and can serve as exemplars for similar schools.
