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## Exploring the Role of Occupational Therapy in Recovery High Schools for Adolescents with Substance use Disorder and Co-Occurring Mental Health Disorders

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# Exploring the Role of Occupational Therapy in Recovery High Schools for Adolescents with Substance use Disorder and Co-Occurring Mental Health Disorders



Taylor Buono, OTD-S  
Victory High School

Tina Miller, BA, Founder and Executive Director and Dr. Mariana D'Amico, EdD, OTR/L, FAOTA

## Introduction

- Completion of this capstone with a recovery high school, Victory High School, was inspired by the public health crisis of substance use disorder (SUD) in adolescents and its impact on participation in daily occupations.
- Focus areas included program development, advocacy, and administration.
- School performance is often affected by drug and alcohol use among youth and adolescents, with associations of higher drop-out and lower college attendance.
- Recovery high schools are safe and supportive environments that provide additional support not offered by public schools for adolescents in recovery from substances.

**Figure 1**  
Florida Recovery Schools of Tampa Bay

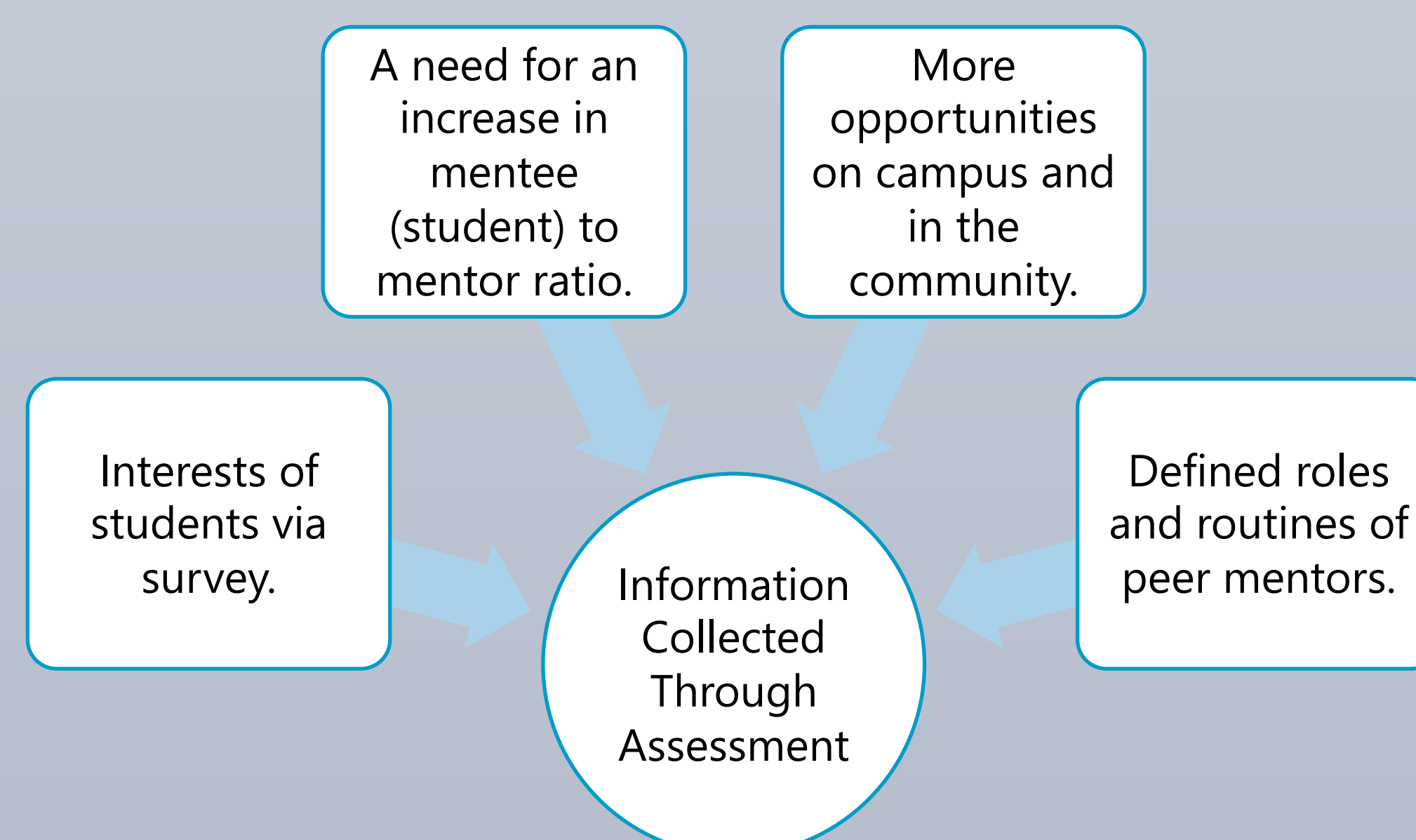


## Site Description

- Victory High School is a non-profit private high school with campuses in Pasco, Pinellas, and Hillsborough counties in Florida.
- Target Population:
  - Adolescents aged 14-19 years old.
  - Those with primary substance use disorder and secondary or co-occurring mental health disorders.
- Services Offered:
  - Academics.
  - Occupation-based activities (art, drumming, sports, etc.).
  - One to one and group mental health counseling.
  - Brain performance and coaching via Vitanya.

## Summary of Needs Assessment

**Figure 2**  
Findings from Needs Assessment



## Literature Review Summary

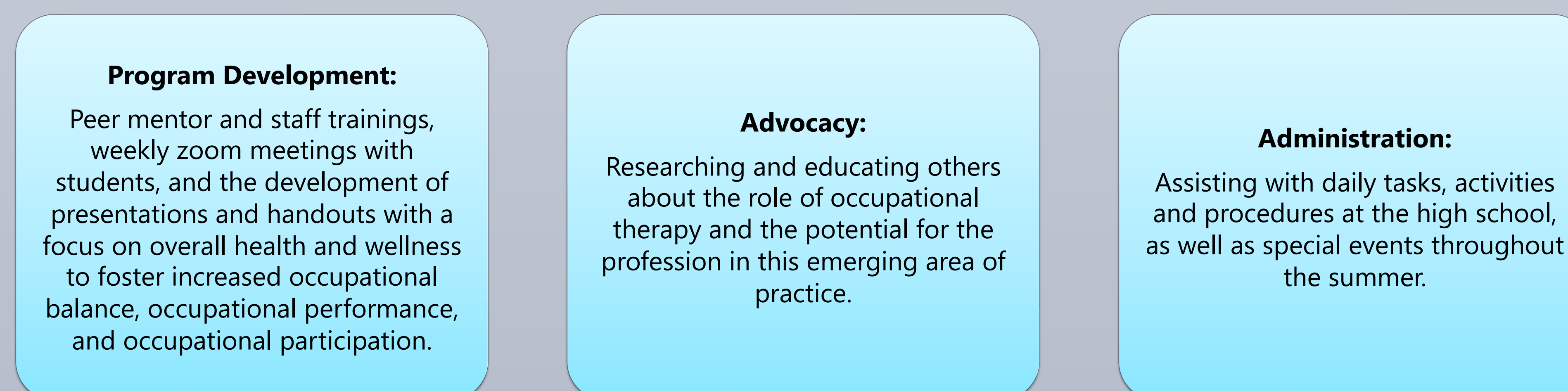
- In 2020, approximately 59.3 million American youth and teenagers over the age of 12 reported using illicit drugs within the past year (Mattila et al., 2022).
- School is a significant setting for youth and adolescents spend more time at school than anywhere else, aside from their homes (Finch et al., 2017).
- School performance is often affected by the adverse effects of drug and alcohol use among adolescents
- Substance use during teenage years may be associated with drop-out and lower college attendance (Finch et al., 2017).
- Recovery high schools are safe and supportive alternative educational environments that provide additional support not offered by public schools for adolescents in recovery from substances (Finch et al., 2017; Tanner-Smith et al., 2018).
- Social connectedness, social capital, and peer support are emphasized and prioritized in recovery high schools to foster an environment of acceptance, personal growth, and academic and behavioral adjustment (Finch et al., 2017; Tanner-Smith et al., 2018).
- Among youth in the United States between the ages of 13 and 18 years of age, approximately one out of every four to five live with a known mental health condition (Cahill and Egan, 2017).
- Approximately half of youth who have untreated mental health problems drop out of school before graduating (Cahill and Egan, 2017).

**Figure 3**  
The Victory High School Logo



## Capstone Project Description

**Figure 4**  
Capstone Focus Areas and Activities



## Learning Objectives Achieved

- Completed needs assessment to determine the interests of students and staff thoughts and visions.
- Completed mental health first aid training for youth.
- Facilitated weekly summer zoom meetings with students and peer mentors.
- Created handouts and presentations for staff, students, and mentors to address leadership, overall health and wellness, and the role of OT in this emerging practice area and the novel setting of a recovery high school.

**Figure 5**  
Youth Mental Health First Aid Certificate



## Implications for OT Practice

- Occupational therapy practitioners can address substance use disorders and other mental health implications, as well as habits, roles, and routines to help promote successful and fulfilling daily living for youth in specialized high school setting.
- Occupational therapists can use their clinical, educational, and advocacy skills to address barriers to engagement and participation in occupations for youth with substance abuse.
- Occupational therapists can implement programs to promote overall health and wellness and occupation-based interventions or activities in various contexts and should include youth with substance abuse programs.
- Opportunities for occupational therapy in this emerging area include screening, evaluation, and intervention, providing evidence of its value on an interdisciplinary team.

## References and Acknowledgements

I extend my sincerest gratitude to Tina Miller, Victory High Schools staff, students and families, for welcoming me and sharing their space with me. I would also like to thank Dr. D'Amico and Dr. Kane for their ongoing support and encouragement throughout the capstone process.

References Available Upon Request