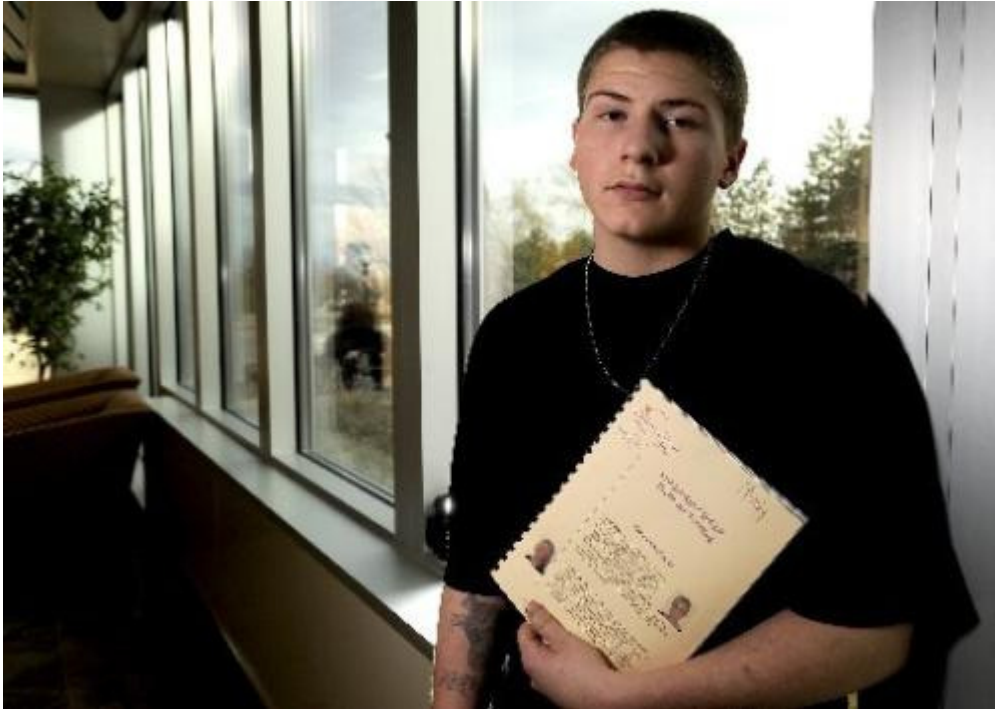


## 'Solution circle' starts healing at Boulder's Justice High

Students who overdosed on prescription drugs among first to participate

By Vanessa Miller Camera Staff Writer

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Nick Sena, a sophomore at Justice High, is a facilitator for a restorative justice program at the school. He is shown at the Boulder County Justice Center. ( MARK LEFFINGWELL )

Six Justice High students on Wednesday faced one another, their families and the poor choices that landed some of them in the hospital two weeks ago.

The students, who got in trouble Dec. 2 for overdosing on prescription drugs while at school, were participating in one of Justice High's first restorative justice "solution circles."

The idea behind the circles is for students who get into trouble to discuss their behavior with their parents, peers, teachers and counselors and come up with solutions other than court-ordered punishments. Administrators at Justice High, a Boulder charter school for troubled teens, say the goal is to address problem behavior before it becomes more serious.

"If I could have done something like this to catch my delinquent behavior before it got worse and progressed, things would have been a lot different for me," said Justice High sophomore Nick Sena, 16, who facilitated the group discussion Wednesday.

Restorative justice, which works to repair harm by bringing suspects and victims together to discuss the criminal behavior, has long been available to adults and juveniles who end up in criminal court. But the new Justice High-based restorative justice program addresses issues such as truancy, fights or drug problems that don't always result in criminal charges but could lead to more bad behavior or expulsion from school.

Funded through an Expelled and At-risk Student Services grant, about \$7,000 will go toward training students and staff members on restorative justice and how to use solution circles.

Wednesday's circle was the second that Justice High has done. It included the students who overdosed, at least one parent for each student, school administrators, counselors and several classmates.

The six students who overdosed signed an agreement to take steps to repair the harm they caused, though the details of their contract are confidential.

Sena, who was nominated by staff members to be trained as a restorative justice facilitator, said he expects the program to go a long way in keeping kids out of trouble.

"It's not really a punishment," he said. "It makes them recognize what they've done and restore the harm that they've brought to themselves and others."

Sena, who is on juvenile probation for two years for legal troubles that he didn't want to disclose, said he thinks his peers respond better to having someone their age and in their situation moderate the discussion, rather than an adult.

"Being student-led is more powerful," he said.

Mindy Logan, vice principal and counselor at Justice High, said the school has seven students being trained as restorative justice facilitators and four -- like Sena -- who have completed the training.

The first circle that Justice High did was for a girl who had been excessively truant, and Logan said it was tremendously helpful. She said students often don't realize how their behavior affects other people, and they often don't feel comfortable communicating the reason they're acting out.

Restorative justice prompts unprecedented conversations among students, parents and educators, Logan said.

"It helps them understand the impact and gives them ways to repair the harm," she said.