



"I know what these kids are going through. I want to be the person I wish I had—
someone who shows up, who listens, who makes you feel like you matter."

—JOSIAH SANCHEZ, YMHC VOLUNTEER

Lake Middle School, a Title 1 public school located in Denver, Colorado, is 1 of 65 service sites that work with a YMHC member like **Josiah Sanchez** (pictured) to serve the needs of students in Colorado.

📍 LAKE MIDDLE SCHOOL, DENVER, COLORADO

Building a Model of Student-Centered Support Through the Youth Mental Health Corps

Across the United States, youth mental health challenges are reaching critical levels. In 2023, 40% of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the past year.ⁱ Despite an increasing demand for mental health services, the behavioral health workforce is significantly understaffed nationally, with more than one third of the U.S. population living in a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area and even greater projected shortages by 2037.ⁱⁱ While the national landscape illuminates widespread challenges, each state addresses its own unique hurdles and triumphs in supporting youth mental health.

The mental health crisis in Colorado threatens not only the well-being of young people but also their academic success and long-term prospects. Recent data from the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey found that 24% of Colorado middle school students—one in four students—reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness.ⁱⁱⁱ Seventeen percent of Colorado middle school students reported that they have seriously considered suicide.

There is a clear connection between mental health and academic performance, school climate, and community well-being. Students struggling with mental health challenges are more likely to experience chronic absenteeism, disengagement from learning, and difficulty forming supportive peer relationships—factors that increase the likelihood that they will drop out of school.^{iv}

Social media is another growing mental health concern because usage among young people is nearly universal: In 2024, almost half of young people ages 13 to 17 reported being online “almost constantly,” with 95% using at least one social media site.^v The widespread use of social media has sparked national conversations around the potential benefits and harms of social media use among young people and prompted the U.S. Surgeon General to release an advisory in 2023 to call attention to the issue.^{vi} In Colorado, recent evidence demonstrates the relationship between increased social media use and poor mental health among young Coloradans.^{vii}

Recognizing these challenges, the state of Colorado has stepped in with proactive measures to improve youth mental health. As part of its commitment, Colorado adopted a 5-year strategic plan aimed at expanding access to behavioral health services

✦ About the Youth Mental Health Corps

The YMHC is a multisector partnership designed to address the youth mental health crisis and the mental health workforce shortage in the United States. The initiative aims to connect middle and high school students with vital mental health resources while offering young adults (ages 18–24) opportunities to gain practical experience in behavioral health careers. By recruiting and training YMHC members to work as peer and near-peer mental health navigators within schools and community organizations, the initiative provides mental health supports to young people while building the behavioral health workforce of the future. YMHC members gain on-the-job work experience, receive a stipend, and earn a certificate or postsecondary credential at no cost to start or advance their careers in behavioral health.

The initiative was developed by the Schultz Family Foundation and Pinterest in partnership with AmeriCorps. The YMHC deployed its first cohort of 306 members in September 2024 to serve schools and communities in Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, and Texas. Seven additional states are preparing to launch their own YMHC programs in fall 2025, and another seven states are developing plans to launch in fall 2026, supported by planning grants. In total, 18 states are now actively partnering in this growing national effort to address mental health through service.

Learn more at YouthMentalHealthCorps.org.

for youth, strengthening prevention efforts, and coordinating resources across state agencies to better serve students and families.

Colorado is also expanding its approach to student well-being through partnerships with the Youth Mental Health Corps (YMHC). Since September 2024, the YMHC has trained and deployed over 100 YMHC members to serve as mental health navigators in Colorado, helping over 3,500 young people access crucial “near-peer” support in its 1st year.

Why Lake Middle School Partnered With the YMHC: “It’s All About Relationships”

Lake Middle School serves approximately 603 students in grades 6 through 8. The school reflects the cultural and socioeconomic diversity of its surrounding community, with 79% of students identifying as Hispanic and 88% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. For years Lake Middle School has faced persistent challenges related to academic performance, student behavior, and school safety. Vandalism, bullying, and disciplinary referrals were frequent, compounded by systemic issues that students face outside of school, including family incarceration, substance abuse, and trauma.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues as students returned to school with increased anxiety, depression, and social disconnection. At the same time, schools like Lake Middle School faced significant shortages of mental health professionals, making it difficult to meet the growing needs of students. In response, Lake Middle School joined Colorado’s YMHC, a statewide initiative implemented locally by Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC). The program places young adults (18–24)ⁱⁱⁱ in schools to facilitate personalized, wraparound mental health support to middle and high school students.

Lake Middle School’s partnership with the YMHC is founded on the fundamental belief that strong, consistent relationships drive student well-being and academic success. As a testament to its commitment to strong relationships, school leadership also emphasized the importance of intentionally matching members to the community they serve. At Lake Middle School, this meant recruiting a YMHC member with shared lived experience, cultural competence, and a commitment to youth development—which is how the school was matched with Josiah Sanchez, a YMHC member from the school’s neighborhood.

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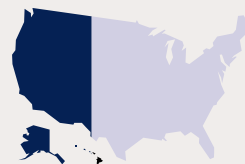
— LAKE MIDDLE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

“I grew up in this neighborhood,” said Josiah. “I know what these kids are going through. I want to be the person I wish I had—someone who shows up, who listens, who makes you feel like you matter.”

This relationship-based approach applies not only to student well-being but also to the development of YMHC members themselves. In addition to the foundational mental health training provided through the YMHC, members receive ongoing mentorship, professional development, and dedicated spaces to meet with students. These additional supports are essential for equipping members with the tools they need to be effective in their roles.

As one Lake Middle School administrator noted, “We built [Josiah’s] capacity to handle behavioral issues [by] shadowing deans and practicing how to facilitate tough conversations. By the time he was fully released into the role, he had the steadiness you need in this work.”

The result is a supportive environment in which YMHC members are empowered to grow professionally while meeting the daily needs of students and the local community.



over 1/3

of the U.S. population lives in a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area



24%

of Colorado middle school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in 2023

4,500+

young people helped by 144 YMHC members in Colorado since September 2024

Day-to-Day: Interventions Large and Small to Help Students Thrive

Once trained and placed at their assigned schools, YMHC members work onsite 5 days a week providing individualized, student-centered support alongside school staff and community partners. Their role as a near-peer navigator for students is unique and multifaceted: Members help students navigate academic pressures, gain access to basic-needs support, and connect with mental health professionals. Beyond serving as a navigator, YMHC members also build rapport with students to instill trust and position themselves as an available support for *all* students. These interventions—large and small—are part of the broader mission of helping students stay engaged in school and thrive.



At Lake Middle School, YMHC member Josiah maintains a caseload of 18 students, meeting with 4 each day for one-on-one check-ins. These daily conversations cover a wide range of topics: academic performance, attendance, emotional well-being, and basic needs like food and clothing. Josiah also participates in schoolwide efforts, serving on the attendance team, participating in student support meetings or intervention planning, and supporting teachers and staff in conflict resolution, extending his impact and relationships to students across the entire school.

“Josiah is the nexus. ... If he can’t help directly, he knows exactly where to go.”

— LAKE MIDDLE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR

A Trusted Hub for Students

Josiah’s extensive presence at the school helps him build trusted relationships with students. One Lake Middle School teacher shared an anecdote about students who were actively searching for Josiah during a passing period: “They were asking around, trying to find him. He’s doing something that’s winning their trust—that’s leadership.”

Josiah’s office—a welcoming, student-centered space—has become a trusted hub for students to ask for help, share concerns, or simply feel seen. Some come needing school supplies or help with homework. Others are navigating challenges that are more complex, such as hunger, housing insecurity, or anxiety. No matter the challenge or concern, students know they can turn to Josiah for a listening ear as a trusted adult who cares about them.

By creating a safe space at school and building a reputation among students as a trusted near-peer who is there to help, YMHC members serve the needs of students in crisis and students who can benefit from an adult to listen to their frustrations or offer kind words. Josiah meets each student where they are, offering guidance and connections to deeper support.

Collaborating Across Sectors to Maximize Support

YMHC members are more than just mental health navigators. They are mentors, mediators, liaisons, and resource scouts. As one site coordinator put it, “You have to be a Swiss Army knife.” This metaphor captures the essence of the role—wearing many hats, responding to dynamic needs, and seamlessly integrating into the day-to-day operations of the school.

How the YMHC Model Works in Colorado: Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC)

Five organizations host and support YMHC members, including the Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC). Throughout the state, 28 YMHC members serve their communities through CYC, with an additional 116 YMHC members serving through one of the other four organizations implementing the program. CYC equips YMHC members with tools to support middle and high school students while also providing members the opportunity to earn a certificate or stackable credential in behavioral health to address the state’s workforce shortage. Each YMHC member is supported through a strong network of site coordinators, site supervisors, and program staff who provide regular coaching, supervision, and professional development to ensure the YMHC members’ success in the schools they serve.

Once accepted into the program, CYC YMHC members receive 2 weeks of intensive training before entering schools. The curriculum, led by CYC, includes Mental Health First Aid, mandated reporting, trauma-informed care, and an introduction to the educational and cultural contexts of the students they will support. Members also engage in school-specific onboarding, including walk-throughs with staff, meetings with onsite supervisors, introductions to local resources, and strategies for building inclusive relationships that honor students’ backgrounds and identities.

Throughout the year, professional learning for YMHC members continues. In addition to the onsite work experience, all CYC YMHC members enroll in a behavioral health credentialing program through the Colorado Community College System. This program leads to a Qualified Behavioral Health 1 Certificate—a free, stackable credential that creates a career pathway in healthcare. As a coincidence, the credentialing program’s instructor is embedded in the CYC ecosystem, working with school-site supervisors to align course content with the field-based experience that members gain at their school sites. Weekly coaching sessions, peer learning communities, and school-based mentorship help YMHC members reflect on their work and deepen their skills.

In the inaugural year of the YMHC in Colorado, 28 CYC members began the coursework, with 25 expected to complete it. Finishing this training enhances members’ qualifications for entry-level roles in the field, while their YMHC service equips them with the experience and skills to excel as effective behavioral health staff.

Josiah's work often extends beyond school walls. As a YMHC member, he builds bridges with an array of local youth-serving organizations, including the Denver Health School-Based Clinic, Servicio de la Raza, Colorado Uplift, Outer Haven, and Denver Parks and Recreation. Through these partnerships, he connects families with housing support, coordinates with local mental health agencies, and helps students and caregivers navigate through complex social services systems.

In one instance, a student with a 42% absentee rate became a regular in Josiah's rotation. After reaching out to the student's mother and building trust with the family, Josiah worked with school staff to arrange transportation, secured clothing and food support, and referred the family for therapy. The student's absentee rate dropped, and her engagement began to improve.

"Now I'm in weekly contact with her mom," Josiah explained. "We're not just talking about school—we're talking about what the family needs to stay afloat."

This web of coordinated support and connections ensures a warm handoff when students need therapy, crisis support, mentorship, or enrichment opportunities. YMHC members are at the center of that web, helping walk the students and families through the process of finding support and resources. This is the power of the YMHC in action—addressing issues as they arise but also building trusted relationships that reconnect students to their education, their community, and their potential.

Early Signs of Impact: "A Nexus of Support"

Early indicators suggest the YMHC is making a big difference at Lake Middle School. The following results have occurred in just its 1st year of implementation:

- ✦ School leaders report a *reduction in behavioral referrals* and *improved student attendance*.
- ✦ *More than 50 students have received individualized support* through YMHC services in the program's first semester.
- ✦ Perhaps most powerfully, *students are beginning to seek out mental health support proactively*—a critical cultural shift.

Having Josiah provide dedicated near-peer support has been a major contributor to the increase in Lake Middle School students seeking out mental health support. One staff member indicated that, with 600 students in the building, "Josiah is the nexus. When a student says, 'I need a person,' they often mean him. And if he can't help directly, he knows exactly where to go."

A Meaningful Experience for YMHC Members

For Josiah himself, the experience has been just as meaningful. A 2022 college graduate with a degree in international relations, he stumbled into the YMHC role after working retail and wondering what might come next.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do after college," he said. "But the idea of supporting mental health and promoting wellness—that pulled me in. There's so much stigma around mental health, especially where I grew up. I wanted to be the person I wish I had."

The impact flows both ways. "This role has helped me find my own voice," Josiah said. "I've learned what professionalism means to me. I've learned that my presence matters. Seeing these students try, seeing them show up—it's a big success."

Looking Ahead

Lake Middle School's work with the YMHC offers a glimpse of what is possible when schools invest in relationship-centered mental health supports. The model is already generating interest from other Denver-area schools looking to replicate Lake Middle School's success. With the continued support of local partners, state leadership, and national funders, the program has the potential to transform not only how students experience school but also how they see themselves and their futures.



✦ JOSIAH'S DAY

As a YMHC member at Lake Middle School, Josiah juggles a wide range of responsibilities – some planned, some unexpected. Here are a few things he might do in a day:

- meet one-on-one with students
- support a restorative conversation
- coordinate tutoring or academic support
- help a student access food or clothing
- join an intervention or attendance meeting
- check in with a caregiver
- provide first aid or emotional support

Endnotes

- i Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025). *Data and statistics on children's mental health*. <https://www.cdc.gov/children-mental-health/data-research/index.html>
- ii Health Resources and Services Administration. (2024). *State of the behavioral health workforce, 2024*. National Center for Health Workforce Analysis. <https://bhwh.hrsa.gov/sites/default/files/bureau-health-work-force/state-of-the-behavioral-health-workforce-report-2024.pdf>
- iii Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment. (n.d.). *2023 Healthy Kids Colorado Survey results*. <https://cdphe.colorado.gov/healthy-kids-colorado-survey-information/2023-healthy-kids-colorado-sur-vey-results>
- iv Monzonis-Carda, I., Rodriguez-Ayllon, M., Adelantado-Renau, M., & Moliner-Urdiales, D. (2024). Bidirectional longitudinal associations of mental health with academic performance in adolescents: DADOS study. *Pediatric Research*, 95(6), 1617–1624.
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- vi U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). *Social media and youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory*. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sq-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf>
- vii CYC operates several programs serving Colorado youth, including the YMHC. The age limit to volunteer for YMHC service through CYC is 24 years old, although other CYC programs accept volunteers through age 29.
- viii Riehm, K. E., Feder, K. A., Tormohlen, K. N., Crum, R. M., Young, A. S., Green, K. M., Pacek, L. R., La Clair, L. N., & Mojtabai, R. (2019). Associations between time spent using social media and internalizing and externalizing problems among US youth. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 76(12), 1266–1273. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychia-try.2019.2325>; Rise Above Colorado. (2024). *Rise Above Colorado Youth Survey 2024*. <https://riseaboveco.org/resources.html#community>