

How a friend's death turned Colorado teens into anti-overdose activists

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Gavinn McKinney loved Nike shoes, fireworks and sushi. He was studying Potawatomi, one of the languages of his Native American heritage. He loved holding his niece and smelling her baby smell. On his

15th birthday, the Durango, Colorado, teen spent a cold December afternoon chopping wood to help neighbors who couldn't afford to heat their homes.

McKinney almost made it to his 16th birthday. He died of fentanyl poisoning at a friend's house in December 2021. His friends say it was the first time he tried hard drugs. The memorial service was so packed people had to stand outside the funeral home.

Now, his peers are trying to cement their friend's legacy in state law. They recently testified to state lawmakers in support of a bill they helped write to ensure students can carry [naloxone](#) with them at all times without fear of discipline or confiscation. School districts tend to have strict medication policies. Without special permission, Colorado students can't even carry their own emergency medications, such as an inhaler, and they are not allowed to share them with others.

"We realized we could actually make a change if we put our hearts to it," said Niko Peterson, a senior at Animas High School in Durango and one of McKinney's friends who helped write the bill. "Being proactive versus being reactive is going to be the best possible solution."

Individual school districts or counties in California, Maryland, and elsewhere have rules expressly allowing [high school students](#) to carry naloxone. But Jon Woodruff, managing attorney at the Legislative Analysis and Public Policy Association, said he wasn't aware of any statewide law such as the one Colorado is considering. Woodruff's Washington, D.C.-based organization researches and drafts legislation on [substance use](#).

Naloxone is an opioid antagonist that can halt an overdose. Available over the counter as a nasal spray, it is considered the fire extinguisher of the opioid epidemic, for use in an emergency, but just one tool in a

prevention strategy. (People often refer to it as "Narcan," one of the more recognizable brand names, similar to how tissues, regardless of brand, are often called "Kleenex.")

The Biden administration last year backed an ad campaign encouraging young people to carry the emergency medication.

Most states' naloxone access laws protect do-gooders, including youth, from liability if they accidentally harm someone while administering naloxone. But without [school policies](#) explicitly allowing it, the students' ability to bring naloxone to class falls into a gray area.

Ryan Christoff said that in September 2022 fellow staff at Centaurus High School in Lafayette, Colorado, where he worked and which one of his daughters attended at the time, confiscated naloxone from one of her classmates.

"She didn't have anything on her other than the Narcan, and they took it away from her," said Christoff, who had provided the confiscated Narcan to that student and many others after his daughter nearly died from fentanyl poisoning. "We should want every student to carry it."

Boulder Valley School District spokesperson Randy Barber said the incident "was a one-off and we've done some work since to make sure nurses are aware." The district now encourages everyone to consider carrying naloxone, he said.

Community's devastation turns to action

In Durango, McKinney's death hit the community hard. McKinney's friends and family said he didn't do hard drugs. The substance he was hooked on was Tapatío hot sauce—he even brought some in his pocket to a Rockies game.

After McKinney died, people started getting tattoos of the phrase he was known for, which was emblazoned on his favorite sweatshirt: "Love is the cure." Even a few of his teachers got them. But it was classmates, along with their friends at another high school in town, who turned his loss into a political movement.

"We're making things happen on behalf of him," Peterson said.

The mortality rate has spiked in recent years, with more than 1,500 other children and teens in the U.S. dying of fentanyl poisoning the same year as McKinney. Most youth who die of overdoses have no known history of taking opioids, and many of them likely thought they were taking prescription opioids like OxyContin or Percocet—not the fake prescription pills that increasingly carry a lethal dose of fentanyl.

"Most likely the largest group of teens that are dying are really teens that are experimenting, as opposed to teens that have a long-standing opioid use disorder," said Joseph Friedman, a substance use researcher at UCLA who would like to see schools provide accurate drug education about counterfeit pills, such as with Stanford's Safety First curriculum.

Allowing students to carry a low-risk, lifesaving drug with them is in many ways the minimum schools can do, he said.

"I would argue that what the schools should be doing is identifying high-risk teens and giving them the Narcan to take home with them and teaching them why it matters," Friedman said.

Writing in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Friedman identified Colorado as a hot spot for high school-aged adolescent overdose deaths, with a mortality rate more than double that of the nation from 2020 to 2022.

"Increasingly, fentanyl is being sold in pill form, and it's happening to the largest degree in the West," said Friedman. "I think that the teen overdose crisis is a direct result of that."

If Colorado lawmakers approve the bill, "I think that's a really important step," said Ju Nyeong Park, an assistant professor of medicine at Brown University, who leads a research group focused on how to prevent overdoses. "I hope that the Colorado Legislature does and that other states follow as well."

Park said comprehensive programs to test drugs for dangerous contaminants, better access to evidence-based treatment for adolescents who develop a substance use disorder, and promotion of harm reduction tools are also important. "For example, there is a national hotline called Never Use Alone that anyone can call anonymously to be supervised remotely in case of an emergency," she said.

Taking matters into their own hands

Many Colorado [school districts](#) are training staff how to administer naloxone and are stocking it on school grounds through a program that allows them to acquire it from the state at little to no cost. But it was clear to Peterson and other area high schoolers that having naloxone at school isn't enough, especially in rural places.

"The teachers who are trained to use Narcan will not be at the parties where the students will be using the drugs," he said.

And it isn't enough to expect teens to keep it at home.

"It's not going to be helpful if it's in somebody's house 20 minutes outside of town. It's going to be helpful if it's in their backpack always," said Zoe Ramsey, another of McKinney's friends and a senior at Animas

High School.

"We were informed it was against the rules to carry naloxone, and especially to distribute it," said Ilias "Leo" Stritikus, who graduated from Durango High School last year.

But students in the area, and their school administrators, were uncertain: Could students get in trouble for carrying the opioid antagonist in their backpacks, or if they distributed it to friends? And could a school or district be held liable if something went wrong?

He, along with Ramsey and Peterson, helped form the group Students Against Overdose. Together, they convinced Animas, which is a charter school, and the surrounding school district, to change policies. Now, with parental permission, and after going through training on how to administer it, students may carry naloxone on school grounds.

Durango School District 9-R spokesperson Karla Sluis said at least 45 students have completed the training.

School districts in other parts of the nation have also determined it's important to clarify students' ability to carry naloxone.

"We want to be a part of saving lives," said Smita Malhotra, chief medical director for Los Angeles Unified School District in California.

Los Angeles County had one of the nation's highest adolescent overdose death tallies of any U.S. county: From 2020 to 2022, 111 teens ages 14 to 18 died. One of them was a 15-year-old who died in a school bathroom of fentanyl poisoning. Malhotra's district has since updated its policy on naloxone to permit students to carry and administer it.

"All students can carry naloxone in our school campuses without facing

any discipline," Malhotra said. She said the district is also doubling down on peer support and hosting educational sessions for families and students.

Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland took a similar approach. School staff had to administer naloxone 18 times over the course of a school year, and five students died over the course of about one semester.

When the district held community forums on the issue, Patricia Kapunan, the district's medical officer, said, "Students were very vocal about wanting access to naloxone. A student is very unlikely to carry something in their backpack which they think they might get in trouble for."

So it, too, clarified its policy. While that was underway, [local news](#) reported that high school students found a teen passed out, with purple lips, in the bathroom of a McDonald's down the street from their school, and used Narcan to revive them. It was during lunch on a school day.

"We can't Narcan our way out of the opioid use crisis," said Kapunan. "But it was critical to do it first. Just like knowing 911."

Now, with the support of the district and county health department, students are training other students how to administer naloxone. Jackson Taylor, one of the student trainers, estimated they trained about 200 students over the course of three hours on a recent Saturday.

"It felt amazing, this footstep toward fixing the issue," Taylor said.

Each trainee left with two doses of naloxone.

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