

Hello, My Name is Henry Sandoval and I am a graduate of FREE L.A. High School at the Youth justice Coalition.

When I was a student at Crenshaw High School, I had low English comprehension. I would go to class without understanding a single word the teacher said. When I couldn't understand a word the teacher said, I would seem like I wasn't engaged. I knew the teachers were aware that I couldn't understand, yet no teacher would ask "would you like me to go through this with you?"

I felt like I was doing all my school work on my own, and it became more and more difficult for me to earn credits. I was there every day, but I wasn't progressing. My mind started to wander, and the teachers would kick me out of class for any little disruption I created. Now that I am a little bit more knowledgeable and conscious of the things that were really going on, I see that the whole time I was in class there was favoritism for those students who were getting A's and B's. The teachers would always say they were only concerned with the "students who wanted to learn." The students who needed the most help educationally or with counseling were the youth who got pushed out of school and into the streets and jails.

One day, another student came up behind me and hit me in the back of the head. I turned around and he hit me again. We got in a fist fight, and we were both suspended. No one ever sat down with the both of us to talk out our differences. Our drama was just pushed out into the streets with no resolution. This is dangerous, especially in communities where simple things escalate and regularly lead to shootings and murder.

With the suspension, I fell even further behind in school. At the end of that semester, even though I had gone to school for a full year, Crenshaw High School expelled me for not earning enough credits. I had no option but to hit the streets, and my time was wasted until I found the Youth Justice Coalition, got back into school and graduated. I have a lot more progress to make, but now I am comfortable speaking, writing and reading English. I am graduating as the youngest person ever in the Los Angeles Public Allies Program – the same program Michelle Obama directed in Chicago. And, I am starting college in the fall.

A big part of the success I saw at the Youth Justice Coalition was the use of transformative justice circles where we solve everything including truancy, student disrespect of staff, conflicts between students and their families, fights and threats between neighborhoods that have been at war with each other for decades, fights, drugs and even weapons. We also use transformative justice to provide students safe passage to and from school; and to prevent drama in our homes and communities through mediation, rumor control, working to stop retaliations after fights and shootings, and even building truces between individuals and neighborhoods. Our attendance and graduation rates are higher than the other schools in South Central even though we are working with all the youth who have been pushed out or are returning home from lock-ups.

I was lucky to graduate. I could have easily fallen through the cracks. It is essential that our students have their issues and complaints met, so that we can be held accountable for our actions without being sacrificed to the streets, jails and graveyards of California. Together, students, our families, school staff and elected officials can combine our strategies and strengths to create more successful schools and graduate students as leaders.