

## About Face — High School Cohort (Ages 14–18)

# About Face

High School Cohort Grant Package — Ages 14–18 | Northern Virginia

Program Type: Multi-Arts Wellness | Cycle Length: 8 Weeks | Participants: 20–25 Youth per Cycle

### SECTION 1

## Program Description

Empowering Creative Voice in the Last Structured Window Before Adulthood

High school is not a practice round. For young people ages 14 to 18, the decisions being made — whether to stay in school, how to navigate conflict, whether to ask for help — are shaping lives in real time. About Face is a tuition-free, 8-week multi arts wellness program designed specifically for underserved high school students in Northern Virginia. It offers something many teens in this region have never had access to: a structured, creative, and emotionally safe space to be seen, heard, and supported — before adulthood arrives.

About Face meets once per week for 2.5 hours over an 8-week cycle, serving 20 to 25 high school youth per cohort. This is not a drop-in program. Participants commit to the full cycle, forming a cohort with shared experiences, shared language, and genuine peer connection. The structure is intentional: consistency is part of the intervention.

Each session draws from a rotating mix of multi-arts disciplines, all facilitated by professional teaching artists and a licensed counselor:

- **Dance & Movement:** Physical expression, emotional release, and creative discipline — using the body as a tool for processing what words cannot always reach.

- **Visual Art:** Self-expression through drawing, painting, and mixed media — supporting identity exploration, confidence, and the beginning of a personal portfolio.
- **Journaling:** Structured and open-ended writing that builds literacy while giving participants a private space to process the complexity of their lives — college decisions, family obligations, financial pressure, identity, and the weight of figuring out what comes next.
- **Singing & Vocal Expression:** Confidence, breath, emotional release, and the discovery of one's own voice — literally and figuratively.
- **Roundtable Discussions:** Facilitated peer conversations on topics with real stakes for this age group: identity, relationships, mental health, future planning, systemic barriers, and community responsibility. These are not lectures. They are honest conversations, led with care.

A licensed counselor is embedded in every cycle of About Face — not to conduct group therapy, but to complete intake assessments and build enough individual relationship to recognize when a young person needs more than an arts program can provide. For high schoolers dealing with trauma, abuse, substance exposure, dating violence, housing instability, grief, or untreated mental health conditions, About Face may be the first structured setting in which a caring professional notices and responds. Referrals are made to therapists and community support services. The counselor is a bridge — not a ceiling.

Families should never have to choose between groceries and their teenager's creative development. About Face is offered entirely at no cost. There are no fees, no equipment purchases, no hidden requirements. The only ask of participants is their time and their willingness to show up.

Journaling builds literacy; dance, visual art, and singing represent the arts in their most accessible and transformative forms; participants ages 14 to 18 are children in the developmental stages that matter most; the program addresses the systemic inequities that determine which teenagers receive enrichment and which go without — a matter of social justice. And the program itself is designed as a safe, inclusive, affirming creative community — the kind of environment the Foundation's environmental priority recognizes as foundational to healthy development.

### The Full Continuum of Creative Youth Support

About Face operates alongside two companion programs: **The Butterfly Effect**, a theater diversion program for at-risk and justice-involved youth, and **Evidence**, a theater enrichment program for underserved youth. A separate About Face cohort serves middle school students (ages 11–13). Together, these programs form an interconnected continuum of creative youth programming in Northern Virginia — meeting young people at every stage of vulnerability and need, from early adolescence through the threshold of adulthood.

For high schoolers, the urgency is particular. Middle school offers another year. Elementary school offers many years. High school is the last structured window — and for too many teenagers in Northern Virginia, it is closing without anything on the other side of it that looks like support.

## SECTION 2

# Statement of Need

Why Northern Virginia's High Schoolers Can't Wait for Access

The teenagers About Face serves are not abstractions. They are 16-year-olds managing part-time jobs, younger siblings, and the FAFSA. They are 15-year-olds who have never told anyone about what is happening at home. They are 17-year olds who want to dance, write, sing, and make art — and have never once been given the resources to do so. The evidence documenting what they face is substantial, and it demands a direct response.

## A Generation in Mental Health Crisis

The data on adolescent mental health is not a trend. It is a crisis. According to the CDC's 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 39.7% of all high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness lasting at least two weeks — nearly 4 in 10 teenagers. More than 28.5% experienced poor mental health, and 20.4% seriously considered suicide. For female

students, that figure climbs to 53%. For LGBTQ+ youth, 41% seriously considered suicide in the past year.

**By the Numbers — CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2023**

- **39.7%** of high school students reported persistent sadness or hopelessness • **28.5%** experienced poor mental health
- **20.4%** seriously considered suicide — rising to **53%** among female students • **41%** of LGBTQ+ youth seriously considered suicide

The CDC identifies two of the most powerful protective factors against adolescent mental health deterioration: **school connectedness** and access to **caring adults**. About Face is built on exactly these factors. A committed 8-week cohort creates authentic peer connection. A licensed counselor embedded in every cycle ensures that at least one caring adult in each teenager's world is paying close attention.

**High School Is a Critical Window — and It Is Closing** Youth ages 14 to 18 are making decisions that have consequences for decades. Whether to stay enrolled. Whether to disclose what is happening at home. Whether to trust an adult. Whether to seek help. Without structured, consistent, supportive programming, vulnerable teenagers disengage from systems that could help them, drop out of school, or enter adulthood without the emotional tools or social skills to navigate what comes next.

For this age group, the urgency is compounded by time. Unlike younger children, who have years ahead of them to access youth services and intervention, high schoolers are approaching the age at which most youth programming ceases to exist. An unserved 10-year-old still has years of opportunity. An unserved 17-year old may be approaching the last structured intervention available to them before they age entirely out of youth support systems. Every cycle of About Face that does not run is a cohort of teenagers who didn't get the window.

**Economic Barriers That Compound Over Years** In Northern Virginia — a region often associated with affluence — the economic reality for many families is dramatically different. According to CFNOVA's 2023 Getting By report, **29% of Northern Virginia families did not earn enough to meet their basic needs**. CFNOVA's 2025 data

identifies 631,104 children in the region.

For high school students in these households, the access gap in arts education is not a single missed opportunity — it is cumulative. They have watched more affluent peers accumulate years of dance training, vocal instruction, visual art education, and private counseling. Youth arts programs in the region typically charge \$400 to \$800 per session cycle. For families who cannot cover their basic needs, this is not a difficult choice. It is no choice at all.

By the time a teenager reaches high school, these compounding deficits show up as reduced creative confidence, fewer college readiness indicators tied to arts engagement, and the absence of the emotional processing skills that structured arts education builds over time. The inequality is not just in one missed class — it is in years of missed development.

**The Evidence Base for Arts in Adolescent Development** The research on arts education and youth outcomes is robust and consistent. A 2019 meta-analysis by the University of Chicago Consortium, drawing on more than 200 studies, found that arts education significantly improves social-emotional development in young people. A 2021 review published through ERIC confirmed that arts participation is positively associated with self-beliefs, social skills, and holistic development in youth — with consistent findings across demographic groups.

For high schoolers in particular, arts engagement provides something that academic instruction alone cannot: a space where identity can be explored, emotions can be processed, and relationships with peers and adults can be built on something other than performance and compliance.

## **The Therapy Referral Gap**

High schoolers are carrying things they have told no one. Trauma from childhood. Abuse — current or historical. Exposure to substance use. Grief that has never been addressed. Housing instability they are too ashamed to name. Untreated mental health conditions they may not even have words for. Standard school systems and community programs are not designed to identify these needs in young people who have learned, often by necessity, to keep them hidden.

About Face's embedded licensed counselor exists to close this gap. Through intake

assessments and sustained relationship over an 8-week cycle, the counselor identifies what a teenager is not saying out loud — and connects them to therapists, crisis services, and community support resources appropriate for older adolescents. This is not what a standard arts enrichment program does. This is what About Face does that others do not.

For high schoolers on the verge of adulthood, this clinical bridge may be one of the last structured opportunities available to identify and respond to deep-seated needs before those needs follow them into adulthood unaddressed.

### SECTION 3

## Our Pitch

About Face, an 8-week tuition-free multi-arts wellness program serving 20 to 25 underserved high school students ages 14 to 18 in Northern Virginia. Each weekly session combines dance, visual art, journaling, singing,

and facilitated roundtable discussions, with a licensed counselor embedded in every cycle to complete intake assessments and connect youth dealing with trauma, abuse, housing instability, or untreated mental health conditions to professional support. About Face is part of a full continuum of creative youth programming alongside The Butterfly Effect (theater diversion for at-risk youth), Evidence (theater enrichment for underserved youth), and a companion middle school About Face cohort — ensuring that young people in Northern Virginia are supported from early adolescence through the threshold of adulthood. Nearly 4 in 10 high schoolers nationwide report persistent sadness or hopelessness; 29% of Northern Virginia families cannot meet their basic needs. **We are requesting \$3,850** to fund one complete 8-week cycle — because when a teenager has creative expression and a caring adult who notices what they need, the trajectory of what is possible for them changes.

#### SECTION 4

## Budget Justification

Proposed Budget: \$3,850 | One Complete 8-Week Cycle | 20–25 High School Youth

Category	Amount	Description
Lead Program Facilitator	\$800	Facilitates all 8 sessions — leads roundtable discussions, journaling exercises, and overall session coordination across the full cycle

Category	Amount	Description
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Dance Teaching Artist	\$600	Professional dance instructor for weekly movement and creative expression sessions across the 8-week cycle
Singing / Vocal Teaching Artist	\$600	Vocal instructor for weekly singing and vocal expression sessions across the 8-week cycle
Licensed Counselor — Therapy Referrals	\$500	Intake assessments, identifying deep-seated needs, and connecting high school youth to therapists and community support services appropriate for older adolescents
Art & Journaling Supplies	\$450	Journals, sketchbooks, paints, markers, and mixed media materials for 20–25 participants across the full 8-week cycle
Venue Rental	\$500	8 weekly sessions (2.5 hours each) at a community center or comparable accessible space in Northern Virginia
Snacks	\$200	Healthy snacks provided at every session for 20–25 youth — an essential element of a welcoming, low-barrier program environment
Administrative & Insurance	\$200	Program coordination, liability insurance, and background checks for all staff and teaching artists

<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$3,850</b>	<b>Full funding for one complete 8-week cycle serving 20–25 high school youth in Northern Virginia</b>
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## Budget Narrative

At full enrollment of 25 participants, the \$3,850 budget yields a per-participant cost of **\$154**. At minimum enrollment of 20, the cost is **\$193 per participant**. Youth arts programs in the Northern Virginia market typically charge \$400 to \$800 per cycle — often more when counseling or therapeutic support is incorporated. About Face delivers a comparable or superior program at a fraction of the market rate, and delivers it free of charge to every family it serves.

Every dollar in this budget goes directly to program delivery. There are no administrative overhead percentages, no organizational management fees embedded in line items. The lead facilitator, teaching artists, licensed counselor, supplies, venue, and participant support are the program — and this budget funds them entirely for one complete cycle.

The licensed counselor line item deserves particular attention. At \$500, this cost is modest relative to the function it performs. Standard arts enrichment programs do not include clinical assessment or therapy referral infrastructure. About Face does — because high school youth are carrying experiences they have not disclosed to anyone, and an 8-week cycle with a consistent, trusted licensed professional is one of the few settings in which those disclosures become possible. The counselor is the clinical bridge between creative participation and professional support, and for some participants in every cycle, that bridge is the most consequential thing About Face provides.

For high schoolers on the verge of adulthood, this 8-week cycle may represent one of the last structured interventions available to them before they age out of youth services entirely. The \$3,850 investment in one cycle is not simply a program cost — it is an intervention with effects that extend well past the final session.

### **Cost Efficiency at a Glance**

- **\$154–\$193** per participant, per 8-week cycle (full funding)
- **\$400–\$800** typical market rate for comparable youth arts programming

- **\$0** cost to families — tuition-free by design
- **100%** of funds directed to direct program delivery
  - **20–25** high school youth served per cycle, with embedded clinical support

**Sources:** CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2023; Community Foundation for Northern Virginia (CFNOVA), **Getting By**, 2023; CFNOVA Regional Data, 2025; University of Chicago Consortium, Arts Education Meta Analysis, 2019; ERIC, Arts Education and Youth Development, 2021.

Prepared: May 8, 2026

About Face operates alongside **The Butterfly Effect** (theater diversion for at-risk and justice-involved youth) and **Evidence** (theater enrichment for underserved youth), forming a continuum of creative youth support in Northern Virginia. These materials may be adapted for other grant applications. Statistics current as of preparation date.