

# About Face

## Middle School Cohort — Ages 11–14

**Program Region:** Northern Virginia

**Funding Request:** \$3,850 — One Full 8-Week Cycle

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### SECTION 1 OF 4

## Program Description

Creative Expression and Early Intervention for Middle School Youth in Northern Virginia

About Face is a tuition-free, 8-week multi-arts wellness program designed specifically for underserved middle school students between the ages of 11 and 14 in Northern Virginia. Meeting once per week for 2.5 hours, About Face creates a consistent, structured, and emotionally safe environment where young people can explore who they are — through movement, visual art, their own voices, and guided conversation — at the precise developmental moment when that exploration matters most.

Each session is built around a rotating blend of five core modalities, thoughtfully sequenced to engage the whole young person:

- **Dance — Movement and Expression:** Structured movement activities that release

tension, build body awareness, and allow participants to express emotion without words. Dance meets youth where language sometimes cannot.

- **Visual Art — Creative Processing and Identity Exploration:** Drawing, painting, and mixed-media work that invites participants to externalize their inner world, process experiences visually, and develop a tangible creative voice.
- **Journaling — Literacy, Self-Reflection, and Emotional Regulation:** Guided writing prompts that build literacy skills while simultaneously encouraging honest self-examination and emotional processing — a practice youth can carry long after the program ends.
- **Singing — Confidence, Voice, and Vulnerability:** Vocal expression activities in a non-judgmental, ensemble-based setting. For many participants, singing in a safe group is the first time they have been asked to be heard — and to believe that being heard matters.
- **Roundtable Discussions — Facilitated Peer Conversations:** Structured group dialogue on topics drawn directly from young people's lives: identity, peer pressure, family dynamics, school stress, emotions, and belonging. Participants are guided — never lectured — to think critically and support one another.

A distinguishing feature of About Face is the embedded presence of a licensed counselor at every session. This counselor does not function as a therapist within the program; rather, they observe, assess, and build trust — and when a participant demonstrates signs of deeper need, they connect that young person and their family to age-appropriate professional resources. About Face is a responsible bridge: it meets youth in a creative setting and ensures that those who need more than enrichment are seen and supported. For many families, this is the first time anyone trained has been watching.

About Face is not a drop-in program. Participants commit to the full 8-week cohort, which builds the continuity, trust, and peer bonds that make the program's impact possible. Enrollment is kept intentionally small — 20 to 25 participants per cycle — so that every young person is known by name, known by story, and known by need.

Critically, About Face is offered at no cost to families. The enrichment market for youth programs in the Northern Virginia region regularly commands \$400 to \$800 per session cycle

— an insurmountable barrier for the families About Face is designed to serve. Removing that barrier is not a peripheral feature; it is a core commitment to equity.

About Face does not operate in isolation. It is one anchor of a three-program continuum of creative youth support in Northern Virginia. **The Butterfly Effect** offers theater-based diversion programming for at-risk and justice-involved youth. **Evidence** delivers theater enrichment for underserved youth pursuing artistic development. Together, the three programs form a full-spectrum pipeline: from early wellness and prevention (About Face), through enrichment and skill-building (Evidence), to diversion and reintegration (The Butterfly Effect). A young person can find a door in at any point on that continuum.

About Face meets middle schoolers before the crisis deepens. It offers something rare: a place to be seen, a skill to build on, and an adult who is paying attention. That combination — creativity, community, and clinical awareness — is the program's greatest gift to the young people it serves.

## SECTION 2 OF 4

# Statement of Need

## Reaching Middle Schoolers Before the Crisis Deepens

Middle school is not simply a transition in academic setting. For young people between the ages of 11 and 14, it is a neurological, emotional, and social watershed. Identity solidifies. Peer dynamics intensify. Family stress becomes more visible. And for youth who are already navigating poverty, instability, or trauma, these years can be the moment when struggle quietly tips into crisis. About Face is designed to intervene at exactly this inflection point — before the need becomes acute, before the family reaches a breaking point, and while the window of protective influence is still open.

## The Youth Mental Health Crisis Is Real — and It Begins Here

The data on adolescent mental health is unambiguous and alarming. The CDC's 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that **39.7% of all high school students** reported persistent

feelings of sadness or hopelessness lasting two or more weeks — a figure that rises to **53% among female students**. One in five high schoolers — **20.4%** — seriously considered suicide in the past year. These are high school numbers. The experiences that drive them begin years earlier, in middle school, when warning signs are present but often unrecognized and unaddressed.

The CDC itself identifies school connectedness and the presence of caring, attentive adults as among the most powerful protective factors available to young people.

About Face is built around both. A stable cohort of peers who meet weekly for eight weeks creates connection. An embedded licensed counselor who is watching, listening, and building trust creates the kind of caring adult presence the research identifies as protective.

*"School connectedness — feeling like school is a place where adults care about you — is one of the strongest protective factors against adolescent mental health struggles, substance use, and violence."*

— Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2023

**Economic Barriers Shut Young People Out** The Community Foundation for Northern Virginia's 2023 Getting By report found that **29% of Northern Virginia families did not earn enough income to meet basic household needs**. This figure — nearly one in three families — exists alongside some of the highest costs of living in the country. The same region that is home to significant wealth is also home to profound, often invisible economic struggle.

The Community Foundation for Northern Virginia's 2025 data identifies **631,104 children** in the Northern Virginia region. Thousands of those children are shut out of the enrichment programs — music lessons, art classes, dance studios, writing workshops — that their more affluent peers take for granted. The barrier is not interest. It is not capacity. It is cost.

Private youth enrichment programs in the Northern Virginia market typically charge between **\$400 and \$800** per program cycle. About Face charges nothing. For the families it serves, that difference is not marginal. It is the difference between a young person having access to a structured, arts-based wellness experience and having none at all.

## The Arts Access Gap Is an Equity Gap

Research consistently confirms what practitioners already know: underserved communities demonstrate significantly lower rates of arts participation — not because young people are less interested in creative expression, but because they have fewer pathways to it. The gap is infrastructural and economic, not motivational. When the cost of participation is eliminated and the program comes to the community rather than requiring the community to come to it, young people show up with energy, curiosity, and genuine hunger for the experience About Face offers.

## The Evidence Base Is Substantial

The research supporting arts-based programming for social-emotional development is deep and durable. The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (2019) synthesized more than **200 studies spanning six decades** and found that arts education produces significant, measurable improvements in social-emotional learning, including self-regulation, persistence, empathy, and collaborative skills — precisely the capacities that protect young people during the high-risk middle school years.

A 2021 review published through ERIC similarly found that arts participation is positively and consistently associated with improvements in self-beliefs, social skills, and developmental outcomes for youth — with particular impact in communities where other enrichment resources are scarce.

| Data Point   | Finding   | Source                   |
|--|---|--------------------------|
| Youth persistent sadness/hopelessness                  | 39.7% of high school students; 53% of female students | CDC YRBS, 2023           |
| Youth who seriously considered suicide                 | 20.4% of high school students in the past year        | CDC YRBS, 2023           |
| Northern Virginia families below basic needs threshold | 29% — nearly 1 in 3 families                          | CFNOVA, Getting By, 2023 |
| Children in Northern Virginia region                   | 631,104 — thousands without enrichment access         | CFNOVA, 2025             |

| Data Point  | Finding  | Source                    |
|---|--|---------------------------|
| Arts education impact on social-emotional development | Significant positive outcomes across 200+ studies, 6 decades   | UChicago Consortium, 2019 |
| Arts participation and youth outcomes                 | Positively related to self beliefs, social skills, development | ERIC, 2021                |

**The Referral Gap: Someone Has to Be Watching** One of the most underappreciated dimensions of the youth mental health crisis is not that professional support doesn't exist — it is that the pathway to it is broken. Many families do not know their child needs clinical support until the situation has become a crisis. A middle schooler struggling with anxiety, depression, trauma, or early suicidal ideation often does not self-identify, and may not have adults around them who are trained to recognize the signs.

About Face addresses this gap directly by embedding a licensed counselor within the creative program environment. Youth who would never walk into a therapist's office will absolutely come to a program where they can dance, draw, write, and talk with peers. The counselor's role is to be present — to observe, to build trust over the arc of eight weeks, and to identify young people whose needs exceed what a wellness program can address. That identification, and the warm referral that follows, can be a turning point in a young person's life. For many families, it may be the first time anyone professionally trained has been paying attention to their child in a consistent, caring way.

About Face does not offer therapy. It offers something equally essential: a trained clinical eye in a room full of young people who are finally comfortable enough to be themselves.

**SECTION 3 OF 4**

## **Our Pitch for Funds**

**Funding Request: \$3,850 — One Full 8-Week Cycle | 20–25 Middle School Youth**

Middle school is the moment when young people either find their footing — or begin to fall. At 11, 12, 13, and 14, the decisions are not yet irreversible. The window is still open. But it will not stay open forever.

About Face is an 8-week, tuition-free multi-arts wellness program serving 20 to 25 underserved middle school youth, ages 11–14, in Northern Virginia. Each week, for 2.5 hours, participants move through a rotating sequence of dance, visual art, journaling, singing, and facilitated roundtable discussions — all held together by a licensed counselor who identifies youth with deeper needs and connects them and their families to professional resources. The program builds literacy through journaling, creative confidence through arts, peer connection through ensemble work, and clinical safety through embedded professional oversight. It is offered at no cost, in direct response to research showing that 29% of Northern Virginia families cannot meet their basic household needs (CFNOVA, 2023) and that nearly 40% of adolescents report persistent sadness or hopelessness (CDC YRBS, 2023).

About Face is one part of a three-program continuum of creative youth support in Northern Virginia, operating alongside **The Butterfly Effect** (theater diversion for at-risk and justice-involved youth) and **Evidence** (theater enrichment for underserved youth). Together, these programs form a full-spectrum pipeline of creative intervention — but About Face is where that pipeline begins: with young people who have not yet reached crisis, in a setting designed to ensure they never have to.

We are respectfully requesting **\$3,850** to fund one complete 8-week cycle of About Face — covering all instruction, clinical support, supplies, space, and participant nourishment for up to 25 young people.

**SECTION 4 OF 4**

# Budget Justification

Proposed Budget: \$3,850 — One Full 8-Week Cycle

| Budget Category | Amount | Description |
|-----------------|--------|-------------|
|-----------------|--------|-------------|

|                                 |       |  |
|---------------------------------|-------|--|
| Lead Program Facilitator        | \$800 | Facilitates all 8 sessions — leads roundtable discussions, journaling exercises, and overall session coordination. Serves as the consistent anchor presence participants build trust with across the full cycle.     |
| Dance Teaching Artist           | \$600 | Dance instructor for weekly movement and expression sessions across the 8-week cycle. Provides structured, age appropriate movement curriculum that builds body awareness, emotional expression, and ensemble trust. |
| Singing / Vocal Teaching Artist | \$600 | Vocal instructor for weekly singing and vocal expression sessions across the 8-week cycle. Creates a non-judgmental ensemble environment where participants develop confidence, breath, and voice.                   |

| <b>Budget Category</b>                 | <b>Amount</b> | <b>Description</b>   |
|--|---------------|--|
| Licensed Counselor — Therapy Referrals | \$500         | Intake assessments, participant observation across all 8 sessions, identification of deep seated behavioral and emotional needs, and warm connection of youth and families to age appropriate therapists and community services. |

|                            |       |   |
|----------------------------|-------|---|
| Art & Journaling Supplies  | \$450 | Journals, sketchbooks, paints, markers, and mixed media materials for 20–25 participants across 8 sessions. All materials are consumable and participant-owned — youth leave with a creative record of their 8-week journey.            |
| Venue Rental               | \$500 | Eight weekly 2.5-hour sessions at a community center or similar accessible space in Northern Virginia. Includes set-up and breakdown time. Venue selection prioritizes accessibility and proximity to participant communities.          |
| Snacks                     | \$200 | Healthy snacks at every session for 20–25 youth. For many participants, who arrive directly after school, this is a meaningful support — and it signals that the program treats the whole young person, not just their artistic output. |
| Administrative & Insurance | \$200 | Program coordination, general liability insurance coverage for the cycle, and required background checks for all adult facilitators and instructors working with minor participants.  |

| Budget Category | Amount         | Description   |
|-----------------|----------------|---|
| <b>TOTAL</b>    | <b>\$3,850</b> | <b>Full funding for one complete 8-week cycle of About Face, serving 20–25 middle school youth ages 11–14 in Northern Virginia.</b> |

## Budget Narrative

The \$3,850 budget for one cycle of About Face represents **\$154 to \$193 per participant** — depending on enrollment between 20 and 25 youth. That cost stands in direct contrast to the \$400 to \$800 per-cycle price point that comparable private youth enrichment programs charge in the Northern Virginia market. About Face delivers equivalent or greater depth — with the addition of a licensed counselor and clinical referral capacity — at a fraction of the cost, and at no charge to families.

Every dollar of this request goes directly to program delivery. There are no administrative overhead allocations beyond the minimal coordination and insurance line that makes responsible program operation possible. The program's facilitation team — a lead facilitator, a dance teaching artist, a vocal teaching artist, and an embedded licensed counselor — is compensated fairly for specialized, skilled work with a vulnerable population. These are not volunteers; they are professionals whose expertise is precisely what makes About Face more than an after-school activity.

The licensed counselor line warrants particular attention. At \$500 for the full 8-week cycle, this represents one of the highest-leverage investments in the budget. Clinical awareness embedded in a creative program setting can identify a young person in need of professional support weeks or months before a family crisis makes that need impossible to ignore. The downstream cost savings — in emergency mental health intervention, school disciplinary action, juvenile justice involvement, or family systems stress — are difficult to quantify but well documented in the research literature. About Face treats the licensed counselor not as a luxury but as a clinical bridge that transforms an arts program into a genuine early intervention. The art and journaling supplies line ensures that each participant leaves the program with tangible artifacts of their creative and reflective work — journals they wrote in, sketchbooks they filled, and a physical record of eight weeks of growth. Snacks at every session are not incidental; for youth who arrive from school, often without an afternoon meal, they are a practical support that keeps participants engaged and signals that About Face cares about the whole young person.

**At a Glance — Cost Efficiency**

Metric

About Face

Market Comparator

Cost per participant (full cycle)

\$154 – \$193

\$400 – \$800

Cost to participant family

\$0 (tuition-free)

\$400 – \$800

Clinical oversight included

Yes — licensed counselor embedded

Rarely

Therapy referral pathway

Yes — warm referrals to community resources

Rarely

% of budget to direct program delivery

95%+

Varies

TAn investment of \$3,850 will fund one complete cycle of About Face — 8 sessions, 2.5 hours

each, serving up to 25 middle school youth who would otherwise have no access to this level of creative, clinical, and community support. It is a targeted, high-impact investment in the precise moment when that investment can make the most difference: before the crisis, at the window, while it is still open.

**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.

**Sources:** Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2023); Community Foundation for Northern Virginia, Getting By (2023) and Regional Data (2025); University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (2019); Education Resources Information Center / ERIC (2021). Statistics current as of preparation date, May 2026.