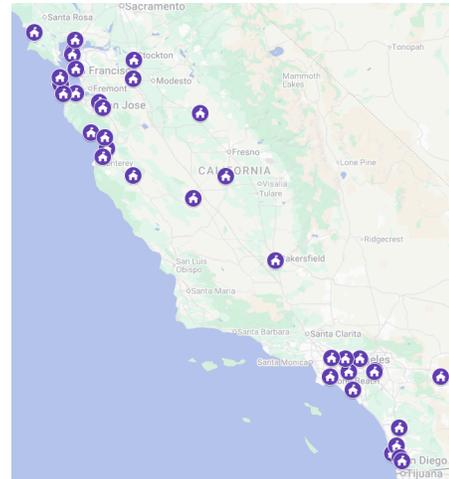


Youth-Centered Approach Reinforces Protective Factors for Adolescents, with Notable Benefits for LGBTQ+ Youth

A partnership between NYU ARCADIA & Youth Creating Change

Directing Change is a school-based mental health/suicide prevention program with a 14 year history serving California youth, in which students create and disseminate brief films about mental health awareness and suicide prevention and submit them to a statewide film contest. *Directing Change* builds from a diffusion of innovation perspective, with flexibility of implementation in varying classes (e.g., film, English) or clubs (e.g., GSA, mental health) and in which the teacher/students in those classes/clubs serve as “early adopters” of program messages. In this way, the program leverages peers to identify signs and encourage help-seeking, centering youth voices in positive, action-oriented messaging.

In partnership, ARCADIA & Youth Creating Change conducted a mixed-method randomized trial between 2022-2025, examining the impact of *Directing Change* on high school students in schools across California (see map). *Directing Change* was found to produce modest but meaningful improvements in help-seeking norms and adult connectedness. Among LGBTQ+ students, these gains were accompanied by increases in peer connectedness and supportive behaviors that facilitate peers’ access to care. **Overall, results show that a scalable, youth-centered approach can reinforce protective social processes for adolescents, with particularly notable benefits for LGBTQ+ youth.**



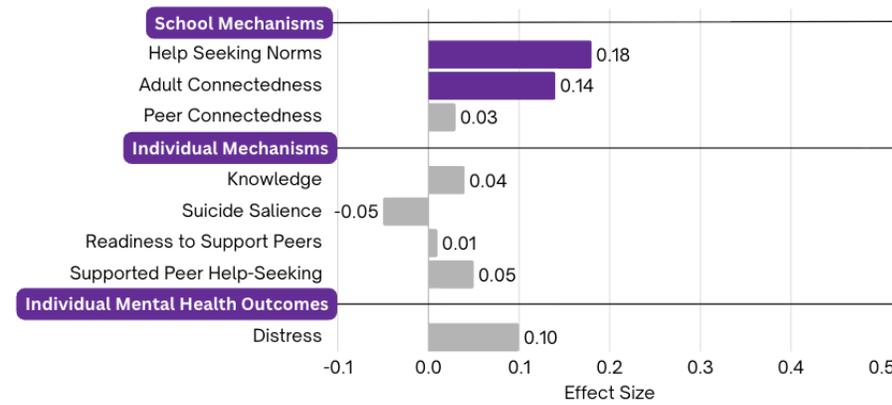
Key Findings:

- **The program was well implemented in *Directing Change*-assigned schools and prevention messages reached a wide group of youth and their communities.** Between 2023 and 2025, 1,498 youth from *Directing Change*-assigned schools received lessons on suicide prevention and/or mental health. They submitted 139 films (more than was expected), sharing them with 4,380 people who attended events hosted by youth and their teachers.
- **Students in *Directing Change* schools reported higher levels of help-seeking norms and greater adult connectedness compared with their peers in control-assigned schools.** But, they did not differ in terms of their knowledge, readiness to engage peers in help-seeking, and likelihood of supporting peer help-seeking (See **Figure 1**). **The impacts found are important because these school-wide mechanisms—whether schools are places where students feel like help-seeking is a normative behavior and where they are connected to adults—are critical foundational changes to support students’ seeking help and their well-being.** These effects were especially strong among girls.

Quantitative study description: To rigorously assess the program’s impact, our study compares youth in schools randomly assigned to receive the program to youth in a waitlist/control group of schools, who received the program in the following year. Our analysis includes 565 high school age students in 35 schools, located across the state of California. Students were surveyed in the fall, before they began the program, and again in the spring, after submitting films to the contest.

Figure 1: The Impact of Directing Change on All Youth Participants

Key: ● Statistically significant (p < 0.05) ● Trend (p < 0.10) ● Statistically non-significant (p > 0.10)



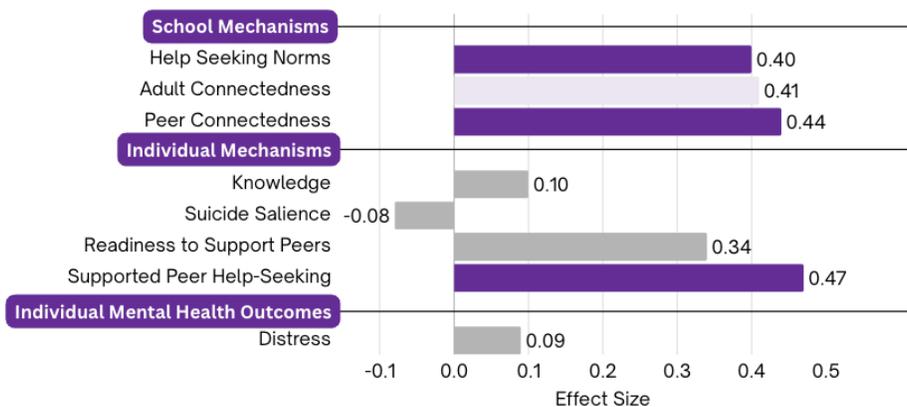
Note: We show our effects in terms of a standardized unit known as an Effect Size. The effect size is a measure of the magnitude of an impact (the difference between the group assigned to Directing Change and the group assigned to the waitlist/control) that is standardized (i.e., has the same meaning no matter the unit of measurement). In addition to distress, we also measured recent *Suicidal Thoughts and Behavior* as a binary variable (Yes/No). This effect is not displayed due to the use of a different effect-size metric for categorical variables. There was no statistically significant difference between the group assigned to Directing Change and waitlist/control.

How to read the figures: Findings are shown as the *difference* between youth in schools assigned to the Directing Change program *relative to* those assigned to the wait-list control group. Purple bars denote effects that are statistically significant and are therefore unlikely to be due to chance; grey bars denote those that are not statistically significant. All effects are shown in terms of a standardized metric to facilitate comparison across measures.

- **LGBTQ+ youth specifically benefited across a wide range of outcomes as a result of their participation in Directing Change.** Twenty percent of the youth identified as LGBTQ+ (in both the Directing Change- and control-assigned schools). Specifically, LGBTQ+ youth reported **greater help-seeking norms, peer and adult connectedness, and more support for peers' suicidal behavior** (raising the question, encouraging them to seek help, and taking action on behalf of a peer), as a result of their schools' assignment to the Directing Change program (see **Figure 2**). While overall readiness to support a peer was not statistically greater for youth in Directing Change schools than that for those in control schools, youth did report greater readiness on two subdimensions not shown in the figure: **greater understanding that if a peer reports suicidality to take it seriously and greater readiness to raise the question and to take action for a friend.**

Figure 2: The Impact of Directing Change on LGBTQ+ students

Key: ● Statistically significant (p < 0.05) ● Trend (p < 0.10) ● Statistically non-significant (p > 0.10)



Note: We show our effects in terms of a standardized unit known as an Effect Size. The effect size is a measure of the magnitude of an impact (the difference between the group assigned to Directing Change and the group assigned to the waitlist/control) that is standardized (i.e., has the same meaning no matter the unit of measurement). In addition to distress, we also measured recent *Suicidal Thoughts and Behavior* as a binary variable (Yes/No). This effect is not displayed due to the use of a different effect-size metric for categorical variables. There was no statistically significant difference between the group assigned to Directing Change and waitlist/control.

Qualitative study description: Interviews were conducted with 54 students and 10 staff in three schools where there was strong engagement with the program. All interviews took place the academic year *after* students and staff participated in the program. Schools varied in terms of where the program was implemented (video production, animation class; mental health club).

- In interviews, students and staff **reported greater belonging and connectedness, greater knowledge and awareness, and greater capacity to help their friends.** Participants also mentioned themes not explored in our surveys, as youth spoke of greater **self expression, emerging as leaders,** and the **joy** that making films offered them. Sample quotes reflecting these themes are included below. **Note that these themes were reported across boys and girls, LGBTQ+ and cisgender/heterosexual students.** A sampling of youth and staff statements are provided below.

"I felt really seen after watching the films."
- Youth

"[Directing Change] had a very positive impact on our school, not just with the students, but also the staff, the teachers. Seeing how we all really became such a close community, almost like a family, because of Directing Change, it was really amazing to see that happen."
- Youth

"In my family, I felt like [mental health] is not really something that we talk about, we just push it aside, so Directing Change has really changed it. Even this past weekend, I was opening up to my mom about stuff, and it was just such an amazing experience to finally get it all off my chest. **So I felt like it's really helped me be more open with it.**"
- Youth

"What's interesting to me is that ... the student will be working on their [Directing Change] project, and all of a sudden it'll sort of hit them what they're talking about, and how it's gonna affect someone."
- School staff

"And one of the students ... I had no idea because in my class, she's the leader of her group... And I was getting an email about the issues that she was having... that she was crying and that she was just really struggling. That's probably the best example of something positive coming out of ... **Directing Change is being able to express what's going on the inside creatively.**"
- School staff

"I think it was really cool that everyone got to see the film at my school because it was kind of like, oh, [Directing Change] isn't just like a club where you go and talk about feelings. They really care and I think it was just a lot of community building and letting people know that it's okay to not be okay, and it's okay to also not wanna talk about it. But it's like you're never alone."
- Youth

"Mental health can be a very deep and hard subject to grasp and talk upon. But I think through the experience of Directing Change, **it didn't have to be so hard.** Like, there was a community. **There's people you could talk to about it,** and you could make it fun through film and there's different ways to express it. It doesn't always have to be so, so serious and you know what I mean?
- Youth

"I'm almost happier that they come out of [Directing Change] a more aware and sensitive person, than that they come out a really great filmmaker."
- School staff

"I had a student come up to me at a lunchtime and say, can I talk to you for a minute? And so that stuff to me is really really positive, because it's taking away the stigma of, okay, I'm really struggling here, and I have nobody to talk to that. ... they really weren't comfortable talking to other people about [these topics] before Directing Change."
- School staff

Youth Creating Change

A non-profit organization dedicated to placing **young people’s voices and creativity at the center** of suicide prevention, mental health, and substance use programming. Our mission is to educate youth about mental health, suicide prevention, substance use and critical health and social justice issues **through art and film projects**; to facilitate healing, belonging, and civic engagement through creative expression, and to support schools and communities through curriculums, trainings, and awareness activities in creating safe spaces where young people feel seen, heard, and supported in reaching out for help.



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ARCADIA for Suicide Prevention at New York University

Housed within NYU’s Institute of Human Development and Social Change, ARCADIA is a research lab that takes a developmentally-informed, population-health approach to adolescent suicide. ARCADIA’s research embeds key tenets of **developmental prevention science**; is **ecologically infused**; **commits to partnership** with city and state agencies and community-based organizations; **amplifies youth voice**; and **integrates the arts**.



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