

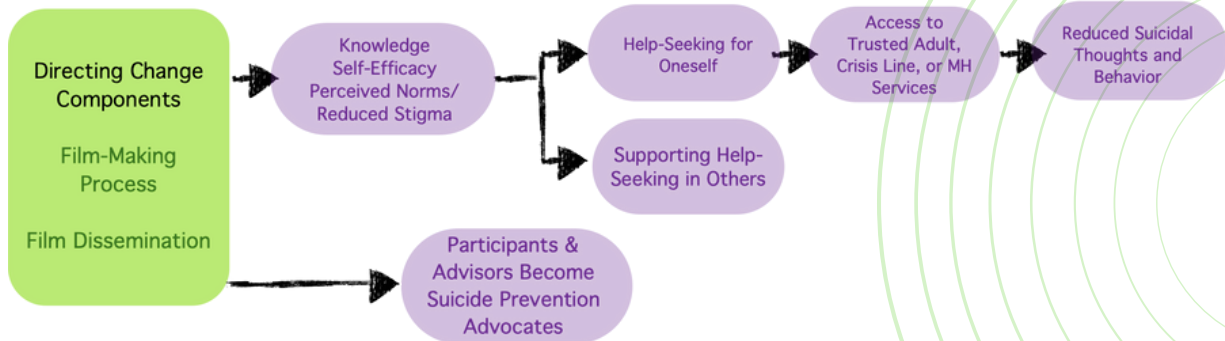
# Report on Preliminary Findings of the Directing Change Program 2020/2021

## INTRODUCTION

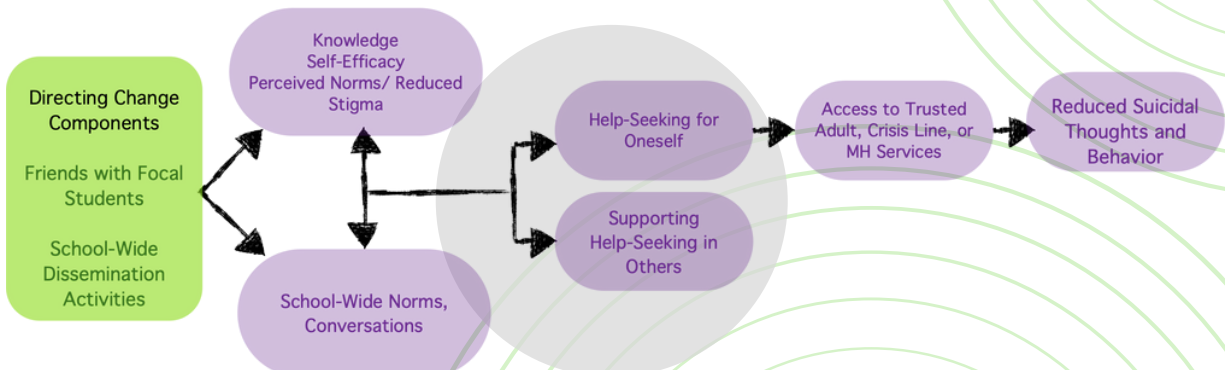
In Directing Change, a program “disguised as a film contest” with a nearly 10-year history serving diverse youth across California (CA), students create 30- or 60-second films in mental health/suicide prevention and disseminate them to the school community. Directing Change is currently implemented through a statewide film contest open to all youth ages 12-25, as well as the school-based mini-grant program. Funded by counties through the Mental Health Services Act as part of statewide suicide prevention efforts overseen by the California Mental Health Services Authority in 2012, the program has been operating as a non profit 501c3 since 2018. The program is based on strong relationships with the California Department of Education, county departments of education, behavioral health departments, and local community-based organizations

Directing Change is thought to address key determinants of suicide risk for student *participants* (what we call “focal students”) by increasing a) *knowledge* in suicidal signs and prevention actions (through the research conducted to make films), b) *confidence/self-efficacy* in helping (and help-seeking) behaviors (through scripting, storyboarding, and acting in films) and c) *norms* (through discussion of films). Other students in the school are thought to increase knowledge, reduce stigma, and improve norms, resulting in greater helping behavior, through a) *viewing the films* created by peers and b) *conversations and interactions with their friends* participating in the program. These pathways of influence (also known as the program’s “theory of change”) are shown in the two figures below, and some of which were identified in a mixed-method 2016 study conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago.

### Expected pathways of influence for focal students:



### Expected pathways of influence for other students:



There are two components of our pilot work that support our understanding of Directing Change. First, we analyzed **survey data** from a small group of mini-grant program high schools in which Directing Change student participants completed before- and after- program surveys of their **knowledge, beliefs and behaviors** about mental health and suicide prevention. Second, we conducted a small set of **qualitative interviews** with students and advisors who had participated in the program for a number of years, to further elucidate the program's theory of change.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THE QUANTITATIVE SURVEY?

### Who participated?

Students in mini-grant schools were invited to complete surveys about their knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors prior to participating in the Directing Change program (baseline) and again after participating in the program (follow-up). Although the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted follow-up data collection in spring 2020, resulting in a reduced response rate overall, we were able to examine changes from baseline to follow-up in a small sample of 8 high schools where students submitted surveys at both baseline (285 students) and follow-up (137 students).

### What did we find?

Results suggested statistically significant improvements in **knowledge about suicide** and suicide prevention, **intentions to support peers experiencing challenge** (e.g., by providing resources, talking to a trusted adult), and **willingness to stay engaged** with topics of suicide prevention and mental health. These findings are consistent with the results of the cross-sectional matched-comparison evaluation conducted by NORC in 2016, which found that students who participated in the Directing Change program, relative to demographically-similar students who did not participate in the program, had significantly greater knowledge of suicide prevention and mental health challenges, had more positive attitudes and intentions, and were more likely to report that they provided support (e.g., provided resources, encouraged help-seeking) to others experiencing challenge or distress.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THE QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS?

### Who participated?

We sampled 10 advisors and 7 students in the Directing Change program (who came from 14 schools, altogether) and conducted one-hour long remote interviews asking about their experiences in the program; these 17 participants came from a larger pool of students and advisors who had participated in the program for a number of years. Our sample represented a wide range of advisor roles (e.g., teacher, counselor, principal), implementation settings (e.g., film, video production, freshman seminar, English, other elective), student groups (e.g., required course for all freshman, advanced film class for seniors, elective open for all grades), and background/interest that drew the advisor/student to the program (e.g., interest in film component vs. interest in mental health/suicide prevention). Three exemplar schools are shown in the text boxes below.

### School A

Advanced video production class, juniors and seniors

One-month unit on PSAs

Social worker pushes in to offer lessons

Rough cuts shared in class/edited

Shared school-wide/district wide

### School B

First year seminar, all freshman

Led by guidance counselor

Rough cuts shared in groups/edited

Shared on school facebook page, in announcements, and as part of suicide prevention week

### School C

Elective pull-out in alternative high school

Co-led by English teacher and film instructor

Linked to other English classes (actors/feedback/writing assignments)

Screened in school-wide town hall and with neighboring schools

In the student interviews, we asked questions about their films and experiences creating them and perceptions of impacts on themselves, their peers, their families, and their school community as a result of the program. For the advisor interviews, we asked questions about the incorporation of the program into the school, how students created and disseminated the films, the perceptions of impacts on students, families, and the school community as a result of the program. We coded these interviews using a modified directed approach in which two team members read the transcripts from the interviews, identified domains to organize the data for analysis, and discussed common themes for coding. Our interest was in identifying both general/typical themes (apply to all or a majority of cases) as well as variant themes (those that might apply to only a few cases).

## WHAT DID WE FIND?

Our interviews revealed impacts on several themes we had articulated in our theory of change (i.e., **knowledge** and **self efficacy, shifting norms and conversations**, and **help-seeking**), but also highlighted a few additional themes we did not expect (i.e., **connectedness and belonging, reluctant leaders, and confidantes and sources of support**). We discuss these below.

### Confirmation of themes in our theory of change

First, our findings suggested an increase in **students' knowledge** of mental health and suicide, warning signs and resources, and **self efficacy/confidence in help-seeking and helping a friend** struggling with mental health challenges or suicidal thinking. Perhaps we find this because some students were drawn into this program from their interest in film, rather than their interest in mental health, per se. Even so, one might worry that students who are engaging in the program are those who are already knowledgeable about mental health and the warning signs of suicide, but our interviews showed that students were able to name more subtle warning signs than they could before they participated in Directing Change. For example, one student explained, "I used to think there [were] such narrow signs... but then I was doing more research and put more science into our film, and there was like a long list that I found, and I was like, wow... it's a lot more than I thought it was."

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- Student

Additionally, students reflected how this increase in **knowledge** empowered them to **seek help for themselves and their friends**, as well as increased their comfort level in asking about suicide directly. One advisor reflected on this by saying, "I feel like they're empowered [because] they know what to do, and they will make the call, and they will ask a friend directly, 'Are you thinking about suicide?'"

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- Student

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Along with the increase in knowledge, the interviews also showed a **shift in norms where students felt greater comfort in having conversations around topics of mental health and suicide**. These conversations were not limited to those with other participants in the program; students **felt empowered to have these conversations** with advisors, students who were not in the program, and, in some cases, even family members. One student explained that, “No one was really scared to talk about it, or like say big words like ‘suicide’ anymore. It was really interesting to see that change, and because I was doing it over the “...” years, I saw it develop after that, which was really wild to see that, like just something so small can make such a big impact.”

Furthermore, we noticed that students who participated in the program took steps outside of the program to actually **seek help for themselves or for their peers**, when the situation demanded it. For example, an advisor stated, “This year, I had a student who has [Directing Change] several years before, and came up to me after class and said, specifically, ‘I’m very worried about this other student. She’s been texting me about her plans to end her life, and I’m trying to figure out how to navigate this correctly because I feel like I have a responsibility to honor the trust she has with me with this private information. But I also know what we’ve talked about. If I’m really her friend, I have to do what’s best for her, not what honors our high school friendship.’” This interaction highlights how the program helped open a line of communication between the advisor and the student, as well as showcasing how the student prioritized helping their friend over honoring a secret.

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- Advisor

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## New themes emerged as a result of our interviews

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- Advisor

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One theme we heard in the interviews that we did not expect was a feeling of **connectedness and belonging** among students and advisors. While watching and making these films, students were able to realize their peers struggle with the same issues they do, which **strengthened relationships among students**. Advisors were also able to see this connection; one advisor stated in their interview, “Just realizing that there’s someone willing to listen to them, someone willing to hear them that they are, you know, valued and valuable voices, that they are experiencing things that are unique but universal at the same time, so it’s not you know, a teen issue, but it’s a human issue as well, you know.”

Additionally, we found that the program appeared to generate what we would call “**reluctant youth leaders**” in mental health advocacy/suicide prevention. These were students who themselves didn’t expect to be leaders in this area, but yet emerged as such as a result of the program. “I would have never thought that I would be doing any of this when I made my film... That was the first time I’ve ever talked about mental health in that level of depth,” one student explained. “It was very scary, so I would have never thought that four years later I would be talking to a bunch of people and panels and having all these opportunities to speak very openly about it. It’s just opened up so many new life experiences for me in that way.”

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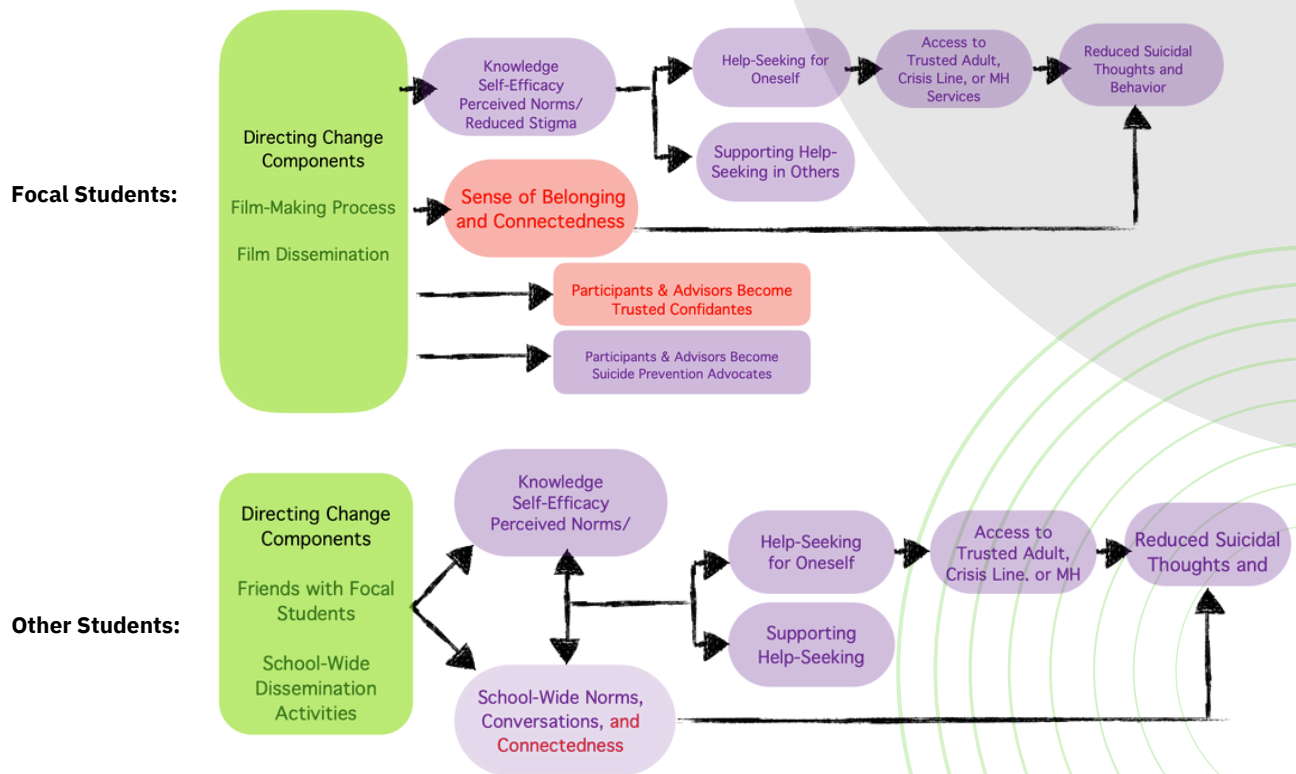
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- Student

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Lastly, students became known as **sources of information and support** for other students after sharing their films. For example, a student stated, “Right [after the film screening], so many of my friends came up to me and they're like, ‘Oh my God. I've experienced these things, too.’ ...I've had to basically strip myself in my filmmaking and be very raw and vulnerable. It's sort of like other people feel that they know me in that way, so they can approach me and do the same...It's very cool because having someone that is your age and who is like you is very important because it's easier to access that support. It's less daunting to ask for help if it's just asking a friend. Even a lot of people that I don't know super closely have also reached out to me.” Since students were vulnerable in sharing their films, **other students felt they were able to open up** to them. This quote also highlights one of the ways the program effectively supports the development of knowledgeable leaders in mental health advocacy and suicide prevention among youth. Our revised theory of changes with these new themes are shown in the figures below.

#### Pathways of Influence of the Directing Change Program, Revised with New Themes:



## WHAT'S NEXT

This report presents preliminary work that was conducted as part of our developing partnership with the Directing Change program, as part of our NYU-based Center, *ARCADIA for Suicide Prevention*. While none of this research is definitive, given the small and selective samples, this work highlights the potential of the Directing Change program for impact on youth suicidal behavior. Programs like Directing Change offer a universal way to reach youth at risk. Rarely do we find such easily-implemented "butterfly effect" programs with reverberating impact. Directing Change has the potential to be such a program.

Funding is currently being sought to support a study of the impact of the Directing Change mini-grant program via a mixed-method randomized trial of high schools in CA in a research-practice partnership, as well as for an implementation study of this same program in New York City/New York State, both starting in the 2022-2023 academic year or beyond. If shown effective through these future studies, this youth-centered approach could well be taken up nation-wide, reducing suicide risk and risk disparities, at scale. For further information about this report, contact [pamela.morris@nyu.edu](mailto:pamela.morris@nyu.edu); for further information about the Directing Change program, contact Jana Sczersputowski at [jana@yoursocialmarketer.com](mailto:jana@yoursocialmarketer.com)