

Ms. Mitchell’s Blank Page: A Learning Case in Sustaining Interventions and Supporting Specific Student Groups

This learning case was informed by interviews, quotes, and stories from the [To&Through Middle Grades Network Team](#), middle grades educators, and community partners in Chicago Public Schools, but the school and the educators in this case have been fictionalized.

Context

Shelly Nathan Bailey Elementary School is a PK-8 neighborhood school on the Southwest Side of Chicago.

Total # of Students	6th-8th Students	Student Demographics	Condensed Elementary On-Track
323	92	68% Hispanic 32% Black	36%

At the start of the 2019- 2020 school year, Bailey Elementary got a new principal, Ms. Williams, who focused much of her effort on improving the middle grades at Bailey. A former middle school teacher herself with a school-wide priority on increasing equity, Ms. Williams charged the Instructional Leadership Team, led by the Assistant Principal, Ms. Mitchell, with the goal of reducing the gap in [Elementary On-Track](#) Rates between male and female middle grades students in the building. As of Fall 2019, Elementary On-Track rates for Bailey 3rd-8th graders was 48% for girls and 26% for boys¹. The pandemic posed many challenges in rolling out that work, but the Instructional Leadership Team made a lot of progress despite these hurdles.

¹ A note about gender: “Historically, CPS data has been collected in a way that groups students into one of two categories: male and female. We hope in the future to be able to report data that more fully and accurately describes the identities of CPS students.” ([To&Through Data Definitions](#))
Gender and sex are not the same, but we have opted to use the terms “boys” and “girls” throughout this learning case when referring to these gender data categories. It is worth noting that [gender is a socialized category and gender is a spectrum](#), not a binary AND there are also ways that gender as it is socialized in our country has resulted in real opportunity gaps for boys, particularly Black and Latino boys, in K-12 schooling.
Within CPS broadly, we see an overall gender gap with 52% of 6th-8th grade girls and 39% of 6th-8th grade boys in the Elementary On-Track category. This gender gap continues through college enrollment with 64% of young women and 53% of young men enrolling in a 2/4-year college across CPS (as of 2021).

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In the 2022- 2023 school year, Ms. Williams (principal) and Ms. Mitchell (assistant principal) partnered to leverage the new [CPS Cultivate survey](#) as a tool to measure some of the impact their interventions were having on student experience. Aligned with the CPS District Blueprint, Ms. Mitchell believes that students who enjoy learning and feel a sense of belonging in the classroom are more likely to come to school and earn better grades. After the Fall administration, the Instructional Leadership Team has decided to focus their work on improving in the Meaningful Work and Teacher Caring Learning Conditions. Both of these areas were low across the school, but particularly for Black and Latino males.

Over the last 3 years, the Bailey Instructional Leadership Team has rolled out a variety of initiatives focused on closing the gender gap in the middle grades including a mentorship program for boys, 1:1 conferencing, and strategies to integrate competition and choice in the classroom.

Learning Case

Ms. Mitchell, the assistant principal and Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) Lead at Bailey Elementary, stared at the empty box in the ILT meeting agenda on her screen. Ms. Mitchell felt as if the blinking cursor were counting down the seconds on the rare block of time she had to plan the agenda for the next ILT Meeting.

In the 2019-2020 school year, the small but mighty Instructional Leadership Team at Bailey, made up of the assistant principal and four experienced teachers, identified some significant gaps between the On Track rates of girls (48%) and boys (26%) in the middle grades. In partnership with their new principal, Ms. Williams, the ILT decided to do focus groups with some of the middle school boys to learn more about their experiences at Bailey. Mr. Young, the middle grades (6th-8th) science teacher and only male on the Instructional Leadership Team, had pointed out that it may be better to partner with an organization like Becoming a Man (B.A.M.) or another outside partner to ensure the boys could identify with and feel comfortable with whoever was leading the focus groups. Ms. Williams facilitated a connection to [an organization](#) (Project OneTen) that supports Black and Brown boys in their transition to high school. The organization was able to host virtual and in-person focus groups for some of the 6th-8th grade boys and then brought the synthesis to an ILT meeting.

