

# Middle Grades Network

The To&Through Middle Grades Network (MGN) supports cohorts of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) dedicated to creating more equitable and responsive learning environments where middle grades students thrive. The network aims to **increase the number of students on-track in elementary school (attendance at or above 90% and GPAs at or above 3.0) through a meaningful increase in students' sense of belonging.** MGN believes that by focusing on the unique developmental needs of early adolescents, we help young people develop the foundational skills and connections to school that are critical for high school and postsecondary success.

Teams of educators at participating schools use knowledge of adolescent development research and multiple forms of data to identify a problem of practice, co-create a shared definition of student success, and partner with students to develop and test change ideas that redefine the middle grades experience.

This improvement story shares the journey of one MGN school in hopes of inspiring others to reimagine systems and structures to ensure that middle grades students thrive.

## DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. ACADEMY OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Located in Englewood

### DEFINITION OF STUDENT SUCCESS

King students are successful when they demonstrate the ability to support their peers, utilize growth mindset language, use their voices to solve real-world problems individually and as a collective, and are celebrated for their academic and social-emotional growth.



### STUDENTS

School Grades: **PREK-8**

Number of Students: **203**

Middle Grades Enrollment: **80**

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Largest racial group: **85.7% BLACK**

Diverse Learners: **10.8%**

Low Income: **85.2%**

### CORE TEAM MEMBERS

Principal | Assistant Principal | Middle School Math Teacher | Middle School ELA Teacher | Middle School Social Science Teacher | Instructional Coach

## YEAR 1 | CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

In spring 2022, the King Academy team gave a student experience survey to all middle grades students, conducted empathy interviews with middle grades boys, and did student shadows with some diverse learner students. Overall trends highlighted that students had strong relationships with teachers but struggled to connect with each other in meaningful ways. More specifically, the Elevate survey revealed that 72% felt class was welcoming but only 42% felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions. The team also reviewed historical outcomes data and reviewed Q1 grades and attendance data using the Grades Monitoring Tool in fall 2022 and found that 64% of 7th grade male-identifying students were on track, but 17% needed intensive support (i.e. had a GPA below 3.0 and attendance below 90%).

## DATA SOURCES

- Student Experience Survey given to all 6th-8th grade students in May 2022.
- Quarterly [Elevate](#) surveys given to all 6th-8th grade advisory classes.
- Quarterly data from the [Grades Monitoring Tool](#)
- Exit tickets following student-led discussions.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Students have an interest in current events and are willing/want to discuss; and with clear parameters, they are able to engage in rich discussions.
- By laying out very concrete ground rules and continuously reinforcing them, you can create a safer-feeling environment in middle grades advisories.
- Through regular meetings and being able to respond and make action plans to support students, you can increase community building as a middle grades team.

## YEAR 1 | CHANGE IDEA

## Student-Led Discussions during Advisory

- Pairs of teachers supported student-led discussions during advisory. The discussions started with 7th grade boys and rolled out in all 6th-8th grade advisories by the end of school year.
- Students selected topics to discuss and co-created ground rules with their advisory teachers.
- The goal was to strengthen peer-to-peer relationships and classroom community in response to an uptick in peer conflicts post-pandemic.

## YEAR | 1 IMPACT

**Student-led discussions** were a powerful change idea that allowed students to use their voices to solve real world problems individually and collectively. Students discussed topics such as relationships, abortion, and the teen takeovers that occurred in downtown Chicago in spring 2023. Teacher observations revealed that students learned how to form and express fact-based opinions in a way that respected and engaged peers. In fact, King saw a **3% increase** in Classroom Community in Elevate for all middle grades students and also saw a **2% increase** in Student Voice and **6% increases** in Meaningful Work and Teacher caring for male-identifying students specifically. Students also noted that they were able to hold themselves and their peers accountable to the ground rules they set to ensure the conversations were productive. The King Academy plans to build on the success of student-led discussions by hosting the conversations every other week in all middle school advisory classes. Students will have the week between discussion to research the upcoming topics so the discussion is further grounded in facts.

## YEAR 2 | CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

In fall 2023, King Academy conducted empathy interviews with a group of their middle school students. Their questions focused on inclusive practices and ways to improve the social climate throughout the middle grades. Overall trends highlighted that students had a desire for more autonomy and wanted to feel more care from their community. This prompted their team to have their first student-led discussion around the idea of care. This was also reflected in their Elevate data which showed that only 52% of King middle grades students reported feeling a sense of community in their classrooms. After winter break, their team encountered a few shifts in staffing, which led to a mid-year reset. Despite the changes, the team remained committed to improving the middle grades experience for their students. One unique opportunity they saw was to incorporate their MGN Student Fellows into their team meetings and into the change idea process. After the King Student Fellows shared feedback and possible action items with their teachers during a MGN team meeting, the team decided to implement a suggestion box in homerooms. The suggestion box allowed educators to gather ideas about student-led discussion topics, attendance incentives, and ways to show care.

## DATA SOURCES

- [Elementary On-track Data](#)
- Elevate Survey Data

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE** | Throughout their journey, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Academy of Social Justice educators noted their most important lessons about improving the experiences and outcomes for middle grades students.

- Be intentional about listening to students. When they feel affirmed and heard, they will be more vocal about issues in the classroom and school.
- Learning how to explicitly show care can lead to increased empathy among students and teachers.
- Developing an organized and consistent system to gather feedback to improve the middle grades experience for students.

## YEAR 2 | CHANGE IDEA

**CHANGE IDEA #1** Student-Led Discussions

- Teachers supported student-led discussions during advisory. The discussions started with 8th grade and focused on themes from their empathy interviews.
- Students selected topics to discuss and co-created ground rules with their advisory teachers.
- The goal was to strengthen peer-to-peer relationships and understand more about their students' needs.

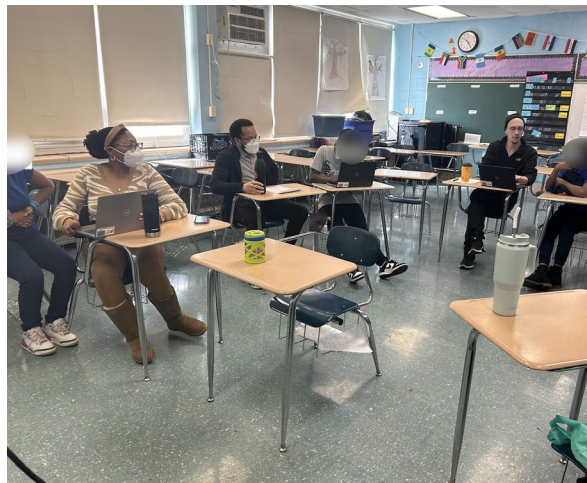
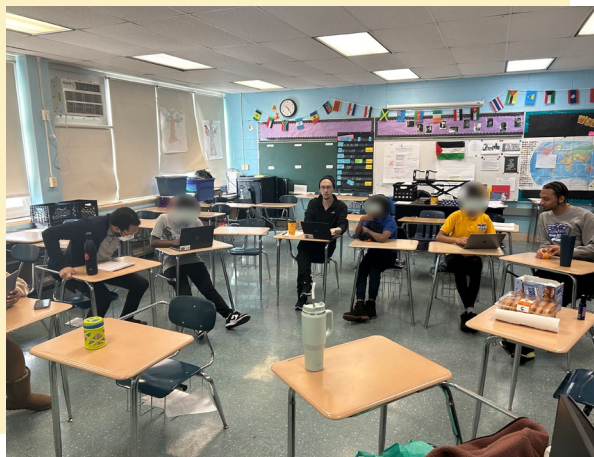
**CHANGE IDEA #2** Suggestion Box

- Homeroom teachers placed suggestion boxes in their classrooms after their Student Fellows attended a meeting and shared the idea.
- Each teacher gathered suggestions based on prompts given to their students.
- Sample Prompt: "What are ways teachers and students can show care to each other?"
- The suggestion box allowed students to share ideas in a safe way, specifically because they could be submitted anonymously.
- It also gave teachers a streamlined way to gather feedback on a number of topics.

## YEAR 2 | IMPACT

Despite a number of pivots during the 2023-24 school year, the King team saw an **increase in GPAs from Q3 to Q4**. They were also able to use the suggestion box to gather ideas about attendance incentives to implement during Q4 after they saw a drop during Q3. They ended the year with an average attendance rate just under 90%. They also gained valuable insight from their MGN Student Fellows, who shared not only their perspectives, but their peers as well. Student fellows shared ways teachers could show care and help students feel more supported. They also brainstormed ways to Though they did not see major shifts in their Elevate data, they plan to build on what has been successful over the last two years for the 2024-2025 school year.

Moving forward, the King team wants to continue with student-led discussions. They also plan to develop a sustainable system around town halls. The purpose of town halls is to provide a space for students to share their perspective on a particular topic or issue. Lastly, they would like to build on incorporating the Student Fellows into their team meeting structure and other spaces to support with leadership development.





## YEAR 3 | IMPACT

In their third year, King strategically focused on sustaining change ideas that had proven effective. They committed to hosting Town Halls, holding two throughout the year. Teachers noted that these Town Halls facilitated meaningful student feedback and fostered student collaboration. However, leadership instability remained a challenge with the principal leaving before the school year ended.

Despite these disruptions, King maintained their focus on data-driven improvements through quarterly analysis of their Grades Monitoring Tool. They achieved a **7% increase** in the Meaningful Work learning condition, with **10% more students** reporting that their classwork was meaningful rather than busy work. Additionally, there was a **5% increase** in the Feedback for Growth condition, with **8% more students** feeling that their teachers believed in their potential for success.

Looking ahead, King plans to continue implementing the sustainable practices developed through their participation in the Middle Grades Network, aiming to build on the progress made.

