

# 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.

## NASH ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Located in Austin community

### DEFINITION OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Student success is when students are supported by the middle school team with consistency, stability, and structure, and the team offers students a sense of belonging.



### STUDENTS

School Grades: **PREK-8**

Number of Students: **257**

Middle Grades Enrollment: **72**

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Largest racial group: **77.4% BLACK**

Diverse Learners: **19.1%**

Low Income: **75.5%**

### CORE TEAM MEMBERS

Principal | Middle School Science Teacher | Middle School Math Teacher | Middle School Social Studies Teacher  
Middle School ELA Teacher (Lead) | Middle School Diverse Learners Teacher

## YEAR 1 | CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

In spring 2022, the Nash team conducted surveys, empathy interviews, focus groups, and student shadows with their middle grades students. Survey results revealed that though many students felt that their identity was affirmed at school, they didn't feel a strong sense of teacher caring or that they could comfortably share their thoughts and opinions in class. During the empathy interviews and focus groups, students shared that sometimes language, especially for the Latinx students, was a barrier and that there was confusion by all students regarding systems in school, especially the discipline policy.

## DATA SOURCES

- Quarterly [Elevate](#) survey results related to the Teacher Caring, Classroom Community, and Meaningful Work learning conditions.
- Staff and student created student surveys to gather additional information from students regarding their experiences in the classroom
- Quarterly review of the [Grades Monitoring Tool](#)

## YEAR 1 | CHANGE IDEA

**CHANGE IDEA #1 Relationship mapping and intentional check-ins to build student-educator relationship**

- Through a student survey that asked which core teacher students had a connection with and a relationship mapping activity completed by the MGN teachers, each teacher identified 5-7 students who did not feel a strong connection to a staff member to intentionally check-in with throughout the week.
- Teachers checked in with students for at least two minutes, 3-5 times a week on topics other than schoolwork. Then every two weeks, they reflected as a team on the connections they built during those interactions and any information that needed to be shared with the team.

**CHANGE IDEA #2 “Would You Rather” community building at the beginning of class to foster peer to peer and student-educator relationships.**

- The Nash team started with an ambitious change idea of building an intentional advisory calendar and structure, but due to staffing shortages, the schedule was modified before that change idea was implemented effectively.
- During the second semester, in order to foster stronger relationships, teachers implemented community building at the beginning of each class. Using “Would You Rather” questions, they helped build stronger connections between students and were able to meaningfully tie the questions to their curriculum.

## YEAR 1 | IMPACT

**Relationship Mapping + Intentional Check Ins** highlighted the fact that relationships are key and that letting students see teachers as humans is valuable. Teachers shared that getting to know the students better during check-ins allowed them the time to show care in a way that students received. These check-ins also helped students take time to check-in with themselves.

**“Would You Rather” Questions and Community Building** at the start of class helped build a sense of belonging and connection between students and with teachers. These questions also bridged the gap between what students were learning in class and their lives outside of school.

Nash saw **1-2% gains** on the Elevate Survey in the Affirming Identities, Classroom Community, Teacher Caring and Meaningful Work learning conditions. For the individual question about whether students feel comfortable sharing thoughts and opinions in class, there was a 6% increase, and there was a **5% increase** in students feeling like the work they do in class is meaningful. Nash plans to start both of these initiatives earlier in the 2023-2024 school year to build on their learning and success.

## YEAR 2 | CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

Building on their successes in year one, the Nash MGN team decided to start relationship mapping and intentional check-ins earlier in the year to build classroom community and strong educator to student relationships. Their Elevate Survey results confirmed that the areas of Classroom Community and Teacher Caring were continued areas of growth. As the year progressed and after looking at the Grades Monitoring Tool, teachers identified an additional need for more regular check-ins with students around their grades, attendance, and social emotional needs, with goal setting and self-reflection built in. They also heard from their students during the MGN Student Fellowship that brain breaks would be helpful to both release energy and focus students.

## DATA SOURCES

- Quarterly Elevate survey results related to the Teacher Caring, Classroom Community, and Meaningful Work learning conditions.
- Staff created student surveys to gather additional information from students regarding their experiences in the classroom and student connections to staff members.
- Quarterly review of the Grades Monitoring Tool to identify students in need of additional support.
- Feedback from Nash MGN Student Fellows

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Incorporation of social emotional learning into everyday classroom activities helped to build meaningful connections with students.
- Checking in with students in a purposeful and intentional way allowed educators to take the time to show care in a way that students received and to let the students know that they are cared for.
- Listening to students and to one another allows the educators at Nash to be able to be more responsive and adapt.

## YEAR 2 | CHANGE IDEA

**CHANGE IDEA #1 Relationship Mapping and Intentional Check-Ins**

Through the relationship mapping survey and subsequent activities, teachers identified 16 students to intentionally check in with during the first semester. Fifteen students were initially identified as needing connection points throughout the week. Teachers continued to check in with students 3-5 times a week for a few minutes each day. Reflections and any pertinent information was tracked in a spreadsheet to identify trends and make sure that everyone on the team was informed about any student needs.

**CHANGE IDEA #2 Weekly ACES Check-Ins on Attendance, Coursework, Emotional, Self-Reflection**

After reflecting on the Grades Monitoring Tool and other achievement data, the Nash MGN Team identified a need to have students focus on goal setting using a more structured protocol. Using the ACES Check In, all students would reflect on their attendance, coursework, and social-emotional needs. They would then complete a self-reflection tied to specific goals. Some teachers then conducted a short conference with individual students to better understand their next steps, while others sent the sheet home to the parents with notes.

**CHANGE IDEA #3 Brain Breaks**

As a part of their work in the MGN Student Fellowship, Nash students shared that they felt more brain breaks were needed in their classes to help students release energy and to improve focus during class. The four students presented their ideas to their teachers and created a survey to give to their peers to determine which brain breaks they would want to see most. The student fellows and teachers brainstormed the best times to implement these breaks.

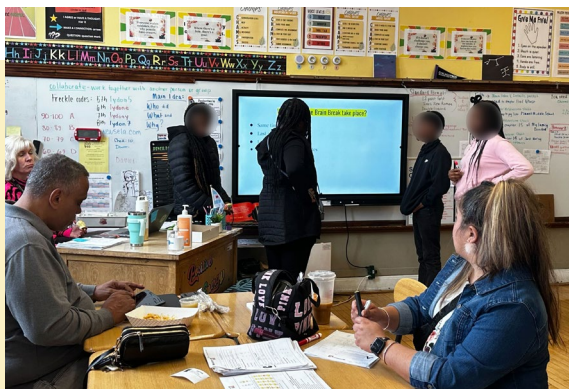
Nash saw between 2-8% gains on the Elevate Survey across all nine learning conditions. Their largest areas of growth were in Classroom Community (+8%), Supportive Teaching (+5%) and Teacher Caring (+4%). The largest individual question growth was, “This class is a welcoming place for everyone,” which grew by 11%, and “This teacher knows my strengths and weaknesses in this class,” which grew by 10%. With continued growth in these areas, Nash plans to continue with each of these initiatives in the 2024-2025 school year in order to make sure that all students feel like they belong and that there is consistency, stability, and structure across the teachers.

**YEAR 2 | IMPACT**

**Relationship Mapping + Intentional Check-Ins** After semester one, the relationship mapping survey was conducted again. This time, **11 out of the 16 original** students identified a connection, many to the person who had been checking in with them, and three additional students were identified as needing those supports. As the Nash teachers continued this change idea, they identified the important ways they had built connections with students and how that impacted the community in the school.

**Weekly ACES Check-Ins** Nash saw an **increase in the percent/proportion of students with a GPA above 3.0** at the end of the year. The proportion of students who are on track was also more steady than in years past. Teachers shared that students are more aware of how to take control of their grades and improve them. The students were also better self advocates and were more comfortable asking how they could do better.

**Brain Breaks** Brain Breaks brought student voice into the classroom in a real way. This helped increase buy-in amongst middle grades students about what MGN is and why the surveys they take are important. As they saw [Silent Ball](#) and [Would You Rather?](#) activities consistently added, students realized that their voice was being heard.





## YEAR 3 | IMPACT

In their third year in the MGN, Nash focused on creating consistency through instructional non-negotiables and making school a welcoming and safe place for all students. They also continued with relationship mapping to make sure that each student had a connection to a teacher in the building and elevating student voices to understand their experiences and what might be holding them back.

With this intentional work on building connections in the school, Nash continued to see growth in learning conditions. With **7% growth** in both Meaningful Work and Student Voice, along with **4% growth** in Affirming Identities, the intentional work that Nash put in came to fruition. Some of the most dramatic changes came in the number of students who agreed with the statements, “What we learn in this class is connected to real-life,” **“I have the opportunity to make choices about my work in this class,”** and **“In this class, my ideas are taken seriously.”** Those three questions each saw an **11% growth** between the beginning and end of the year.

As the Nash team becomes an MGN alumni, they plan to sustain the work by:

- Intentionally onboarding new staff to the MGN work at the beginning of the year.
- Using student experience data for intentional planning and making sure that the work is focused on one to two areas.

