

# 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.

## CHARLES SUMNER MATH & SCIENCE COMMUNITY ACADEMY

Located in West Garfield Park

### DEFINITION OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Student success is when students feel seen, heard, and celebrated. Teachers, staff, and students work together to create an environment that is safe, encouraging, developmentally appropriate, and challenges them academically.



### STUDENTS

School Grades: **PREK-8**

Number of Students: **177**

Middle Grades Enrollment: **87**

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Largest racial group: **100% BLACK**

Diverse Learners: **15%**

Low Income: **80%**

### CORE TEAM MEMBERS

Counselor | 7th/8th Grade Math + Science Teacher | 7th/8th Grade ELA + Social Science Teacher

5th/6th Grade Math + Science Teacher | Middle School Diverse Learner Teacher | Middle School Diverse Learner Teacher

[Pitch-In](#) Program Manager

## YEAR 1 | CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

In spring 2022, the Sumner team conducted student experience surveys and focus groups with their 5th-8th grade students. Survey results and focus groups revealed that students had a desire for deeper connection; not only in their academics but with their teachers and school community. Students spoke about the small groups or student surveys to strengthen these connections as well. After their first [Elevate](#) survey, 53% of students reported feeling that their work was meaningful. As a result of that data, teachers wanted to know more about what the word “meaningful” meant to their students. What they found was that there was a disconnect between the academic content and connection to the real-world. Based on the desire for more transparency and connection, the team decided to focus on how to improve the Meaningful Work learning condition.

## DATA SOURCES

- Quarterly [Elevate](#) survey results related to the Meaningful Work classroom learning condition.
- Direct student feedback in the form of engagement activities and Google surveys to determine student understanding of the word meaningful.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- A student’s perception of what you’re doing might be different from what you’re doing.
- Students develop a sense of agency by communicating their thoughts and opinions.
- Students need to provide ongoing, direct feedback to teachers on how to adjust practices by participating in different surveys or activities.

## YEAR 1 | CHANGE IDEA

**Making Meaningful Work Connections through Learning Targets & Discussion**

- Middle grades teachers committed to having explicit conversations with students around why, how, and what made their work meaningful.
- In addition, some students led small groups discussions around Meaningful Work and teachers included student choice in academic content.

## YEAR 1 | IMPACT

**Making meaningful work connections through learning targets and discussion** led to students feeling a stronger sense of ownership and understanding of purpose behind their academic work. Using prompts such as “this assignment connects to the real world by...”, led to discussion about and helped students make those connections. In addition, teachers who met with students during small groups said they **“enjoyed talking about it”** and **“liked that there was not a wrong or a right answer.”** As a result, the team saw a **6% increase** in the Meaningful Work learning condition between the two Elevate survey administrations.

Towards the end of the 2022-23 school year, the team shifted their focus towards the Classroom Community learning condition in Elevate and implemented different strategies to increase engagement. This will be the focus for the start of the 2023-24 school year with teachers keeping in mind, “what strategies can be used to support student engagement, their sense of community in the classroom, and the middle grades as a whole?” The team looks forward to collaborating and building off of last year.

## YEAR 2 | CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

After the start of their 2023-2024 team meetings, the Sumner team decided to focus on the Student Voice learning condition in Elevate. Their beginning of the year data reported that 65% of students felt their voice was heard and they had choices in their classes. Their specific focus for the year was **“what does it mean for students’ ideas to be taken seriously?”** The Sumner team decided to dig deeper into the data and held Elevate Data circles. As a result of those conversations, they decided to create the Classroom Suggestions Council, which included gathering ideas from their students on how to improve their middle grades experience. They also saw this as a unique opportunity to incorporate their [MGN Student Fellows](#) in the change idea process.

## DATA SOURCES

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

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE** | Throughout their journey, Charles Sumner Math & Science Community Academy educators noted their most important lessons about improving the experiences and outcomes for middle grades students.

- Students are much more willing to make a suggestion when they feel heard and see their ideas come to fruition.
- You have to explicitly name it, having a follow up discussion with students after implementing action items is important.
- Giving suggestions can carry over into other spaces. For example, they are more vocal in class giving different ideas during discussion and in other areas of the school.

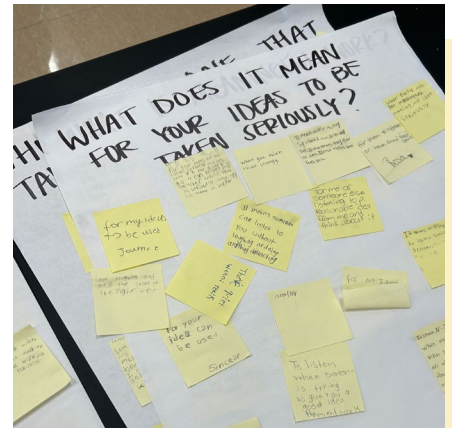
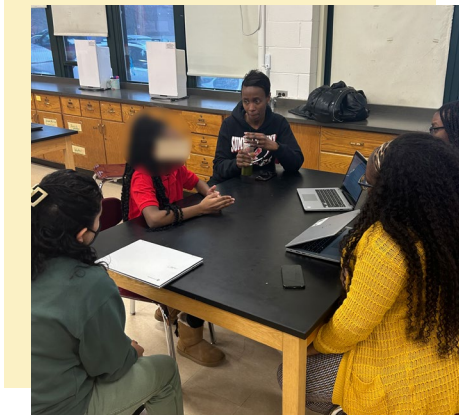
## YEAR 2 | CHANGE IDEA

**CHANGE IDEA** Classroom Suggestions Council

- The Sumner team and their MGN Student Fellows created a plan to implement the Classroom Suggestions Council.
- The team gathered suggestions in a Google Form that lived in each homeroom teacher’s Google Classroom. The focus questions were “what is an idea you have to improve your classroom community?” and “what is an idea you have to improve your middle school experience?”
- Once suggestions were collected from their peers, the Student Fellows presented them to the teachers (the MGN team) which led to action planning.
- After adjustments were made, teachers continued to gather suggestions from their students. As a result, the following shifts and adjustments occurred:
  - Revisited Meaningful Work conversations
  - Held explicit conversations about consequences
  - Provided explicit language about brain breaks
  - Used suggestion for behavior incentives

The Sumner MGN team held a town hall called “You Spoke, We Listened” to ensure that students were aware of the shifts. Students were invited to give additional feedback during this time about the adjustments their teachers made.

As a result of their change idea(s), the Sumner team saw an **increase of 7%** in the Student Voice learning condition in Elevate, with an 8% increase in **“students feeling like their ideas are taken seriously.”** Additionally, Sumner saw an average **increase of 4%** in each of the nine learning conditions. Their attendance remains at 93% and their on-track rate **increased 8%** from Quarter 3 to Quarter 4. One of the most powerful shifts was the impact on their team’s perception of student voice and sharing power. This mindset shift was reflective of the recognition that it’s okay to **“start small”** and to **“remember, it’s a process that includes trying new things, failing, and trying again.”** Lastly, as a result of the the Classroom Suggestions Council, the following shifts occurred: **revisited Meaningful Work conversations, held explicit conversations about consequences, provided explicit language about brain breaks, and used suggestions for behavior incentives.**

[illegible]



## YEAR 3 | IMPACT

In their final year of the MGN partnership, Sumner centered their work around fostering care in the classroom. They began the year with Data Circles, facilitated in collaboration with a former MGN Student Fellow and their own SVC. These conversations helped the team deepen their understanding of what it means for teachers to authentically care about students' lives beyond academics.

Building on this foundation and inspired by practices shared by another MGN school, Sumner launched Student-Led Discussions to further explore student perspectives on a specific learning condition. These discussions aimed to not only gather meaningful feedback, but also promote healthy peer-to-peer dialogue and support the development of academic discourse skills. In parallel, the team continued to analyze data from their quarterly Grades Monitoring Tool, examining GPA trends by grade level and subject area to better inform their instructional support. Their intentional focus on care and student voice led to shifts in student experience, including:

- **9% increase** in students feeling their ideas are taken seriously
- **5% increase** in students feeling comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in class
- **5% increase** in students feeling their teacher cares about their life outside of school

During their final MGN team meeting and end-of-year reflections, Sumner expressed excitement about the long-term impact of this work—especially for their rising eighth-graders who have engaged in the process since fifth grade. The team shared their appreciation for the partnership and voiced a commitment to sustaining these practices moving forward.

