

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.

TALCOTT FINE ARTS MUSEUM ACADEMY

Located in West Town

DEFINITION OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Student success is when students explore their authentic selves, demonstrate growth and self-improvement in areas that are meaningful to them, and contribute to the greater good of their local and global communities.



STUDENTS

School Grades: **PREK-8**
 Number of Students: **467**
 Middle Grades Enrollment: **171**

DEMOGRAPHICS

Largest racial group: **82% HISPANIC**
 Diverse Learners: **20%**
 Limited English: **51%**

CORE TEAM MEMBERS

Principal | School Counselor | 6th - 8th Grade Science Teacher | 7th and 8th Grade Humanities Teacher
 7th and 8th Grade Math Teacher | 7th and 8th Grade Diverse Learners Teachers | 6th - 8th Grade Cluster Program Teacher

YEAR 1 | CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

In spring 2022, the Talcott team gave student experience and Elevate surveys to all middle grades students, conducted empathy interviews and student shadows with their introverted and lower achieving students, and conducted focus groups with their high-achieving students and newcomers. The data showed that while 85% of students felt they could make mistakes, teachers believe in them, and they got suggestions for how to improve, nearly 30% did not identify a trusted adult in the building. The Elevate and Student Experience survey also reveals that students often felt disrespected by their peers in class, 41% of students did not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in class, and 50% feeling that they did not connect to what they were learning in class. This data led the team to conclude that they needed to focus on increasing the sense of belonging for middle grades students and building connections beyond academic content.

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.
- Teacher created exit tickets following advisory lessons.
- Teacher observations of change in peer-to-peer interactions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Adolescents need repeated and varied opportunities to practice self-expression and self-awareness.
- Be open to new ideas and remember how fast young people are learning and changing.

YEAR 1 | CHANGE IDEA

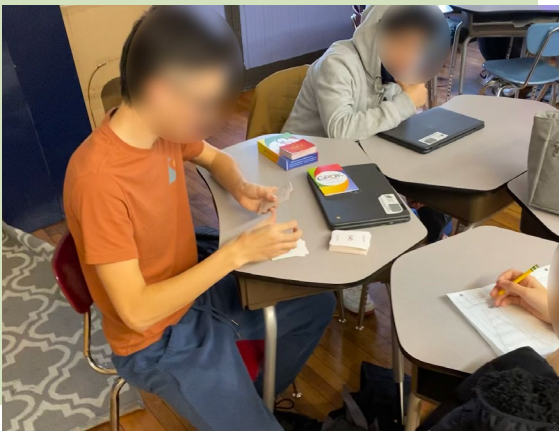
CHANGE IDEA #1 Using Restorative communication Strategies in Advisory

- The 7th grade team started by having students journal about the definition and uses of communication. Students then used a [non-violent communication framework](#) to practice strategies from the framework in scenarios they might experience at school or at home.
- The 8th grade team began by having students journal about their own feelings and situations where they needed to understand the feelings of others. Students then use the [Grok card](#) game to practice identifying emotions and needs, as well as empathizing with the feelings of others.
- The goal was to strengthen peer-to-peer relationships and build a culture of acceptance and inclusivity within advisories and across the middle grades.

YEAR 1 | IMPACT

Using Restorative Communication Strategies in Advisory strengthened both peer-to-peer and student-to-educator relationships by creating space for students and teachers to talk about personal experiences inside and outside of school. Exit tickets revealed that students enjoyed and benefited from the structured self-expression and communication activities, which helped increase their sense of self-awareness, willingness to have difficult conversations, and knowledge of how to appropriately communicate with others. In fact, there was a **7% increase** in Classroom Community and **14% increase** in Meaningful Work on the Elevate survey by the end of school year, with a **10% increase** in the question about students feeling more comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in class. There was also a **6% overall increase** in Elementary On-Track rates from January 2023-June 2023.

In order to build on the learnings from and success of their change idea, the Talcott team plans to incorporate team building games and challenges into advisory bi-weekly. The team also wants to be even more explicit about the connection between strengthening peer-to-peer relationships and meaningful work in advisory.



YEAR 2 | CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

After attending their second MGN Summer Institute in August 2023, the Talcott team decided to build on their success improving peer to peer relationships in SY23 by working to address trends they saw in their academic data. In particular, the team noticed that their incoming 8th graders were not following through with their assignments and it was negatively impacting their GPAs. They decided to address this by launching bi-weekly grade reflection conversations with all middle grades students. The team also worked to refine the 1:1 conferences that middle grades teachers began testing towards the end of SY23 school year and were intentional about tapping into their returning MGN Student Fellows to recruit two new Fellows and to continue strengthening student voice across the middle grades.

DATA SOURCES

- [Elementary On-track Data](#)
- Elevate survey data

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE | Throughout their journey, Talcott Fine Arts Museum School educators noted their most important lessons about improving the experiences and outcomes for middle grades students.

- Being more intentional about student identity and their perspective of the teacher, the class and their learning is important.
- Asking students for feedback and making changes accordingly can allow both parties to benefit.

YEAR 2 | CHANGE IDEA

CHANGE IDEA #1 Accountability Bundles

- Continuing on last year's positive growth with peer to peer relationships, the team expanded these efforts during the 2023-2024 school year to include a targeted focus on building executive functioning skills through bi-weekly grade reflections and peer accountability.
- The goal of this change idea is to increase the Meaningful Work learning condition by 10% and increase the English Language Learners (ELL) and Newcomers On Track rate by 15% from Q1 to Q4.

CHANGE IDEA #2 GPA Tracker + Grade Reflection Tool

- The Talcott team created a GPA tracker, which is a Google sheet to help students calculate their GPA on a bi-weekly basis.
- Students participated in a lesson on the importance of their GPA and how to calculate it.
- The team also created a Grade Reflection tool to have students reflect on their grades and a list of actions they can choose from in order to improve.

CHANGE IDEA #3 1:1 Conferences

- Each quarter of the 2023-2024 school year the Talcott teachers met with a pre-assigned group of students for [1:1 conferences](#). The conferences were between 10-15 minutes and were tailored to each student.
- The Talcott MGN Team created a student conferencing form to help prepare students for 1:1 conferences with a staff member. The form changed from semester 1 to semester 2 to be more focused on a specific area of growth for students such as attendance, behavior, or academics.

CHANGE IDEA #4 Give 2, Get 2 + Clock Partners

- In the winter of 2024, the Talcott Student Fellows conducted Student-Led Classroom Community Data Circles focused on the Elevate Data Point, “I feel comfortable sharing my thoughts and opinions in class.”
- The students heard and then shared with teachers that students don’t feel confident in their answers, that they were afraid that they would be made fun of and that the “popsicle stick” method (where teachers choose a popsicle stick with a student’s name on it) to get students to share stressed them out.
- With that information, in the spring of 2024, the Talcott teachers implemented two new strategies in order to increase participation without the added stress: Give 2, Get 2 and Clock Partners. In Give 2, Get 2, students respond to a teacher prompt on two sticky notes. The teacher then calls out a time and the students get together with their clock partner (a predetermined peer from their paper clock with the name of a classmate to partner with at that “time”) to share what they wrote. The class then engages in a larger discussion about their responses.

YEAR 2 | IMPACT

Accountability Buddies During the first semester of the 2023-2024 school year, accountability buddies met once a week during advisory periods to check-in with each other. They conducted grade check-ins together, participated in getting-to-know-you activities, and were allowed to work together during some assignments. This change idea was only implemented during the first semester due to a number of students transferring in and out, staff turnover, and some students not using their time as instructed.

GPA Tracker + Grade Reflection Tool The GPA tracker was used frequently throughout the 2023-2024 school year and the students became very familiar with how to calculate their GPA. As new students transferred in, existing students had a really good understanding of how the tool worked and were able to teach new students how to utilize it. This led to more student initiative in looking at their grades and asking questions. At the end of the year, 51% of all Talcott students have above a 3.0 GPA.

1:1 Conferences Quarterly one-on-one conferences led to more organic relationships between teachers and students and time to talk about things outside of school. This also has brought students to the forefront that may not have been on the radar. It gives teachers one-on-one time with each student and allows students space to voice concerns. One-on-one conferences also allow for collaborative problem solving around grades, attendance, and social emotional concerns. On Elevate, this translated to a **4% increase** over the course of the 2023-2024 school year in students saying, “This teacher makes sure different backgrounds and perspectives are valued and supported” and an overall **5% increase** on Supportive Teaching and **8% more saying that “This teacher knows my strengths and weaknesses in this class”**.

Give 2, Get 2 + Clock Partners Teachers used these practices at least once a week in their classes. With these practices there was an increase in student participation, especially when students understood how it connected to their speaking and listening standards. At the end of the 2023-2024 school year, Talcott saw a **4% increase** on Elevate in Classroom Community with the individual questions of **“In this class, we have lots of opportunities to interact with each other” increasing by 6% and “I feel comfortable sharing my thoughts and opinions increasing by 9%.**



YEAR 3 | IMPACT

In their third year as part of the MGN, Talcott focused on sustaining practices that had been most effective during their time in the cohort, including 1:1 conferencing, sharing data with students to get additional feedback, and dedicated time for social-emotional learning. With new members on the team, time was also dedicated to onboarding new staff to the work being done.

Using these practices, Talcott continued to see growth in their learning conditions data this year. They saw an **overall 5% growth** in both Feedback for Growth and Teacher Caring, along with a **6% increase** in Meaningful Work. By the end of the year, **12% more students agreed with the statement, “This teacher lets me know they believe I can do well in this class,”** and **11% said that, “This teacher cares about my life outside of school.”**

To sustain the work moving forward, Talcott identified four key areas they want to focus on:

- Time and support to discuss the needs of middle grade students and implementation of next steps;
- Dedicated time for students to express their ideas;
- Continuing to provide students with opportunities to explore, inspire, and grow different parts of their identity; and
- Helping students set goals and provide them with a road map for achieving those goals.

