

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.

SOUTH SHORE FINE ARTS ACADEMY

Located in South Shore

DEFINITION OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Student success is when students demonstrate academic and personal growth. This happens best when teachers and students recognize the growth together.



STUDENTS

School Grades: **PREK-8**
 Number of Students: **209**
 Middle Grades Enrollment: **85***

DEMOGRAPHICS

Largest racial group: **97% BLACK**
 Diverse Learners: **35%**
 Low Income: **67%**

CORE TEAM MEMBERS

Principal | Assistant Principal | Middle Grades Diverse Learner Teach | 7th-8th ELA/SS Teacher | 7th-8th Middle Grades Math Teacher | 5th-6th ELA/SS Teacher | 5th-6th Middle Grades Math Teacher

YEAR 1 | CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

In spring 2022, the South Shore Fine Arts Academy (SSFAA) team conducted student experience surveys, student shadows, and focus groups with their 6th-8th grade students. Survey results and focus groups revealed that students wanted classrooms to feel like more welcoming places. Students also expressed a desire for teachers to know more about them and their abilities. Surveys also showed that it was not always easy for students to talk to their teachers or to share their thoughts and opinions in class. During their first administration of the [Elevate](#) survey, 46% of students strongly agreed/agreed that they felt a sense of Classroom Community (peer-to-peer relationships) and 54% of students strongly agreed/agreed that they experience Teacher Caring (educator-to-student relationships).

DATA SOURCES

- Quarterly [Elevate](#) survey results related to the Teacher Caring and Classroom Community learning conditions.
- Direct feedback in the form of a [Student Questionnaire](#) to gather additional data around students' sense of comfort sharing their thoughts and opinions in class.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Being there and present is vital to building relationships; remember to see students for who they are and meet them where they are.
- Acknowledging students, centering humanity and love, and showing interest in their lives outside of school are important.
- Students are capable of strong discussion, are open-minded, and less judgemental about others' thoughts and opinions.

YEAR 1 | CHANGE IDEA

Question of the Day

"*Question of the Day*" was created based on their Elevate data and other student surveys. Teachers took 10-20 minutes a day to ask questions that students were interested in, such as **"is love or loyalty more important in friendship?"**.

- Discussions took place either at the beginning or end of the day with each teacher designated to a specific grade level. Resource teachers completed the activity with their students as well.

YEAR 1 | IMPACT

The SSFAA team reported that students loved "*Question of the Day*" and that it allowed for deeper relationships between students and their teachers. As the year progressed, student engagement and buy-in continued to increase.

As a result of their change idea, the SSFAA team saw a **12% increase** in the Teacher Caring learning condition, including a **16% increase in students feeling that "their teacher is glad they are in this class"**. There was a **2% overall increase** in Classroom Community as well.

Towards the end of the year, the team began to discuss an advisory structure that includes "*Question of the Day*" with two team members volunteering to pilot it. During the 2023-24 school year, the team is looking to incorporate advisory into their schedule and increase students' sense of classroom community. Lastly, the SSFAA team is working on how to bring the same engagement and confidence students experience while sharing out their responses during "*Question of the Day*" to other areas in school.

YEAR 2 | CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

After the start of their fall team meetings, the SSFAA MGN team decided to focus on the Student Voice and Classroom Community learning conditions in Elevate for the 2023-2024 school year. 65% of their students positively reported feeling as if their voice was heard and that they felt a strong sense of community. Based on the success of Question the Day from the 2022-23 school year, the team decided to continue with and build on this change idea. One approach was to incorporate student voice by having their MGN Student Fellows select questions to be included in the daily activity. Additionally, the team had their Student Fellows attend a meeting to share about their middle grades experience. Based on insights from that meeting, the team decided to implement a suggestion box to gather ideas on how to improve the middle grades experience. The SSFAA team was also able to learn more about what care and community meant to their students and how to support that need in the classroom through an Elevate Data circle conducted in March 2024.

DATA SOURCES

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

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

- Students trust their voice is heard because they feel the care is there.
- Their experiences throughout this year have led to a group effort amongst students (i.e. showing care for teachers and each other).
- Listening to suggestions can impact student outcomes and improve the middle grades experience.

YEAR 2 | CHANGE IDEA

CHANGE IDEA #1 Student Voice Incorporation: Question of the Day

- “*Question of the Day*” continued based on feedback from students and success during the 2022-23 school year. Teachers took 10-20 minutes a day to ask questions that students were interested in.
- MGN Student Fellows selected questions for this activity. Sample questions included “**Can a trio of friends work?**” and “**Should religion be discussed in school?**”
- The goal was to build on success from the previous school year and transfer ownership to students.

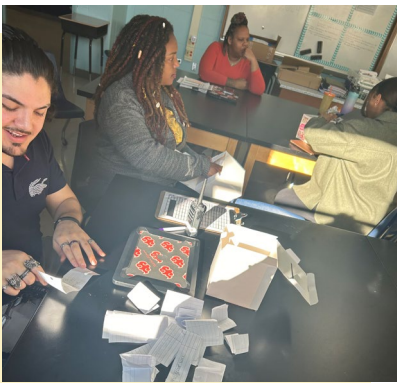
CHANGE IDEA #2 Student Voice Incorporation: Suggestion Box

- Teachers implemented a suggestion box to gather additional feedback from students about how to improve their middle grades experience.
- Each homeroom teacher kept a Suggestion Box in their classrooms for students to submit suggestions.
- Teachers reviewed the suggestions at team meetings which led to the following action items:
 - More group projects;
 - More opportunities to not wear their school uniform; and
 - Ability to work outside the building/classroom

YEAR 2 | IMPACT

As a result of their change idea(s), the SSFAA team saw a **1% increase** in the Student Voice learning condition and 80% of students reported that their teacher responded to suggestions to make their class better. Additionally, within the Classroom Community learning condition, 78% of students felt they had lots of opportunities to interact with their peers in class. Though not a direct area of focus, there was also a **4% increase** in the Meaningful Work Elevate learning condition. There was also an increase in GPA each each quarter with their Quarter 4 average GPA being right below 3.0. Lastly, after the teachers reviewed suggestions, it led to the following action items: **more group projects, more opportunities to not wear their school uniform, and the ability to work outside the building/classroom.**

The SSFAA team plans to focus on more alignment across teachers with their change idea to support building their middle school culture. They hope to implement a Community Week at the beginning of SY25 and want to understand more about their incoming 7th grade students. They plan to continue with Question of the Day and want to find additional ways to incorporate student voice using the suggestion box.



YEAR 3 | IMPACT

In their final year of the MGN partnership, South Shore prioritized building sustainable infrastructure for their Student Voice Committee (SVC). After connecting with an MGN Cohort 1 school, they adopted a distributive leadership model to support the growth and sustainability of the SVC. Responding to students' desire for a stronger sense of community, the team facilitated a student-planned Community Day, deepening peer connections.

The team continued to engage with data through quarterly analysis of data in the Grades Monitoring Tool, focusing specifically on GPA trends to better understand how to support student success. Their efforts to strengthen classroom community and elevate student voice led to a **13% increase** in students reporting they felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in class.

At their final partnership meeting, the South Shore team reflected positively on their experience, sharing that they especially valued using “*Question of the Day*” and plan to continue the practice. They are excited to carry their SVC work forward and intend to be intentional with future student surveys to avoid fatigue and ensure meaningful feedback.

