

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.

CHALMERS STEAM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Located in North Lawndale



DEFINITION OF STUDENT SUCCESS

Student success looks like a strong student-centered community taking ownership of their education through organization and communication with the end goal of graduating to be successful in high school.



STUDENTS

School Grades: **PK-8**

Number of Students: **185**

Middle Grades Enrollment: **92**

DEMOGRAPHICS

Largest racial group: **93% AFRICAN-AMERICAN**

Diverse Learners: **25%**

Economic Disadvantaged: **90%**

CORE TEAM MEMBERS

Principal | School Counselors (2) | Middle School Social Studies Teacher | Middle School ELA Teacher

YEAR 1 | SY25 CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

During spring 2024, the need to strengthen the classroom community and student voice for 6th-8th graders at Chalmers was evident. 55% of students rated Classroom Community positively with only 43% agreeing that they felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in class. More than 60% of students believed bullying was a problem and because teachers did not always recognize all forms of it, students did not always feel supported. This data, combined with their problem of practice - *"If we build a stronger classroom community and help make students feel more comfortable, then they will take more academic risks, feel connected to each other, and be open to academic rigor"* - guided the team's work in the SY25 school year.

DATA SOURCES

- Data from the *MGN Student Experience Survey* and focus groups conducted in spring 2024.
- Classroom Community data from the *Elevate* and *Cultivate* Surveys. Both surveys were given twice in SY25.
- Student check-ins, incident reports, and classroom discussions to identify key concerns related to bullying.
- Exit Slip following the Bullying Town Hall.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- The importance of understanding adolescent/brain development and how it connects to our experiences educators
- Making changes based on student voice and perspectives can be simple, should be data driven, and is motivating for educators.

CHANGE IDEA #1 | "QUESTION OF THE DAY"

- Every day during morning meeting, 6th-8th-grade students engaged in community building discussions based on a question of the day (QOTD).
- There was 100% participation with ~50% of students showing excitement about QOTD.

CHANGE IDEA #2 | BULLYING TOWN HALL

- The 90-minute event with all 6th-8th graders included a community building activity, small group discussions led by students, the creation of anti-bullying pledges, and whole group reflection.
- MGN Student Fellows led the planning by sharing personal experiences, creating a voting process for Town Hall student leads, shaping discussion questions, and facilitating parts of the event.
- The goal was to foster a safe space for honest conversation while building a stronger, more respectful school community.

YEAR 1 | IMPACT

At the end of the school year, the Chalmers team saw positive results for their students in various ways. *"Question of the Day"* was a good way for students to practice sharing their perspectives that led to increased academic risk. In fact, Classroom Community **improved 4%** vs. the beginning of the school year and there was a **10% increase in students feeling comfortable sharing thoughts and opinions in class**. The *Bullying Town Hall* gave students the vocabulary and confidence to call out situations where bullying exists and to hold themselves accountable to the anti-bullying pledges that were hung around the building following the event. Given the success of their change ideas, the team plans to host quarterly town halls on topics of interest and to have students create the question of the day in SY26. The team also hopes to build on the data skills they developed by reviewing the multiple forms of middle grades data with all adults in the building more regularly.