

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.

NORTHWEST MIDDLE SCHOOL

Located in Belmont-Cragin

DEFINITION OF STUDENT SUCCESS

At Northwest we want students to feel academic and social confidence through meaningful, authentic connection inside and outside the classroom, and use their voice to actively and intentionally participate in the community.



STUDENTS

School Grades: **6-8**

Number of Students: **529**

Middle Grades Enrollment: **529**

DEMOGRAPHICS

Largest racial group: **95% HISPANIC**

Diverse Learners: **16%**

English Learners: **58%**

CORE TEAM MEMBERS

Principal | Assistant Principal | School Counselor | Middle School Special Education Teachers (2)

Middle School Visual Arts Teacher | Middle School Math Teacher (3) | Middle School Social Studies Teacher

YEAR 1 | 2024-2025 CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

In spring 2024, the Northwest team gave student experience surveys to all middle grade students. The data showed that 52% of students didn't feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in class and about 30% of students didn't feel like teachers knew their strengths and weaknesses, or that they could come to their teachers with a problem. They did find that a large majority of students felt that teachers respected them (91%) and that they could connect to what they were learning (83%). This data led the team to conclude that they needed to create intentional time and space for more positive and meaningful connections between educators and students.

DATA SOURCES

- *Baseline Student Experience Survey* given to all 6th-8th-grade students in spring 2024.
- Quarterly *Elevate* Surveys given to all 6th-8th-grade students starting in fall 2024 and *Cultivate* Survey given in fall 2024 and spring 2025.
- Teacher observations of change in peer-to-peer interactions.
- Student feedback from community building and data circles.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- It is important to work on teacher mindsets and student outcomes. The Northwest team worked to support teachers in looking at data about a very personal thing (their students) and not taking it personally, instead using the data to find solutions.
- The team lived by the belief, "If you create reasons for kids to show up, they will come."

CHANGE IDEA | "QUESTION OF THE DAY"

- All 6th-8th-grade students participated in "*Question of the Day*" during the first 15 minutes of the day in their homerooms.
- Teachers included students in the practice by having them pick the questions, spin the wheel of questions, and share their ideas for questions.
- "*Question of the Day*" was added to the list of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) non-negotiables to maximize the time they had with students to do intentional SEL work.

YEAR 1 | IMPACT

"*Question of the Day*" improved classroom communities in classes that were consistent. **students grew in their comfort sharing their ideas.** When "*Question of the Day*" needed a boost, a plan was built to incorporate intentional community circles once a month. With varying success, these two practices were added to a list of SEL non-negotiables that were observed and supported. With these in place, a concerted effort was made to show students that teachers were taking their responses seriously. They created a student-facing PERTS Teacher Data Template to address student data explicitly and inspire classroom conversations around student voice. These efforts led to a **1% increase** in *Teacher Caring* and holding steady through the year in both *Classroom Community* and *Feedback for Growth*.