

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.

BUDLONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Located in Lincoln Square

DEFINITION OF STUDENT SUCCESS

When our students are able to navigate life in every area, academic and social-emotional, with a growth mindset focused on the joy of learning, progress, and accountability for themselves and others.



STUDENTS

School Grades: **PK-8**

Number of Students: **758**

Middle Grades Enrollment: **250**

DEMOGRAPHICS

Largest racial group: **37% HISPANIC**

Diverse Learners: **14%**

English Learners: **35%**

CORE TEAM MEMBERS

Principal | Assistant Principal | School Counselors (2) | Youth Interventionist | Middle School Science Teachers
Middle School ELA Teacher | Middle School Math Teachers (2) | Middle School Social Studies Teachers (4)
Middle School Diverse Learners Teachers (3) | 5th Grade Teachers (2) | 5th Grade Diverse Learners Teacher

YEAR 1 | 2024-2025 CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

In spring 2024, the Budlong team gave student experience surveys to all middle grades students and conducted empathy interviews and focus groups. The data showed that 35% of students didn't feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in class and 30% believed that bullying was happening at the school. In focus groups, students shared that teachers and staff made them feel welcome, but they did not feel fully connected to or supported by their classmates. This data led the team to conclude that they needed to create intentional time and space for more positive student-to-student connections.

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 circles.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Encouraging students to take ownership of "*Question of the Day*" made it more meaningful for students.
- "*Question of the Day*" allowed for students to connect more with their classmates, which promoted empathy and collaboration.

CHANGE IDEA | "QUESTION OF THE DAY"

- All 5th-8th grade students participated in "*Question of the Day*" during the first 15 minutes of the day in their homerooms.
- Students discussed their answers with new partners each week in order to build stronger connections with all of their peers.
- Questions were translated into four different languages, so that all students could participate.

YEAR 1 | IMPACT

Implementing "*Question of the Day*" and focusing on building a strong supportive community led to **6% gains** on *Elevate*, in both Classroom Community and Meaningful Work between fall 2024 and spring 2025. Budlong also saw an **8% gain** in both *Feedback for Growth* and *Supportive Teaching*. **students reported that they enjoyed getting to talk about something other than academics, and especially enjoyed when teachers answered the questions too.** These conversations and the support of the Student Fellows also helped Budlong educators realize that teachers and students often wanted the same things when it comes to classroom learning environments.