The To&Through Middle Grades Network (MGN) is a cohort of CPS schools dedicated to creating more equitable and supportive educational environments where middle grades students can thrive. The network seeks to build the capacity of practitioners to understand the developmental, social-emotional, and non-academic factors critical for student success and to make changes in practice that improve middle grades indicators for success in high school and beyond.

Practitioners from selected schools participate in customized professional learning and receive dedicated in-school coaching as they engage in a student-centered improvement process grounded in data, research, and the expertise of participating schools. The ultimate goal of the MGN is to build school capacity and develop best practices for middle grades success that can be implemented district-wide.

The pilot cohort of MGN schools is focused on developing and testing solutions related to the following problem of practice: “Our students and families do not always feel they belong in our school communities because of school and societal barriers caused by systemic racial/ethnic injustice and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning. As adults, we need to create caring and equitable relationships where middle school students and families are seen, valued, and engaged.”

01 INQUIRY
Collect, analyze, and use quantitative and qualitative data to better understand the experiences of middle grades students.

02 DESIGN
Articulate a problem of practice and develop a strategy to address that problem.

03 ITERATION
Conduct quarter-long cycles of improvement to test solutions to the identified problem of practice.

04 SHARING
Shift focus outward so that others can learn how to better support middle grades students.

toandthrough.uchicago.edu
Intentional Relationship Building to Strengthen Student-Educator Relationships

LOCATION

Brighton Park
3825 S. Washtenaw Avenue
Chicago, IL 60632

INQUIRY

In spring 2020, the Brighton Park team conducted surveys and focus groups with their middle grades students. Focus groups revealed that students felt teachers did not check for understanding frequently enough, that students generally did not feel connected to adults at the school, and that students did not have a strong sense of identity. School-level outcome data also indicated that the transition to fifth grade, when students begin to interact with multiple teachers per day, was particularly challenging.

STUDENTS

School Grades: PreK - 8
Number of Students: 331

DEMOGRAPHICS

93.1% Hispanic
14.8% Diverse Learners
48% English Learners

DESIGN

Using this data, Brighton Park identified their middle grades problem of practice and their first change idea to test in the fall of 2020.

- **Problem of Practice**: “Our students are struggling with academic engagement and executive functioning skills, as well as struggling to connect with peers and staff. These challenges are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning. As a result, we need to provide opportunities for students to develop purposeful and meaningful relationships with adults that support their executive functioning skills in order to increase their academic engagement and success.”

- **Change Idea**: Brighton Park designed their change idea around implementing bi-weekly individual student check-ins with all of their middle school students. Twice per month, Brighton Park middle school students met with a teacher to discuss how they are doing at home and in their classes to set clear goals for the next two weeks.

- **CPS Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP) Priority**: Quality and Character of School Life: Student Voice, Engagement and Civic Life
Throughout the 2020–2021 school year, each Brighton Park middle grades teacher met with 25 students bi-weekly in a one-on-one conference to build stronger relationships and better support students.

**ACTIONS**

- Brighton Park used bi-weekly pulse check surveys to measure student-teacher connections and reviewed them for interventions. One-on-one conferences helped build the personal relationships that teachers and students were missing in the midst of trying to make up for lost instructional time.
- Brighton Park’s MGN teacher leads also completed staff empathy interviews in January 2021 to gauge impact of the conferences.

**INSIGHTS**

- Using survey and conference data, the Brighton Park staff was able to formalize what a student needed most. This included more social-emotional check-ins and identifying barriers to success including attendance, grades, stress, family, or friends.
- One-on-one conferences increased staff empathy and awareness of what students were experiencing, which led to more flexibility and grace for both staff and students.

**LEARNING**

- Social-emotional learning cannot be isolated; rather, it must be incorporated into all areas of learning.
- Strong developmental relationships are truly important between educators and students.
  - Students want staff to ask how they are doing and if they understand what is happening in school and their lives.
  - Sharing power with students reduces stress and helps students find more joy in classroom activities, leading them to take more ownership of their work.

**NEXT STEPS**

- Moving forward, Brighton Park intends to continue the surveys, focus groups and one-on-one conferencing.
- Brighton Park will have a Student Voice Committee to foster more collaboration between staff and students.