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 Community Building to Strengthen Student-Educator Relationships

LOCATION
Brighton Park
4520 S. Kedzie Avenue.
Chicago, IL 60632

STUDENTS
School Grades: PreK – 8
Number of Students: 792

DEMOGRAPHICS
98.6% Hispanic
12.8% Diverse Learners
34.5% English Learners

INQUIRY
In spring 2020, Columbia Explorers (CE) sought to understand how they could empower students to become agents of their own learning. Surveys revealed that 24% of students liked their teachers and were invested in positive relationships and that more than 38% of students were motivated when their personal interests were at the core of their learning. School level student data also indicated that sixth grade students were the most likely to feel disconnected from their teachers because the transition from 5th to 6th grade is often a culture shock that disrupts learning and motivation.

DESIGN
Using this data, Columbia Explorers identified a problem of practice and their first change idea to test in the fall of 2020.

• Problem of Practice: “Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, our middle grades students are struggling to see themselves as empowered learners. As a result, as adults, we need to find ways to spark intrinsic motivation in our students.”

• Change Idea: Columbia Explorers’ change idea is to purposefully integrate the identities and personal stories of students into the curriculum in order to build and strengthen meaningful relationships and spark intrinsic motivation. This focus will begin with 6th grade reading classes and then expand to other grade levels and subjects.

• CPS Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP) Priority: Quality and Character of School Life: Relational Trust; Student Voice, Engagement, & Civic Life; Transitions, College & Career Access, & Persistence

ITERATION
Columbia Explorers plans to use a variety of tools and data to implement and measure the effectiveness of their plan including:

• A “Getting to Know You” questionnaire as a way to understand and incorporate student interests into lessons;
• Pulse check surveys to monitor a sense of belonging and motivation for students;
• A quarterly “Student Experience Survey” to measure changes in student perceptions of identity-based lessons and teacher relationships; and
• A reflection tool that allows teachers to analyze survey results from students and reflect on the broader identity work.