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 for 24% of students, liking their teacher and establishing a positive relationship motivated them to do well. And another 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 fifth to sixth 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**: In order to build strong educator-student relationships and increase student engagement during remote learning, Columbia Explorers focused on intentional community building by purposefully integrating the identities and personal stories of students into all areas of the curriculum, starting with reading.

- **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

Throughout 2020–2021, Columbia Explorers implemented a variety of surveys and lesson plans to improve student experience and affirm student identity:

ACTIONS

• A “Getting to Know You” questionnaire was conducted to better understand and incorporate student interests into lessons, with advisory lessons centered around SEL and reading units focusing on identity.
• A “Student Experience Survey” was given three times during the year to measure changes in student perceptions of identity-based lessons and teacher relationships.
• Staff and Student Voice Evaluation Surveys were employed to reflect on student voice in the classroom.

INSIGHTS

• Students felt more comfortable coming to teachers/adults and vocalizing what changes they would like to see in the classroom.
• Students were more open to sharing during talking circles and felt more connected to the texts offered in reading.

LEARNING

• Students given choice in their class activities and assessments felt more connected to their class, even during remote learning.

NEXT STEPS

• Moving forward, Columbia Explorers intends to continue building and strengthening relationships between students and staff through talking circles and restorative conversations.
• Columbia Explorers plans to develop a Student Voice Rubric and curate a Student Voice Toolbox of best practices for teachers to use throughout the year.
• Columbia Explorers will also provide more opportunities for student input on lessons, units, rubrics and grading.