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.
Interest-Based Activities to Strengthen Student-Educator Relationships

**LOCATION**

**Dearborn Homes**
2710 S. Dearborn Street
Chicago, IL 60616

**STUDENTS**

**School Grades:** PreK - 8  
**Number of Students:** 263

**DEMOGRAPHICS**

94.7% Black  
18.3% Diverse Learners  
92.4% Low Income

**INQUIRY**

During spring 2020, the Drake team surveyed rising seventh and eighth graders about their needs and experiences as middle grade students. The surveys revealed that students needed more academic support, such as tutoring, and emphasized the importance of relationships and mentors. Students also expressed a desire for their voices to be heard in school decisions. In addition, school-level data highlighted disparities in academic performance and school discipline between boys and girls, a trend aligned with the district’s focus on young Black men.

**DESIGN**

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

- **Problem of Practice:** “Due to societal barriers caused by systemic racial injustice and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning, our middle grades students are struggling to consistently engage. We need to model a sense of urgency and develop strong, consistent, and flexible relationships, supports, and training with students and their families.”

- **Change Idea:** Drake developed interest-based instructional and extracurricular activities to strengthen 1:1 and mentoring relationships between middle school boys and Drake educators. The Drake team implemented their first change idea with Black male students in sixth through eighth grade.

- **CPS Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP) Priority:** Quality and Character of School Life: Student Voice, Engagement, and Civic Life
ITERATION

Throughout 2020–2021, Drake used a variety of metrics to iterate on and measure the effectiveness of their change idea.

ACTIONS

• Drake collected data on how frequently students were meeting with mentors in order to understand which mentors and students were participating regularly and intervene with additional support as necessary.
• The team also provided professional development for staff — particularly staff without teaching experience — on how to create supportive relationships with students.
• Drake regularly monitored attendance and GPA, which they connected to mentoring data to gauge the initial impact of the program.

INSIGHTS

• Educators gained a greater understanding of students’ barriers to full engagement.
• The Male Mentoring Program would not be sufficient enough to dramatically increase academic achievement, engagement or attendance in the short term.
• Students did not know the importance of their GPAs nor how to calculate them.

LEARNING

• Students want to be an active part of the decision-making process in their school.

NEXT STEPS

• Drake will continue the male-mentoring program in the fall and continue to measure its effectiveness.