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.
Intentional Community Building in Advisories to Strengthen Peer to Peer Relationships

**LOCATION**

Gage Park  
3510 W. 55th Street  
Chicago, IL 60632

**STUDENTS**

School Grades: 6 - 8  
Number of Students: 1,017

**DEMOGRAPHICS**

97.2% Hispanic  
10.2% Diverse Learners  
31.2% English Learners

**INQUIRY**

During spring 2020, Hernandez asked middle school students to complete the “Perfect School Project” to incorporate student voices and expertise in the school’s continuous improvement strategy. Through the project, students indicated a need for a greater emphasis on relationships. In particular, students wanted spaces where they could share their feelings and wished they had deeper relationships with their teachers, especially outside of content learning. School level data also indicated that outcomes for the large population of Spanish-speaking students, who are new to the country and Diverse Learners, were lagging compared to their peers.

**DESIGN**

Using this data, Hernandez identified their middle grades problem of practice, along with their first change idea to test in the fall of 2020.

- **Problem of Practice:** “Our students and families do not always feel they belong in our school community because of school and societal barriers caused by systemic racial injustice. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning students are also experiencing collective trauma and disruptions to social and academic development. As a result, as adults, we need to collaborate to create a culture of care that intentionally attends to the social-emotional (SEL) needs of students by prioritizing the development of positive peer-to-peer relationships and school-wide community.”

- **Change Idea:** Hernandez’s first change idea is to implement talking circles in all of their advisory classes. Talking circles are a protocol where students are given space and time to reflect on personal questions and hear the stories from their peers and teachers. Hernandez’s talking circles will have a particular focus on newcomer, Diverse Learner, and LGBTQ students, all of whom indicated feeling less connected to the school community.

- **CPS Continuous Improvement Work Plan (CIWP) Priority:** Quality and Character of School Life: Physical and Emotional Safety

**ITERATION**

Hernandez will look at three metrics to determine whether or not talking circles are having the intended impact including:

- Direct feedback from Student Ambassador focus groups about their perceptions of the circles;
- Bi-weekly debriefs with the teachers facilitating talking circles; and
- Pulse check surveys to monitor the impact of circles on students at various points during the quarter.