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 these 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 needs of students by prioritizing the development of positive peer-to-peer relationships and school-wide community.”

- **Change Idea:** Hernandez’s change idea was 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 stories from their peers and teachers. Hernandez’s talking circles had a particular focus on students in the newcomer, Diverse Learner, and LGBTQ communities, 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
Throughout 2020–2021, Hernandez trained a group of teachers to implement talking circles and targeted advisory methods. They looked at three metrics to determine whether or not talking circles had their intended impact:

**ACTIONS**
- Hernandez implemented a beginning, middle, and end of the year pulse check survey to monitor the impact of circles on students.
- Hernandez also used a Student Ambassadors (SAs) program to gather feedback from their students about how talking circles and advisory were going.
- Teachers met in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) to plan and debrief the facilitation of talking circles.

**INSIGHTS**
- Students felt cared about as a result of adults’ focus on peer-to-peer relationships; a positive side-effect was that focus also increased student-to-teacher relationships.
- Student Ambassadors’ input and support in planning helped to strengthen teacher-student relationships. They gave direct feedback about their perceptions of the circles and helped to make improvements moving forward.
- The SAs reported that they were proud to be able to build relationships despite remote learning and that the activities in advisory made the day seem more bearable.

**LEARNING**
- There was a difference in topic preferences for different grade levels: sixth and seventh graders wanted to keep things light, and eighth graders were more focused on current events and deeper conversations.
- A teacher’s confidence and comfort level with leading discussions will greatly affect students’ engagement in conversation.

**NEXT STEPS**
- Findings from surveys and the ambassador focus groups increased the sense of urgency to incorporate more student voice into the classroom and school-level decision making. Moving forward, Hernandez will work with their student ambassadors to start a Student Voice Committee.
- Hernandez will continue offering a Talking Circle PLC for teachers.
- The Hernandez Team will continue to use the comfort students build in early years to serve as the foundation for deeper conversations in later grades.