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
Zoom Family Socials to Strengthen School-Family Partnerships

LOCATION
Woodlawn
6300 S. University Avenue
Chicago, IL 60637

STUDENTS
School Grades: 6 - 12
Number of Students: 624

DEMOGRAPHICS
93.6% Black
13.9% Diverse Learners
73.1% Low Income

INQUIRY
During spring 2020, the UChicago Charter Woodlawn (UCW) Middle School team conducted student focus groups, exit interviews with eighth graders, and empathy interviews with families. Overall, students felt a strong sense of community but often struggled to deepen their relationships in positive ways. Feedback from families revealed a desire for a stronger community amongst families as well as more ways to connect with teachers and staff. They felt this support and consistent family engagement were even more important given the developmental changes their middle schoolers are experiencing. A review of historical data confirmed that this was a consistent request from UCW families.

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

• Problem of Practice: “UCW has failed to create and preserve authentic relationships with our students’ families that support student success.”

• Change Idea: UCW hosted Family Zoom Socials with sixth-grade families to build relationships amongst families as well as between families and teachers. UCW focused their change idea on the sixth grade to establish authentic community relationships that empower teachers, students, and their families to equally invest in and support student success at each stage of the UCW experience.
ITERATION

Throughout 2020–2021, UCW used the following metrics to iterate on and measure the effectiveness of their change idea:

ACTIONS

• UCW regularly tracked Zoom Social participation, phone calls, and in-person contacts with students’ parents/caregivers across all staff in the school.
• Parents completed exit surveys on their feelings about the Zoom Social experience.

INSIGHTS

• Families voiced to school administration their willingness to participate in virtual social gatherings but mentioned that there were obstacles in a remote setting (e.g., screen time/screen fatigue) as well as potential disconnect regarding overarching purpose of the Zoom socials.
• Setting intentions for each social led to more engaging and interactive events, as well as better feedback from parents.
• The Zoom Socials provided opportunities for staff to become more comfortable communicating across lines of difference.

LEARNING

• Many families were not used to interacting with school personnel in a space that was designed specifically for them. Power dynamics that previously existed between staff and families still affected people’s expectations of the Zoom Socials’ shared space.
• Socializing does not feel as organic in a remote setting; screen fatigue impacts adults as much as it impacts children.
• Families can be reached more easily through their children. Involving students in the invitation and recruitment process through extra credit or alternative incentives proved to be a highly effective way to increase family involvement.

NEXT STEPS

• Moving forward, the UCW team will transition to a more student-focused problem of practice that examines student voice at UCW with greater emphasis on self-advocacy, student leadership, and giving students influence over their experiences.
• UCW will restructure their MGN team to align with student voice initiatives across all middle school grade levels.
• UCW will continue asking families what they think authentic engagement looks like and create spaces for families to increase their involvement.