

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 thrive. The network aims to *increase the number of students with attendance at or above 90% and GPAs at or above 3.0 through a meaningful increase in students' sense of belonging.*

Since February of 2020, schools in the pilot cohort have worked to redefine the middle grades experience by using qualitative and quantitative data to understand student experiences, develop a problem of practice, and test change ideas that positively impact the experiences and outcomes of middle grades students.

This profile shares the journey of one MGN school in hopes of inspiring others to reimagine systems and structures to ensure middle grades students thrive.

COLUMBIA EXPLORERS ACADEMY LOCATED IN BRIGHTON PARK



SY2021-22 TEAM MEMBERS

- Principal
- Two Assistant Principals
- Case Manager
- One 5th Grade Teacher
- Two 6th Grade Teachers
- One 7th Grade Teacher
- One 8th Grade Teacher
- English Language Program Teacher

Columbia Explorers Academy

Year One Improvement Story

YEAR ONE

CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

In spring 2020, Columbia Explorers Academy (CEA) 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. 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.

STUDENTS

School Grades: PreK - 8

Number of Students: 761

Middle Grades Enrollment: 369

DEMOGRAPHICS

97.1% LatinX

17.7% Diverse Learners

45.7% English Learners

Data Sources

- Beginning, middle, and end of year **Student Experience Surveys**.
- **An Incorporating Student Voice Self-Assessment** for teachers based on Hart's Ladder of Youth Engagement was created by the MGN Team.

YEAR ONE

Identity Focused Reading Unit

- Teachers implemented a four-week reading unit that more explicitly focused on student's identities.
- The goal was to bring students' experience into classroom materials, and help them find their work more personally meaningful.

Student Voice

- From student and staff feedback, educators began using talking circles, created a 5th grade pilot Student Voice Committee, and planned more professional development for teachers.
- The goal was to build teacher-student connections and help students feel their experiences and lives outside of school were valued.

YEAR ONE

IMPACT

Through the Identity Focused Reading Unit, students connected more fully to English Language Arts texts, both because of the content and their ability to exercise choice about assignments. Teachers incorporated books that reflected students' identities, helped students make connections about identity and leadership, and had them reflect on their own identity and how it is impacted by their surroundings. Teachers also offered choice in how to complete assignments and gave students an opportunity to use their strengths to share their learning. After seeing success in the student-identity focused unit, teachers incorporated identity work into all remaining units for the year.

The success of giving students choice during the identity unit helped teachers identify a greater need for student voice. This led to focused professional development by grade and across the school. Students had more opportunities to share their opinions through talking circles and feedback at the end of units. Students became more open to participating and sharing during talking circles, which created stronger relationships with their teachers and peers. Across all middle grades students, an average of 88% of students "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they felt like a part of the school by the end of the year.

Columbia Explorers Academy

Year Two Improvement Story

YEAR TWO

CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

In the [student experience survey](#) at the end of the 2020-21 school year, students emphasized the importance of group work, project-based learning, and content that was relevant to their lives. Fall 2021 Elevate survey results also showed that 62% of students said that work was meaningful and not busy work, 49% said teachers cared about students' lives outside of school, and 63% said that their ideas are taken seriously.

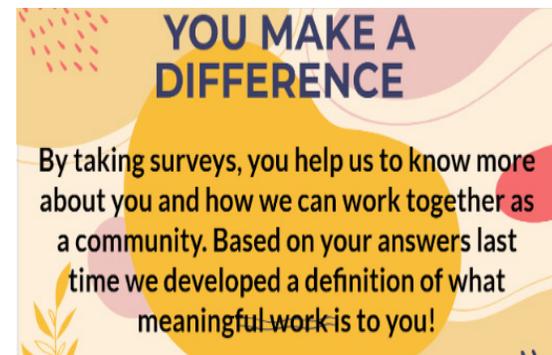
Educators were also starting to find success having data-oriented conversations with students. During the 2020-201 school year, most teachers rated the status of student voice in the “adult initiated” and “consulted/assigned but informed” ranges of [Hart’s Ladder of Youth Engagement](#). This data prompted a greater focus in schoolwide professional development on how to translate the success they had in data conversations with students into changes in the classroom.

CEA’s Definition of Student Success

- Students are supportive and positive towards one another, resolve conflicts independently, and seek adult support when they need it.
- Students and teachers work collaboratively to build trusting relationships.
- Students feel safe and secure with social emotional interactions with staff and students.
- Students speak up for themselves and others.
- Students have a growth mindset about work, extracurriculars, and relationships.
- Students feel confident and proud of themselves academically, socially and emotionally.
- Students meaningfully engage in SEL skills and are accountable and intentional to use these skills in their everyday lives both in and outside of school.

Data Sources

- Elevate survey results related to the Meaningful Work learning conditions.
- MGN created reflection surveys after data talking circles.



YEAR TWO

CHANGE IDEAS

Connecting Classwork to Students’ Lives

Students were [surveyed](#) about how they defined meaningful work and strategies their teachers used in the past that made work meaningful. This information was used to develop a school-wide definition to guide teacher’s work throughout the year and to identify strategies that teachers could use in their classrooms.

- Teachers chose from student-identified strategies to better connect classwork to students’ lives, including 1) project-based approaches, 2) discussing real-life connections during lessons; 3) partner or group work; and 4) centering units on student experiences.
- The goal was to make classroom work more meaningful by responding directly to students’ learning preferences.

Sharing Data with Students

- Teachers shared their classroom [Elevate survey](#) data with students using a talking circle structure.
- These circles were another space for students to channel their voice, and enabled them to co-create, alongside their teachers, a learning environment that better met their needs.
- The goal was to increase student voice and feedback to affect change in the classroom conditions, especially around meaningful work.

Columbia Explorers Academy

Year Two Improvement Story

YEAR TWO

IMPACT

By **connecting classwork to students' lives**, they developed a clearer personal definition of student success and what it meant for their own experience. Through this development, students took more ownership over their work.

Teachers also found that **sharing data with students** led to authentic conversations about their experiences, increased engagement, supported student mental health, fostered the feeling of community in homerooms, and encouraged students to share their thoughts and feelings at school.

In addition, Columbia Explorers saw growth in all six learning conditions on the Elevate survey over the course of the school year. In the two areas of focus - Meaningful Work and Teacher Caring - there was an overall 3% and 2% increase respectively to 75% and 69% from the beginning of the year, and a 5% increase from 62% to 67% of students who felt the work was meaningful and not busy work and a 6% increase from 49% to 55% of students who felt that teachers cared about their life outside of school.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Throughout their two and a half year journey, CEA educators noted their most important lessons about improving the experiences and outcomes of middle grades students:

- 01** Listening to student voices leads to a more engaged student body, and encourages work that better demonstrates mastery.
- 02** Students may need guidance to see the difference between “fun” and “meaningful” work, and educators have to find a balance between the two.
- 03** Fostering conversations with students about data related to their experiences leads to stronger student voice and more meaningful student-educator relationships.

