

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.

BRIGHTON PARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LOCATED IN THE BRIGHTON PARK COMMUNITY



SY2021- 2022 TEAM MEMBERS

- Principal
- Assistant Principal
- School Counselor
- 6th Grade Humanities Teacher
- 8th Grade Humanities Teacher
- Middle School Diverse Learner Teacher

Brighton Park Elementary School

Year One Improvement Story

YEAR ONE

CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

In spring 2020, the Brighton Park team conducted surveys and focus groups with their middle grades students and empathy interviews with families. Survey results and focus groups revealed that students felt teachers did not check for understanding frequently enough, that students generally did not feel connected to adults at the school, and that students did not have a strong sense of identity. Parents reiterated similar themes and noted that communication, particularly in their native language, helped them feel more connected to the school. In addition, school level outcome data indicated that the transition to fifth grade, when students begin to interact with multiple teachers per day, was particularly challenging.

STUDENTS

School Grades: PreK – 8

Number of Students: 331

Middle Grades Enrollment: 178

DEMOGRAPHICS

93.1% Latinx

14.8% Diverse Learners

48% English Learners

Data Sources

- **Bi-weekly pulse check surveys** to measure student-teacher connections and to help teachers design interventions to specific student needs.
- **Staff empathy interviews** were conducted in January 2021 to gauge the impact of their change idea.

YEAR ONE

CHANGE IDEA

One-on-One Student-Teacher Check Ins

- Bi-weekly one-on-one check-ins were conducted virtually with all 5th - 8th grade students.
- During check-ins, students shared with teachers how they were doing at home and in their classes in order to set goals for the next two weeks.
- The goal was to build teacher-student connections and help students feel their experiences and lives outside of school were valued.

YEAR ONE

IMPACT

One-on-one check-ins helped prioritize and build the personal relationships that teachers and students were missing in the midst of trying to make up for lost instructional time during remote learning. Using survey data and qualitative data collected from the one-on-ones, the Brighton Park staff was able to focus on relationships and formalize what a student needed most. This included more social-emotional check-ins and expanding their definition of student success more holistically to include attendance, grades, well-being, and strong systems of support.

Empathy interviews conducted by the MGN team also revealed that staff found the check-ins worthwhile and wanted to continue them as they transitioned to hybrid learning in the 2021-22 school year. Teachers said the check-ins helped build relationships with students and families in new ways. As one teacher noted, *“I didn’t realize that students have lives outside of school and social lives [...] during the pandemic I realized that the kids did have issues—I have tailored my instruction to this.”*

Students also benefited from the one-on-one check-ins in specific ways. 79% of middle grades students said check-ins were helpful with their attendance, 83% said they helped with grades, and 87% said they helped increase their participation.

Brighton Park Elementary School

Year Two Improvement Story

YEAR TWO

CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

Based on the pulse check surveys from the 2021-2022 school year and Elevate survey results, students reported that they were struggling with stress and wanted more opportunities for peer interaction. More specifically, 47% of Brighton Park middle grades students identified themselves as stressed, very stressed or extremely stressed in their biweekly pulse check survey, and 66% identified homework or classwork as a source of that stress. While 57% of students felt connected to their teachers, only 38% felt connected to their peers. In their first round of Elevate, Brighton Park teachers found that 57% of students felt that the work they were doing was connected to their real life and 54% felt that teachers cared about their life outside of school. They wanted educators to ask them about their wellbeing and whether they were connecting with the work. As a result, Brighton Park decided to dedicate more time in the day to social-emotional learning (SEL) and incorporate strategies to make work more meaningful.

Brighton Park's Definition of Student Success

Students at Brighton Park are successful when they are:

- Organized and responsible
- Able to be self-aware and to self-regulate
- Comfortable self-advocating
- Acting as leaders
- Problem solvers and critical thinkers
- Able to show mastery of the content

Data Sources

- **Bi-weekly pulse check surveys** to measure student-teacher connections and to help teachers design interventions to specific student needs.
- **Elevate survey** results related to the Classroom Community and Meaningful Work learning conditions.
- **One-on-one empathy interviews** with teachers to gather feedback about change ideas.
- **Anecdotal feedback** from the middle grades teachers during team meetings.

YEAR TWO

CHANGE IDEAS

Dedicated SEL Time, Twice a Day

- Teachers facilitated SEL instruction at the beginning and end of day for 30 minutes.
- This time was used for formal SEL instruction, morning meetings, student check ins, completing assignments and support in organization.
- The goal was to strengthen student-teacher relationships and classroom community.

Giving Relevant Feedback and Connecting Classwork to Student's Lives

- At the beginning of every class, teachers clearly stated what students would learn, how the lesson connected to the current unit, and monitored what they needed to work on using [active monitoring strategies](#). They also gave students the opportunity to make connections between what they were learning and their life outside of the classroom.
- The Brighton Park MGN team adapted their initial change idea to include [choice boards for teachers](#) which provided multiple ways for students to show their understanding of class content. Choices included exit slips and "relevancy bulletin boards".
- The goal was to help students see the connection between class work and real life so that class work would become more meaningful.

Brighton Park Elementary School

Year Two Improvement Story

YEAR TWO

IMPACT

Dedicated SEL time, twice a day, led to an increase in executive functioning and social-emotional skills. Through grade level team and MGN team reflections, teachers shared that they had the space to connect with students and learn more about their experiences. As a result, 83% of middle school students agreed or strongly agreed that teachers accepted them as a person and 73% agreed or strongly agreed the classroom was a welcoming place on the final Elevate survey of the 2021-2022 school year.

Giving relevant feedback and connecting classwork to student's lives: By giving students more immediate feedback on their work, students were able to show mastery of content and think more critically about how to improve. 79% of students said that their teacher helped them see their progress as they learned more and 57% said they felt like their teacher cared about their life outside of school. Students were also more engaged when discussions included real-world applications of what they were learning. Most students also believed their teacher made their work really interesting (67%) and that what they learned was connected to their real life (60%).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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

- 01** Understanding student experience is fundamental to students feeling like they belong and are connected to school.
- 02** Educators cannot assume what students are thinking or how they feel. They need to ask students and then try new ways to build their academic mindset.
- 03** Social-emotional learning cannot be isolated; rather, it must be incorporated into all areas of learning.

