

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.

HERNANDEZ MIDDLE SCHOOL LOCATED IN GAGE PARK



SY2021-22 TEAM MEMBERS

- Two Assistant Principals
- MTSS Coordinator
- STEM Specialist
- School Counselor
- English Language Program Teacher
- 6th Grade Math Teacher

STUDENTS

School Grades: 6 - 8
Number of Students: 862

DEMOGRAPHICS

96.9% Latinx
11.9% Diverse Learners
34.6% English Learners

Hernandez Middle School Year One Improvement Story

YEAR ONE

CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

During spring 2020, Hernandez asked middle school students to complete the “Perfect School Project” to incorporate student voice and expertise into the school’s continuous improvement strategy. Through the project, students indicated the 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.

Long-term data also revealed that English Language Learners (ELLs) often had lower grades than their peers. In addition, newcomer, Diverse Learner, and LGBTQIA+ students struggled with a sense of belonging more than other student groups. The team decided to focus on increasing student voice and sense of belonging for these students, with the intention that those same strategies would permeate to the rest of the student body.

Data Sources

- Beginning, middle, and end of the year **pulse check surveys** were used to monitor the impact of talking circles on students.
- **A Student Ambassadors (SAs)** program was launched to gather feedback from students about how talking circles and advisory were going.
- **A Professional Learning Community (PLC)** for teachers, separate from Grade Level Team Meetings, was developed specifically to plan and debrief how to facilitate talking circles.

YEAR ONE

CHANGE IDEA

Talking Circles

- Talking Circles, a protocol where students are given space and time to reflect on personal questions and hear stories from their peers and teachers, circles were used in all 6th - 8th grade advisory classes.
- Quantitative and qualitative data collection focused on the experiences of students in the newcomer, Diverse Learner, and LGBTQIA+ communities, all of whom indicated feeling less connected to school.
- The goal was to strengthen peer-to-peer relationships and build a sense of belonging.

Student Ambassador Program

- A group of student ambassadors offered feedback about advisory and helped plan activities and structures for that time.
- The goal was to elevate student voice and give students the opportunity to co-create their advisory.

YEAR ONE

IMPACT

Talking Circles improved both peer-to-peer and student-educator relationships with students reporting that they felt cared about as a result of adults’ focus on peer-to-peer relationships. Pulse check surveys, given to all students throughout the year, also showed growth in student perceptions of belonging and teacher caring. For example, at the start of the 2020-21 school year, 75% of ELLs said they “almost always” or “often” felt they belonged, and by the end of the year, that number grew to 89%. Among non-ELLs, this number rose from 73% to 80%. In that same survey, the number of ELLs that felt there was at least one staff member who cared about them “almost always” or “often,” grew 10%. Among non-ELLs, there was an 8% increase.

The Student Ambassador Program also positively impacted student-educator relationships. Student ambassadors gave direct feedback about their perceptions of the circles and developed improvements that were used moving forward. The SAs reported that they were proud to be able to build relationships despite remote learning and that activities in advisory like talking circles, discussions of current events, and goal planning for the future made the day seem more bearable.

Hernandez Middle School

Year Two Improvement Story

YEAR TWO

CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

Through focus groups conducted between November of 2020 and February of 2021, students revealed that they felt like they belonged when teachers gave them more opportunities to interact with peers. In the fall 2021 Elevate survey results, 72% of students said that they had lots of opportunities to interact with one another, but only 47% felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in class. Educators also expressed the need for a space where they could work together on how to improve learning conditions in their classrooms. These beliefs led to change ideas that emphasized collaboration between students, between educators, and across the two groups.

Hernandez's Definition of Student Success

Successful students at Hernandez actively engage in enjoyable and productive learning activities, take and reflect on risks, and build positive friendships with peers in order to reach their goals.

Data Sources

- **Focus Groups** during the 2020-2021 school year with identified target student groups (EL + DL students).
- **Elevate survey** results related to the Classroom Community and Meaningful Work learning conditions.
- **Belonging Maps** and subsequent reflection and talking circles to identify what impacts a sense of belonging in the classroom.

YEAR TWO

CHANGE IDEAS

Cooperative Learning

- Hernandez focused on cooperative learning, which allows students to learn primarily in small groups with guidance from the teacher.
- Their goal was to increase the number of opportunities for intentional peer-to-peer interaction and make learning more meaningful.

Professional Learning Community (PLC)

- Hernandez also employed the Differentiated Professional Learning model, which allowed teachers to collaborate, learn in the modality that they preferred, and create change ideas and learning plans that reflected their individual Elevate survey results.
- The goal was for content teams to test change ideas based on their Elevate results to better meet the needs of students in their classroom.

Student Voice Committee (SVC)

- With support from the CPS Department of Social Science and Civics, Hernandez created a formal Student Voice Committee (SVC).
- The committee expanded on the learnings from the student ambassadors' and was open to any interested students. Instead of just giving feedback on advisory, the SVC supported the work teachers were doing to improve learning conditions in classrooms, especially in the area of teacher caring.
- The goal of the SVC is for students to analyze data, give feedback, and recommend improvements to the student experience.

Hernandez Middle School

Year Two Improvement Story

YEAR TWO

IMPACT

Cooperative Learning enabled students to feel more cared for by their teachers and connected to one another. Students appeared more engaged in their work. During Q3 and Q4, the Elevate survey reported that 4% more students felt their learning was connected to real life, and 4% more felt their teacher cared about their lives outside of school. Students also noted that classroom learning was more successful when teachers were explicit about their expectations and corrections, included activities like talking circles, and made the content more interactive and relevant to students' interests.

Through the **Professional Learning Community** (PLC), teachers had more resources and space to collaborate with one another, develop new ideas for their classroom, and learn how to affirm their students' identities. They found that professional learning was more successful when teachers could make choices about their own learning, and when data was based on inputs rather than outputs.

Through the **Student Voice Committee**, students' voices and identities were brought into classroom conversation. After looking at Elevate data, the SVC gave feedback on power dynamics in the school, making work more meaningful in classrooms, and ways for teachers to show they care. They also completed their own belonging maps and gave feedback on where they felt a sense of belonging and where they did not throughout their school day. Focus on student voice at Hernandez led to 22 students applying for a single spot on the Local School Council (LSC). At the end of the year, the MGN team was working on ways to connect the students who did not get elected to the LSC to the SVC, and making sure that the student on the LSC had input from the SVC for their meetings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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

- 01** Teachers can influence classroom learning conditions and how students perceive them, which influences academic performance.
- 02** By focusing on a particular question on the Elevate survey, teachers can develop change ideas that make a big impact on those student perceptions.
- 03** Teacher buy-in is high when teachers have a voice and the work is relevant and responsive to their needs and interests.

