

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.

UCHICAGO CHARTER WOODLAWN MIDDLE SCHOOL LOCATED IN WOODLAWN



SY2021-22 TEAM MEMBERS

- Middle School Director (Principal)
- Dean of Student Culture
- 6th Grade Lead + Literacy Teacher
- 7th Grade Lead + Science Teacher
- 8th Grade Lead + Social Studies Teacher
- STEM Special Education Teacher

UChicago Charter Woodlawn Middle School Year One Improvement Story

YEAR ONE

CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

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. Families felt that support and consistent engagement were even more important given the developmental changes their middle schoolers were experiencing. A review of historical data confirmed the consistency of this request from UCW families.

STUDENTS

School Grades: 6-12

Number of Students: 569

Middle Grades Enrollment: 266

DEMOGRAPHICS

98.8% Black

14.1% Diverse Learners

76.1% Low Income

Data Sources

- 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.

YEAR ONE

CHANGE IDEA

Zoom Family Socials

- UCW wanted to continue all school functions and activities despite the virtual learning environment for students. They hosted Family Zoom Socials with sixth-grade families to build relationships amongst families as well as between families and teachers.
- The goal was 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.

YEAR ONE

IMPACT

While Zoom Family Socials did not fully address family engagement challenges, the process increased the team's focus on family engagement throughout the year. The socials helped UCW teachers feel more comfortable reaching out to families, especially across lines of difference. Despite limited attendance, parents and teachers learned about each others' personal stories and interests in a way that strengthened their relationships and improved communication during the remote learning period.

The MGN team adapted their change idea as the year progressed by creating a theme for each social i.e. Chicago Black Excellence, increasing the focus on relationship building, and being responsive to how parents wanted to use the time. These actions resulted in better feedback from parents and increased participation at each subsequent social.

UChicago Charter Woodlawn Middle School

Year Two Improvement Story

YEAR TWO

CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

Given the return to in-person learning in fall 2021, the UCW team thought it important to focus on student belonging and community. Through focus groups, students shared that they did not always feel safe in the hallways and outside of the school building, both physically and psychologically. Students also expressed a desire to build community across grade levels and to have more say in how that sense of community was built. In addition, UCW found that Classroom Community was lower than other learning conditions on the [Elevate](#) survey. As a result, UCW decided to focus on team and community building during advisory periods.

UCW's Definition of Student Success

UCW students have the opportunity to take ownership over how they learn, take pride in what they are learning, and make connections to their future success.

Data Sources

- Focus groups were held in fall 2021 and spring 2022. In an effort to provide a diverse set of student perspectives, students were divided into two groups based on criteria including GPA, behavioral incidents, participation in afterschool activities, and whether or not the students reported having a positive relationship with a school adult.
- Elevate was given to each Advisory Class by the Grade Level Team lead.
- Anecdotal information about which advisory activities were most effective based on formal and informal feedback from students.

YEAR TWO

CHANGE IDEAS

Team and Community Building during Advisory

- Each advisory teacher tested out different activities such as Jeopardy, Four Corners, and a spaghetti tower challenge, based on their students' interests.
- Teachers documented which activities were successful in engaging students and shares this document with other middle school teachers. The document included an activity description, length of time, and any tips for implementation.
- The goal was to increase the sense of community within advisory and across the school community as determined by growth in the Classroom Community measure on the Elevate survey.

UChicago Charter Woodlawn Middle School Year Two Improvement Story

YEAR TWO

IMPACT

UCW found that **team and community building activities** during advisory were most successful in classrooms where teachers created clear structures and consistent expectations. Students cited that they developed better relationships with teachers and peers in these classrooms that they saw as safe spaces. Some teachers also shared the Elevate data with students which led to a shift in student motivation from external to internal as the year progressed.

The spring focus groups also clarified for teachers how student and teacher perceptions of Classroom Community differed. Based on a deeper understanding of how students define community and safety, the UCW team planned to develop a shared vision for advisory with the entire middle school team to set the foundation for how advisory will look during the 2022-23 school year. They made plans to host quarterly focus groups in order to get student input on advisory activities and other ways to strengthen the community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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

- 01** Adult-centered opportunities for parents and teachers to interact outside of academic conversations about students create unique but effective spaces to build more authentic relationships with parents and help improve communication, particularly across lines of difference.
- 02** Students crave and value structure, as it fosters consistency, safety, and community.
- 03** The qualities and behaviors that build genuine relationships can not necessarily be taught. They develop over time and through open communication between educators and students.
- 04** It is necessary to have effective methods to share information about students across grade levels and transitions.

