

The To&Through Middle Grades Network (MGN) is a group of CPS schools dedicated to creating more equitable and responsive 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 (i.e. condensed elementary on-track) through a meaningful increase in students' sense of belonging.*

Participating schools in each cohort work 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 that middle grades students thrive.

TALCOTT FINE ARTS MUSEUM ACADEMY LOCATED IN WEST TOWN



SY2022-2023 TEAM MEMBERS

- Principal
- Assistant Principal
- School Counselor
- 6th - 8th Grade Science
- 7th/8th Grade Humanities Teachers
- 7th/8th Grade Math Teacher
- 7th/8th Grade Diverse Learners Teachers
- 6th-8th Grade Cluster Program Teachers

STUDENTS

School Grades: PreK - 8

Number of Students: 467

Middle Grades Enrollment: 171

DEMOGRAPHICS

82% Hispanic

20% Diverse Learners

51% Limited English

DEFINITION OF STUDENT

Students at Talcott are successful when they:

- Explore their authentic selves;
- Demonstrate growth and self-improvement in areas that are meaningful to them; and
- Contribute to the greater good of their local and global communities.

Talcott Fine Arts Museum Academy

Year One Improvement Story

YEAR ONE

CHANGE IDEA RATIONALE

In spring 2022, the Talcott team gave student experience and Elevate surveys to all middle grades students, conducted empathy interviews and student shadows with their introverted and lower achieving students, and conducted focus groups with their high-achieving students and newcomers. The data showed that while 85% of students felt they could make mistakes, teachers believe in them, and they got suggestions for how to improve, nearly 30% did not identify a trusted adult in the building. The Elevate and Student Experience survey also reveals that students often felt disrespected by their peers in class, 41% of students did not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in class, and 50% feeling that they did not connect to what they were learning in class. This data led the team to conclude that they needed to focus on increasing the sense of belonging for middle grades students and building connections beyond academic content for middle grades students and building connections beyond academic content.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- When students are given a purpose and sense of belonging, they are more willing to learn.
- Adolescents need repeated and varied opportunities to practice self-expression and self-awareness.
- Be open to new ideas and remember how fast young people are learning and changing.

Data Sources

- **Student Experience Survey** given to all 6th - 8th grades students in May 2022.
- **Quarterly Elevate surveys** given to all 6th - 8th grade advisory classes.
- Teacher created **exit tickets** following advisory lessons.
- **Teacher observations** of change in peer-to-peer interactions.

YEAR ONE

CHANGE IDEA

Using Restorative Communication Strategies in Advisory

- The 7th grade team started by having students journal about the definition and uses of communication. Students then used a [non-violent communication framework](#) to practice strategies from the framework in scenarios they might experience at school or at home.
- The 8th grade team began by having students journal about their own feelings and situations where they needed to understand the feelings of others. Students then use the [Grok card](#) game to create scenarios where they need to empathize with the feelings of others.
- The goal was to strengthen peer-to-peer relationships and build a culture of acceptance and inclusivity within advisories and across the middle grades.

YEAR ONE

IMPACT

Using **Restorative Communication Strategies** in Advisory strengthened both peer-to-peer and student-to-educator relationships by creating space for students and teachers to talk about personal experiences inside and outside of school. Exit tickets revealed that students enjoyed and benefited from the structured self-expression and communication activities, which helped increase their sense of self-awareness, willingness to have difficult conversations, and knowledge of how to appropriately communicate with others. In fact, there was a 7% increase in Classroom Community and 14% increase in Meaningful Work on the Elevate survey by the end of school year, with a 10% increase in the question about students feeling more comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions in class. There was also a 6% overall increase in Elementary On-Track rates from January 2023-June 2023.

In order to build on the learnings from and success of their change idea, the Talcott team plans to incorporate team building games and challenges into advisory bi-weekly. The team also wants to be even more explicit about the connection between strengthening peer-to-peer relationships and meaningful work in advisory.