

# Transformative Collaboration:

A Case Study of a Community, Educator, and Foundation Partnership for Student-Centered Learning Innovation in North Minneapolis



**Prepared by ACT Research for The Jay & Rose Phillips Family Foundation of Minnesota:**

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## Introduction

Real educational change is hard. Billions of philanthropic and government dollars have been spent on research and school change initiatives; but our students, especially our black and brown students, continue to learn in environments where they feel disconnected, where their identities and communities are not celebrated, and where they are not supported in dreaming and preparing for their future. On the Northside of Minneapolis, generations of racism and inequity have resulted in schools that have been chronically failing its brilliant youth and families. The past five years have brought even more challenges with constant budget shortfalls in the school district, a teacher strike, a global pandemic, and the murder of George Floyd and the killings of so many others.

In the midst of all these challenges, a group of community members, educators, and students dreamed and designed new ways of teaching and connecting with Northside youth. This effort was supported by a family foundation committed to working in a new way. While by no means a perfect or complete process, this work is an example of

- **real, educator-led change** that shows promise for fundamentally altering the student and educator experience in schools, and
- **a community-led grantmaking process** facilitated by philanthropic staff, coaches, and evaluators engaged in a new way with a district, schools, and communities.

This case study provides an overview of the grantmaking process and the grants themselves. It outlines the impact of the work on students, educators, the community, and the Foundation and shares lessons for supporting this type of work in the future. Lessons include ideas for how foundations and schools can best lead this type of transformative educational change and specific examples of practices schools can adapt to fit their own unique contexts, including:

- a journaling and counseling model that has shown promise for building strong student-teacher/staff relationships, SEL support, and improved climate at a middle school, and
- a future- and social-justice- focused school pathway that is building a strong sense of community and supporting students' identity development and planning for their futures at a high school.

### ABOUT THE JAY AND ROSE PHILLIPS FAMILY FOUNDATION OF MINNESOTA

Founded in 1944, the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation of Minnesota decided in 2015 to shift its strategy to become a place-based funder in North Minneapolis. The current Board of Directors represent the third and fourth generations of the family since the Founders. The Foundation's staff currently consists of 2 staff members. Current assets are about \$60 million with approximately \$3.5 million of grantmaking a year (approximately \$1.5 million in education).

## Grantmaking Strategy

**Committing to North Minneapolis and Bolder Work.** In 2015, the Board of Directors of the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation of Minnesota made the decision to focus their grantmaking on North Minneapolis, the neighborhood where Rose Phillips grew up and where Jay and Rose Phillips met in the early 20th century. At the time they met, North Minneapolis was the hub of the Jewish community that was barred from living in most other parts of the Twin Cities. Today, the community is predominantly Black in an America that continues to be racially and economically divided. The Foundation committed to funding bigger, bolder projects and making longer term commitments than some of its previous smaller, more geographically-distributed grantmaking.



*Community design session for student-centered learning grantmaking strategy.*

Most importantly, it committed to partnering with the ecosystem of entrepreneurs, nonprofits, educators, and community members on the Northside to both design the work that needed to be done and to engage in and lead it.

Through a human centered design (HCD) process with the community, the Foundation and partners clarified the spaces they would be funding. They settled on economic and education funding areas that would subsequently be iterated to focus on building a vibrant Northside economic ecosystem grounded in local ownership and transforming education by supporting more student voice and relevant curricula. This case study focuses on the Foundation's education work.



“We did that [the new grantmaking strategy] through a deep community feedback process. It wasn't like we just read a bunch of white papers and did that, but setting the right solution space that allows frontline experts to be problem solvers ... They had a ton of academic credentials and knowledge to bring, but they also added this vital lived experience of actually trying to deliver programming, education, and curriculum in the context of their own schools.”

– *Foundation Program Director*

**Community-led grantmaking.** Early in this work, the Foundation assembled an educational advisory committee composed of community members, educators, and students, most of whom live and work on the Northside. This group brought expertise, lived experiences, and connections to the Northside that significantly guided the Foundation’s strategic and grantmaking decisions. They also served as “*faithful community liaisons*”, communicating back to the community, listening to the community, and staying abreast of important issues. After an initial round of small grants as the Foundation transitioned to this new place-based educational funding work, the community advisory group was instrumental in advocating for a “bold” phased approach that would result in one or two large, long-term grants that would have the possibility of producing more impact than a portfolio of small grants.

Throughout this process, the community advisory committee was deeply engaged, reviewing proposals and conducting site visits. Members made funding recommendations to the Foundation’s Board and reviewed evaluative information on the work that was funded. The advisory committee also provided essential insights that helped the Foundation evolve its grantmaking focus over the years.

## ABOUT THE COMMUNITY-LED GRANTMAKING PROCESS

The Foundation’s current strategies evolved from an expansive human centered design (HCD) process that engaged a broad cross-section of North Minneapolis community members in 2016. Read the Foundation’s 2020 case study, [A Move Towards Community-Led Grantmaking](#), for more details on the Board of Directors’ 2015 strategic directive; the human centered design process; and the Foundation’s place based, community-led grantmaking journey. Currently, two standing advisory committees meet regularly to update strategy and review proposals. Funding recommendations are made to the Board of Directors based on advisory committee recommendations. Advisory committee members represent North Minneapolis and have particular knowledge about the Foundation’s funding areas. Education advisory committee members include educators, parents/families, school and district staff, and students. Each advisory member receives a \$1200 annual stipend. The Foundation hired consultants to help design and facilitate the HCD process and help set up the committee processes.

**A phased approach to making “bold” grants.** Grantmaking began with a set of smaller planning grants. All Northside district middle and high schools and a contract alternative high school were invited to submit a proposal for a \$50,000 grant for 6 months of work to plan and pilot a larger, more transformative project to focus on student-centered learning. This process included individual outreach to school leaders, an initial proposal, idea development support from Foundation staff, and a revised proposal. Six schools received planning grants in the fall of 2017.

Planning grants were an opportunity for educators to think “*outside of their current constraints*”<sup>2</sup> and draw upon an abundance of information, exemplars, and support to create something new. It was also an opportunity for the advisory group and Foundation to see how the teams functioned and to inform their decisions for the second round of larger grants. Additionally, it provided a more level ground for the different schools by giving them similar resources during the planning grants.

<sup>1</sup> Quote is from a community advisory committee member. <sup>2</sup> Quote is from the Foundation Program Director.

During the planning grants, the Foundation supported learning for school and district staff via a learning trip to Boston with Education Evolving, a Twin Cities-based education nonprofit. Participants visited teacher-powered schools and models of student-centered learning. Schools were supported in piloting and learning from their ideas by ACT Research, a developmental evaluation consultancy and the authors of this case study. They helped the schools gather and learn from quantitative and qualitative data, design and iterate their programs, and plan for their bold grant proposals. The community advisory group engaged with these grants at multiple points, reviewing proposals, conducting site visits, and providing feedback.

At the end of this process in the spring of 2018, schools submitted proposals for Being Bold grants, which would provide \$250,000 to \$400,000 a year for multiple years, or Building Toward Bold grants, which provided up to \$75,000 for one year. Two programs were selected for Being Bold grants, Patrick Henry High's Community Connected Academy(CCA) and Olson Middle School's My Story My Brilliance (MSMB). Another school received a Building Toward Bold grant. Initially planned for three years, the Being Bold grants extended to a fourth year for both schools and a fifth year for CCA. The motivation for the length of the grants was to *"give them enough time to actually make real change."*<sup>3</sup> A key expectation of the grants was a gradual shift to sustainability through standard school funding practices without Foundation support. From a peak of nearly \$721,000 in the 2019-2020 academic year, Foundation support decreased to \$422,000 in 2021-2022, and \$100,000 in 2022-2023.

**A commitment to learning and a new level of support.** Throughout the Being Bold grants, schools were supported with developmental evaluation support from ACT Research to help them gather and learn from quantitative and qualitative data, design and iterate their programs, and adapt to new information and realities like emerging results and the rapid shift to distance learning at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring of 2020. In year one, CCA was also provided with school structure and change management support from The School Leadership Project; and in year two, CCA was provided with project based learning coaching from EdVisions.

Learning was also supported by annual kickoffs and end-of-year meetings. These brought together schools, Foundation staff, coaches and evaluators, and community or national experts to plan and reflect. These meetings were suspended at the start of the pandemic.

During the planning grants and the larger grants, the Foundation supported learning trips so that school-based teams could observe effective programs and take home concrete practices that they could implement in their schools. These included trips for both schools to New York City to observe programs like the Cornerstone Academy for Social Action (CASA) middle school and the Urban Assembly School for Green Careers.



New York learning trip. Pictured are Olson and Patrick Henry teachers/staff, CASA teachers/staff, Foundation staff, and learning trip consultants.

<sup>3</sup> Quote is from the Foundation Program Director.

Staff from Patrick Henry's CCA program also visited Tennessee and New Mexico to observe how schools supported by Big Picture Learning and Future Focused Education, respectively, are implementing internships and project based learning. Local learning trips brought staff to charter schools like Avalon and Paladin that are advancing student-centered learning in Minnesota.

**A new level of Foundation staff engagement with the work.** A key component of this initiative was the deeper engagement of the Foundation Program Director with schools, the district, and the broader educational ecosystem. Instead of “*just making decisions about grants*”, the Program Director was deeply engaged with the work, encouraging school staff to stick to their implementation plans, holding regular meetings with consultants, serving as a liaison with the school district to help manage financial details and make work happen within district regulations, and even helping with scheduling venues and food for events. This also involved an openness to let the community advisory process unfold. The Director's engagement has continued as the grants have wound down, transferring to connecting schools with other resources and funding. Throughout the work, the Director has engaged the broader Northside educational ecosystem, connecting grantees to key members of the network and gaining insights for future work and other grantmaking strategies.



“I think it was through this work that I had a chance to adjust to the role of facilitating a grant making process rather than just making decisions about grants. I definitely am grateful for the support and dedication and insight that our education advisory committee has consistently shown. You know, that's had a profound experience on how I understand my role and how I think about how philanthropy should operate.”

– *Foundation Program Director*

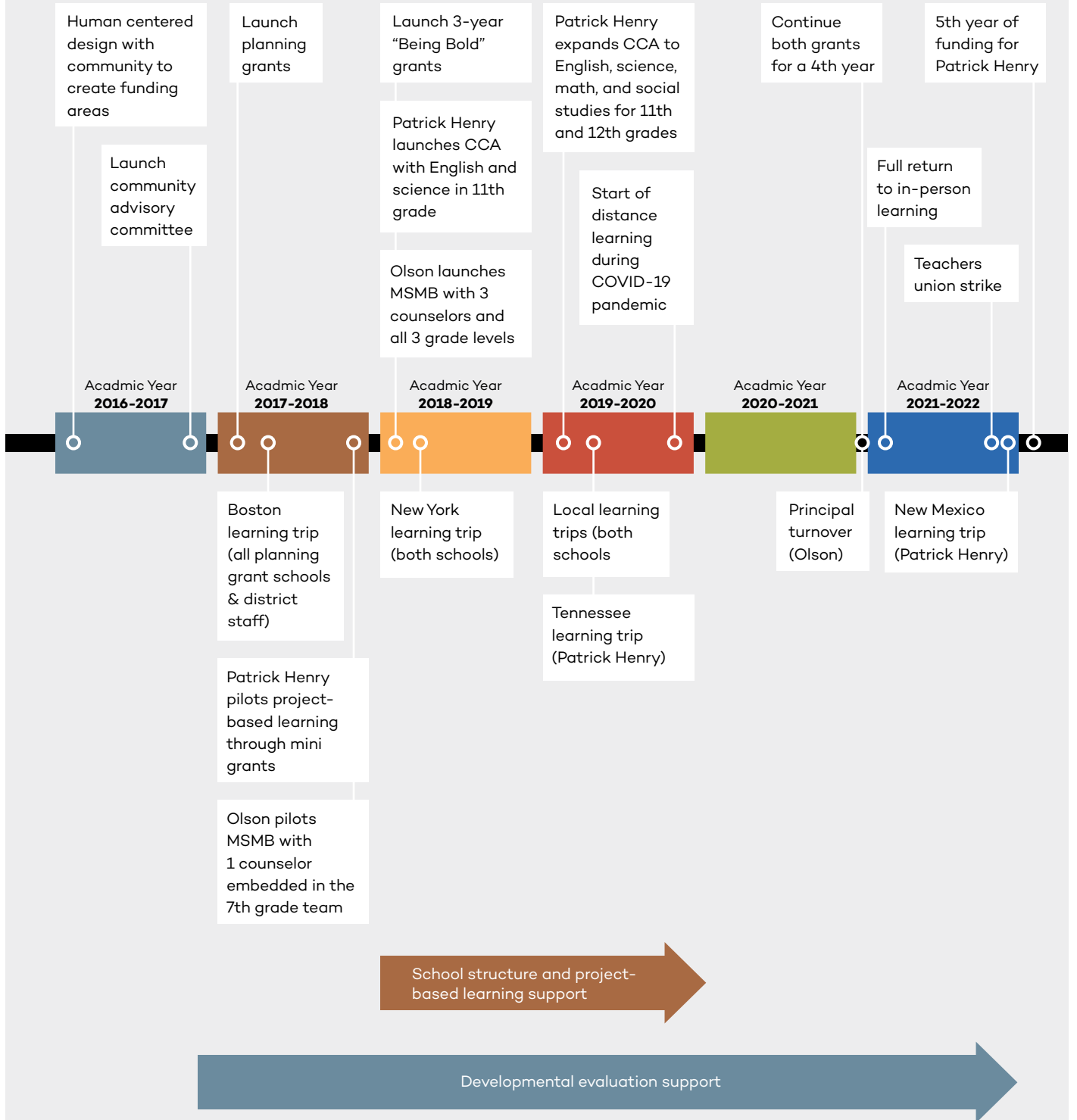


“I think Joel's openness as a leader in Phillips to just let the process unfold and to try to lessen the reins. I think that was really positive. I think he has been able to assemble a really dedicated group of people who didn't know each other and found a way to work together.”

– *Community Advisory Committee Member*

**Sharing learning and advocating for this work.** Foundation staff have also played a key role in sharing learning from this work, supporting schools in sharing their learning and advocating for the district to apply lessons from this work to other schools. This has involved presenting to philanthropic peers; presenting to the evaluation community; engaging district staff in learning trips, presentations/discussions of program impact, and Foundation board meetings; commissioning and sharing evaluation reports, including this one; and supporting schools in their own social media sharing, including videos and blog posts.

## TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS





# Community Connected Academy

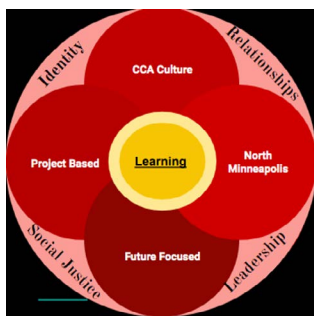
## PATRICK HENRY HIGH SCHOOL



### Program Development and Key Components

Community Connected Academy (CCA) at Patrick Henry High is a mostly insulated, community-connected, student-centered pathway for 11th and 12th graders. It consists of four core teachers, a counselor, and a special education teacher. Students spend most of their day in CCA with a cohort of other students, only leaving for electives. The key components of CCA are:

- a project-based curriculum with a social justice emphasis;
- a focus on students' futures including experiential real-world learning and internships;
- a focus on social emotional learning (including identity development and advocacy);
- cohorts of students;
- intentional culture and relationship building;
- an integrated team of teachers and an embedded counselor; and
- deliberate connections to North Minneapolis through the curriculum, internships, and other programming.



### CCA MISSION AND VALUE STATEMENTS

(co-created by staff and students)

**Learning:** We believe students and their families at Patrick Henry High School deserve an education that reflects themselves and their experiences to build and encourage the investigation of self and community, to determine their own destiny, and break free of white supremacy - redistributing power.

**CCA Culture:** We believe a strong, positive CCA culture is built on authentic relationships and collaborative innovation that values personalized platforms and creates student ownership.

**Project-Based:** We believe shifting in pedagogical paradigm in education away from the traditional model towards project based, work study, and experiential learning provides students opportunities to learn perseverance, resilience, and collaboration skills.

**North Minneapolis:** We believe in engineering passion, purpose and achievement for each learner through engaging in the community and contributing to a just and healthy North Minneapolis community.

**Future Focused:** We believe in preparing students for the demands of leadership and collaboration and removing barriers to future learning and life opportunities, students will remain curious and hopeful toward their future.

### ABOUT PATRICK HENRY HIGH SCHOOL

Patrick Henry is one of two district high schools in North Minneapolis. In the fall of 2021, Patrick Henry had an enrollment of 909 students. Most (almost 93%) are BIPOC, with 49% African American, 24% Asian, 14% Hispanic, 4% two or more races/ethnicities, and 2% Native American. Most students (69%) qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Patrick Henry High will have a new name soon. After several years of students and community members advocating for the school to no longer be named after a slave owner, the Minneapolis Board of Education has approved a name change, but the name is still to be determined.

The major goals of CCA from their founding “profile of a graduate” developed with students, families, staff, and community members are

- CCA graduates are ready for college, career, and real life
- CCA graduates understand themselves, others, and the social systems that impact their community
- CCA graduates know how to advocate for themselves and others

CCA started in the fall of 2018 as a partial day program for 50 11th graders with a science teacher, an English teacher, a program coordinator (who was a licensed school counselor), and an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer. The original plan was to expand to a partial day program for 11th and 12th graders in year two and a fully insulated program in year three; but based on student feedback, the program scaled up after only one year to include all four core courses for grades 11 and 12. *Chemistry and Environmental Science* are the science courses. *Algebra II* and *College Prep, Algebra, and Statistics* are the math courses for 11th and 12th grades respectively. The program currently serves approximately 110 students.

**Voice.** Throughout the program’s design and implementation, it has been guided by student, family, and community voice. Prior to program launch, staff conducted a “profile of a graduate” exercise with students, families, and community members. Attendees participated in circles where they shared their ideas about the purpose of education, their previous experiences at Patrick Henry High, how to improve relationships with stakeholders and include their voices, their hopes and dreams for students, the skills and habits they felt students need to develop, the support they felt students need, and other topics. Throughout program implementation, students have helped guide program design, iteration, and operations through frequent feedback conducted by the evaluation consultant, quarterly CCA feedback surveys, intentional voice practices like circles built into advisory and core courses, and weekly “family meetings”. Student voice has determined programmatic elements like the schedule (e.g., maintaining a block schedule instead of a seven-period day) and topics to learn about.



“I think in terms of our programmatic framework ... we get feedback from students [quarterly] ... We get feedback from students on projects, what they want to learn about in the following year. We get feedback based on schedule; that’s a big one ... like the Friday wellness day that was sort of driven by their desire to just ... have fun ... we even voted on block versus seven period this year ...”

– CCA Teacher/Staff

**Project-based learning and inquiry.** Students complete a project in each core course every-quarter (this will likely transition to a single integrated project in the future)<sup>5</sup>. These are organized around a common theme, with identity regularly being the theme for the first quarter of each year. For example, students calculated their ecological footprint in environmental science, brainstormed and visualized their values and passions as functions in math, and completed a personally-relevant political activism project in social studies. Other themes have related to other key aspects of CCA’s mission like advocacy for self and others. For

<sup>5</sup> During distance and hybrid learning in 2020-2021 and two quarters of the 2021-2022 school year that were disrupted by high numbers of absences, a temporary return to distance-learning, and a teacher strike, projects were mostly put on hold.

example, advocacy projects have centered around topics like food waste and fast fashion in environmental science and financial literacy in social studies. These projects place an emphasis on student choice and topics that are relevant to students, the community, and social justice. They also integrate theoretical lenses and literacy frameworks like environmental and feminist lenses and culturally responsive literacy.

Projects give students an opportunity to dive deeper into a topic, spending significantly longer on it than in conventional classes. The ability to dive deeper into a topic is further supported by a block schedule that gives students longer uninterrupted blocks of time to work. Projects also help students work on developing transferable skills aligned with CASEL's SEL Framework (CASEL, 2015) including self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. Each project cycle culminates in an exhibition where students present their projects to other Patrick Henry students and community members.



CCA student project exhibition (left) and Green Careers Exploration experience (right).  
[Pictures are from CCA staff]

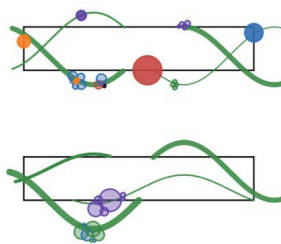
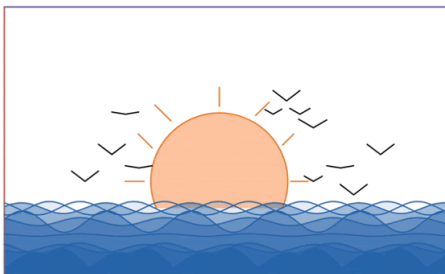
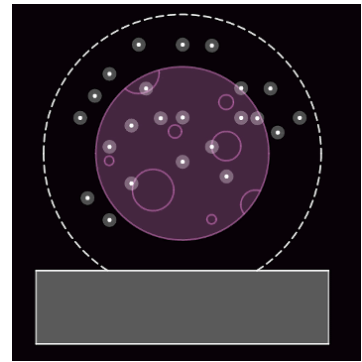
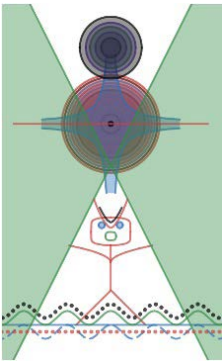
**Integrated social emotional learning.** All CCA staff play a role in students' social emotional learning, with one teacher noting, *"it's just kind of woven throughout ... it's a constant."* Projects, especially in the first quarter, and discussions throughout the year center on identity development. Students further develop their identity through internships and other real-world experiences where they get to try out new opportunities. Teachers/staff report that weekly family meetings and intentional classroom and advisory practices and simply being part of a community that supports each other and holds one another accountable builds relationship skills. Students have reported that completing projects and presenting them in exhibitions builds self-management and communication skills. CCA staff aim to help students develop the confidence to try (and fail at) new things, helping them develop both self-awareness of their strengths/interests and self-confidence.



“We're able to provide an environment that's open, that allows our students to expand and to step into who they are. And I think that, to me, that's what SEL is all about ... Just giving them that space and that support and the confidence to try things, to fail, to voice like, I have anxiety around this and to know that you're not going to be judged for that ... We believe that this is what you want to do, let's do it. And it's cool to do that scared, and it's okay to not know what the outcome is going to be.”

– CCA Counselor

In addition to the integration of social justice topics and theoretical lenses across the curriculum and projects, the program has also built structures/spaces to address conflict and hard topics. For example, when conflicts arise within CCA or difficult community events occur, the program takes time to address these in the classroom or in family meetings and through restorative practices and circles. In the last year, the counselor has also been leading students through a Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) process.



Example math identity projects. These are dynamic, animated mathematical functions students created to reflect their identities. [Images from [Mr. Stringe's Classroom website](#)]

**Counselor role.** A dedicated counselor plays a key role in supporting students, supporting the educator team, connecting with families, and leading the design and operation of CCA. The counselor role is a leadership position within CCA, serving in many ways like an administrator. They regularly communicate with teachers to let them know what students need and are in the classroom whenever needed. The counselor stays on top of students' academic progress and plays a key role in helping students improve grades from previous terms. This takes a lot of time but is critical to supporting students' timely graduation. The counselor is also “*the person that students go to when they need to talk to somebody*” and they support students in “*whatever a kid wants to pursue*.”<sup>6</sup> When needed, the counselor leads restorative practices and circles, and also leads equity and other curricula in CCA. The counselor said, “*I'm a lot more connected with [students] than I would be if I was not in this program, and the relationships are much different ...*”.

<sup>6</sup> Quotes are from a CCA teacher/staff.

**Internships and future-focus.** One of the most anticipated parts of the CCA experience is the opportunity to complete an internship. This component has taken a number of forms over CCA's four years and is still in development. It has included a mix of traditional internships, short projects with community organizations inside and outside the building, and group mentorships. One of the most impactful CCA internships featured a cohort-based model, mentorship, and learning and leadership development through a process of training, experiencing, and teaching; see the *CCA Students and Loppet Internship at Theodore Wirth Park* spotlight to learn more about this internship.

Most internship partners have come from North Minneapolis or nearby areas and many partners already had a focus on youth development. Recruiting internship partners, onboarding students and sites, coordinating internship logistics, and making sure that students get credit for internships when relevant takes time. These tasks have fallen on a mix of CCA staff over the years. This includes the program coordinator, the AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer in year one, classroom teachers, and a dedicated work-based learning coordinator. Moving forward, CCA plans to manage internships solely through one work-based learning coordinator position. CCA is also hoping to offer paid internships in the future.

Internships are part of a larger programmatic commitment to prepare students for “college, career, and real life”. Key components of this work are the identity development that pervades CCA and supporting students in trying new things. This future-focus has also included a dedicated college and career course and a capstone project about developing plans for what to do after high school. Going forward, the college and career course will be woven into the four core courses.

Another area of focus for CCA has been delivering increasingly robust financial literacy education. Since the program's first days, students have asked for more financial literacy instruction as a part of being ready for “real life”. Teachers responded by including critical and financial literacy training throughout the curriculum and projects. Examples have included using financial literacy as a vehicle for understanding the relevance of exponential growth, understanding historic and ongoing injustices, and advocating for the community. This has also included exploring entrepreneurship by designing a business, even creating and selling products like soaps and concrete benches. It has also included building very specific knowledge about budgeting, credit cards, and loans.

**Intentional Culture, Community, & Relationship Building.** Intentional community building in CCA focuses on building relationships between students and between students and teachers/staff. Much of this strong community comes from being in a cohort, sharing almost the entire school day for two years and working together on projects. It also comes from program teachers/staff who can sometimes be (in students' own words) “*like parents*” or “*annoying family members*” and who integrate team-building activities into daily instruction. CCA teachers/staff also build community responsively, for example leveraging conflict and potentially disrespectful language in the classroom as an opportunity to explicitly discuss how to best communicate with one another and to model de-escalation.

When possible, intentional community building has included start-of-year activities like visiting a ropes course and trips throughout the year like the day at Theodore Wirth Park facilitated by CCA Loppet interns. Community building is sustained through intentional practices like weekly family meetings where all of CCA also eats lunch together. Recently, it has also included daily 30-minute breaks where students can take walks together, go to the gym, or play games.



*Community building trip to Theodore Wirth Park, led by a group of CCA students as a part of their Loppet Internship. [Picture from CCA staff]*

**Connecting students to North Minneapolis.** Trips into the community, presentations from community partners, internships in the community, projects that focus on key community issues, and responsive conversations and reflection build connection to the Northside and tools to advocate for it. The program directly addresses key issues or events on the Northside, whether it be violence/killings or gentrification – *“not normalizing it and not shying away from talking about it,”* as one teacher/staff member put it.

**Support from school leadership.** A key part of CCA’s success has been support from the school’s leadership. The principal has supported the program as a way to fulfill the school’s strategic plan, protecting positions during times of budget uncertainty, finding ways to support the program through traditional school-funding measures as Foundation support wound down, and empowering the team to design something bold and new while also integrating it with the rest of the Patrick Henry community. This support and commitment is also reflected by the principal enrolling two of his children in CCA. During program design and early implementation, an assistant principal played a major role in setting up the program structure and helping staff negotiate details like working within the school’s master calendar, ensuring students were on course to graduate, protecting CCA’s status as an insulated pathway, and articulating with the work of other teachers and academic programs.

**Adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic.** The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted CCA operations. The shift to distance learning put internships and many aspects of project-based learning on hold. It also disrupted the constant in-person interactions between students and between students and teachers/staff that were driven by teaching and learning with one consistent group of educators and a cohort of fellow students all day. CCA staff shifted their persistent in-person support to persistent distance support through active outreach by email, calls, texts, and video chats. Teachers/staff adapted the schedule to make it more flexible and manageable for students.

## RESULTS

CCA students are staying in high school and graduating at high rates; report higher levels of connection than other students at Patrick Henry; and experience strong, persistent support from a team of teachers and a counselor. Feedback from students and staff point to a program that has built a sense of family and community among its students and that is supporting students to graduation while helping them better understand who they are, how to understand and engage in the world around them, and dream and build their futures. This has all been accomplished in the context of pervasive budget cuts and the ongoing stress of an unprecedented global pandemic. It has also been accomplished in the context of a city and a school district marked by generations of inequality and inequities, and a new intensity to American racism with the murders of George Floyd and so many others.

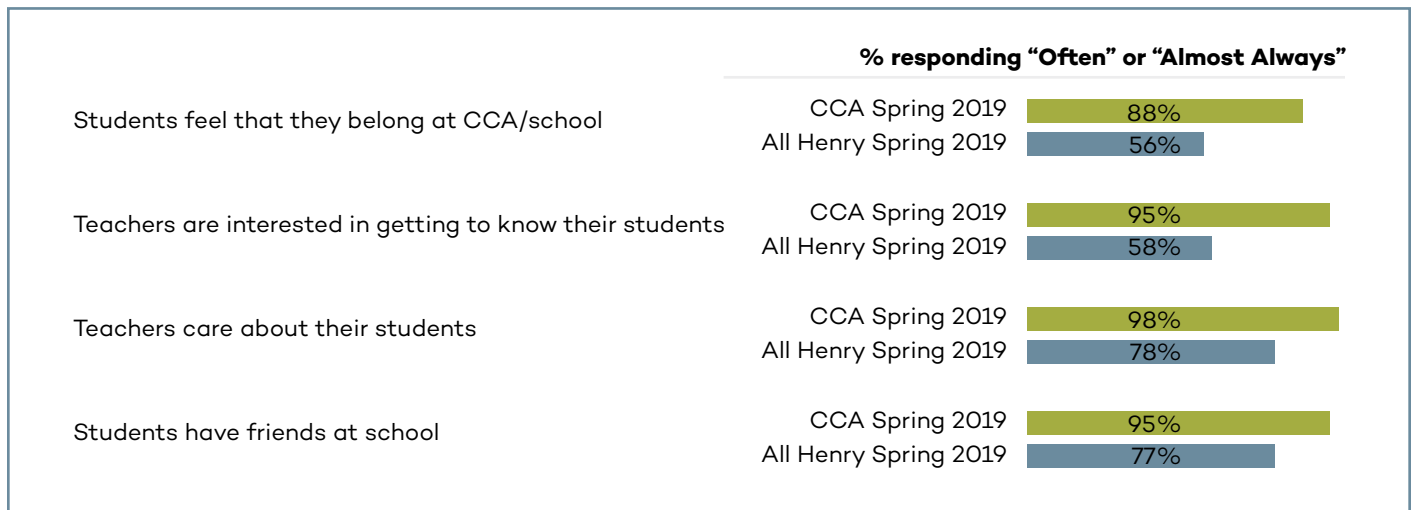
## WHAT STAFF SAYS

“The biggest one [success], I think is forming a family and community feeling among the students ... they love their teachers and their counselor. ... And I think that’s a huge success for students to be able to explore their own identity and what they mean to not only the school, but to this community.” – *Patrick Henry Administrator*

“I really think having a space where they [students] can be and bring their whole selves ... where they have the space to grow into whoever, it is that they want to be.” – *CCA Teacher/Staff*

“Being able to understand equity in its truest form and being able to meet with students where they’re at, and not only that, but meet students where they dream to be, has had a huge impact.” – *Patrick Henry Administrator*

**Building a sense of community and strong support.** The sense of community built by CCA is reflected in both quantitative and qualitative evidence of the program’s impact. CCA students report higher levels of belonging, teacher caring, teacher interest in getting to know students, and having friends than the rest of Patrick Henry<sup>7</sup>.



*Climate survey responses for CCA students and all Patrick Henry in spring 2019. Students were asked how often each of these statements were true with possible answers ranging from “Almost Never” to “Almost Always”. All differences are statistically significant and not likely to be due to chance.*



“I think this larger sense of community, like we’ve had some tumultuous times in CCA where there’s been conflict over the years between students and we’ve worked through it. ... And I think that’s super important, that sense of community and what it means to be a part of a community.”

– *CCA Teacher/Staff*

<sup>7</sup> Note: these results are from the first year of CCA’s implementation. This is relatively old data, but it is that last year for which comparison data is available and is consistent with subsequent student feedback from surveys and focus groups.

The vast majority of CCA students report that CCA staff support them as a person (93% when surveyed during distance learning in Fall 2020 and 96% when school was back in person in fall 2021). Students also regularly provided feedback like, “[our teachers] care about the relationship” and that “the community [in CCA] helped me build connections and better relationships with others.”

**Preparing students for college, career, & real life and helping students understand who they are.** When students were surveyed about the future focus of CCA in the fall of 2021, almost all CCA students (95%) agreed that CCA is preparing them for college, career, and real life. Students have also recognized the role that CCA has played in helping them develop their identity and develop future-focused leadership skills during feedback sessions.

The internship component of CCA is still emerging and was severely disrupted by the shift to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic; but for students who have had internships, they have had a strong impact. Internships have provided an opportunity to explore new options and try out potential futures. They have also provided an opportunity to experience mentorship while developing identity and leadership skills. As they become more consistent and build on lessons learned, internships have the potential to be a profound experience for students.

### WHAT STUDENTS SAY

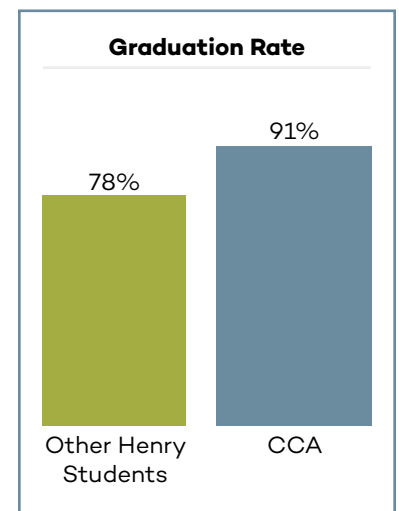
“CCA helps me develop my identity because it gives me an opportunity to work on projects that reflect on who I am.”

“CCA made me learn that there were many opportunities to choose from.”

“I’ve grown to become a better leader than before. I overcame my shyness and fears of trying new things.”

“Before CCA, I knew I was going to college. Didn’t know what I wanted to go for and [I was] not motivated ... North News [internship] helped me find a passion and do a double major. It helped me focus on what I want to do ...”

**Strong retention and graduation.** Relative to the rest of Patrick Henry, CCA students are retained from 11th to 12th grades and graduate at higher rates. Retention from 11th to 12th grades was particularly strong for the first two cohorts who started in-person (91% for CCA students versus 75% for other Henry students who started their junior year in fall 2018 and 91% versus 74% for students who started in Fall 2019). Retention was not as strong for the third cohort who started during distance learning, most likely reflecting the difficulty of building relationships online (82% for CCA students versus 77% for other Henry students who started their junior year in fall 2020 during distance learning). Graduation for the first two cohorts of CCA has been strong. As of publication, 91% of students from the first two CCA cohorts had graduated, compared to 78% of other Henry students who started their junior year at the same time.





**Educator innovation and leadership.** CCA is building a concrete model of equitable and anti-racist education and social emotional learning at a time when those are still vague concepts for many educators. Neither of these are standalone components in CCA, they are integrated throughout every facet of the program. Much of what CCA is doing can and should be adapted by more schools.



*Future Focused Education, Albuquerque, NM learning trip. Pictured are CCA teachers/staff and Joel Luedtke, the Foundation's Program Director (far right).*

CCA shows that real innovation and community are possible within public schools, even those with the most uncertain budgets and even in the most stressful times. Once this type of innovation has gained traction, it can even be funded by standard school funding mechanisms, although this will continue to be a struggle in Minneapolis for the foreseeable future. Patrick Henry has made steady progress toward funding the program internally, with the Foundation only funding the work-based learning coordinator position in year five. Patrick Henry was poised to make the transition to full, sustainable, internal funding in 2022-2023, but budget cuts necessitated another year of Foundation funding for the coordinator and will require moving English out of CCA.

CCA is also a testament to the fact that entrusting educators to design and implement a new way of teaching, learning, and supporting students at the school-level can create promising results and can help support the development of new leaders. CCA staff have become leaders in their building (taking on roles such as department chairs; instructional, building, and professional development leadership team members; student council advisor; and equity lead). Teachers outside the program are beginning to adopt some of CCA's practices (including specific projects and exhibitions). It cannot be emphasized enough that adequate resources (both financial and other) and school leadership support are critical to this type of educator-led innovation.



“I think CCA showed that you could be innovative even in a public school setting, despite some of the challenges, it's just how do you interpret some of the policies? How do you communicate effectively? And then how do you kind of spread the leadership amongst your team? ... I think most of the barriers are mentally and internally.”

– Patrick Henry Administrator

<sup>8</sup> Differences in overall retention and graduation rates are statistically significant ( $p < .01$  for multiple logistic regression models) even after controlling for potentially important student differences like race/ethnicity, English language learning status, special education status, and GPA before entering the program. This means that these differences are unlikely to be due to chance. [Notes: Missing values for previous GPA were imputed so that all data from all students could be included in statistical tests. All available graduation data included, including graduations after initial class year. Because these rates are calculated using junior year as a starting point and do not adjust for transfers in or out of school, they cannot be compared to official graduation rates that start at freshman year and adjust for transfers in and out of a school.]



# My Story My Brilliance

## OLSON MIDDLE SCHOOL

### Program Development and Key Components

Founded on the core assumption that “our students possess inherent brilliance and a strong capacity for learning, but that conditions met within traditional schools frustrate, rather than cultivate these capacities”, My Story My Brilliance (MSMB) at Olson Middle School aimed to “reconnect students with their agency (My Story) and their unique talents (My Brilliance)”. Some of the key elements of MSMB were:

- the creation of interdisciplinary teams of teachers and counselors,
- a transformative counseling model that featured counselors at each grade level,
- journaling,
- a school wide commitment to intentional teaching and social-emotional learning,
- a more relevant curriculum and interdisciplinary projects,
- and a focus on three student-centered questions: “Who am I now? From where did I come? Who am I becoming?”

A key part of MSMB was an administration that supported a bold vision for school change, empowered program staff and other teachers to design and implement it, and provided time and space for innovation. The following image shows the program model created by the MSMB team. This model emerged from the work and was continuously refined by program staff.



## ABOUT OLSON MIDDLE SCHOOL

Olson Middle School is a public middle school on the Northside of Minneapolis. In the fall of 2021, Olson had an enrollment of 433 students. Most (almost 90%) are BIPOC, with 58% African American, 11% Asian, 10% Hispanic, 8% two or more races/ethnicities, and 2% Native American. Most students (71%) qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

**Piloting and expansion.** Olson Middle School took advantage of the planning grant to pilot MSMB with the seventh-grade teaching team and a counselor in the spring of 2018. Following the award of the “Being Bold” multiyear grant, MSMB was expanded to all three grade levels and two additional counselors were added in the fall of 2018. Additional project support came from three teachers on special assignment (TOSAs, a literacy TOSA, the IB coordinator, and an instructional specialist) who supported each of the grade level teams. The instructional specialist also served as the official program coordinator. The counselors, TOSAs, principal, and assistant principal met regularly to guide the program.



*Olson teachers and staff planning for the 2019-2020 school year at a Foundation sponsored kickoff event.*

**Grade-level teacher-counselor interdisciplinary teams.** Teachers and counselors worked together in collaborative teams. A counselor was assigned to each grade-level team and worked regularly with teachers (see the *MSMB Journaling and Counseling Model* spotlight for more details) through team meetings, journal reading sessions, going into the classroom, and facilitating student-teacher and family-teacher conversations.



“Another big aspect was the whole idea of thinking about counselors in a different way, the counselor role being one, working side-by-side with the teachers, with the students and not being sort of a role of meeting [only] with students.”

– Olson Administrator

**Transformative counseling model.** Funding allowed Olson middle school to hire two additional counselors, providing a counselor at each of the three grade levels. This allowed counselors to engage in intensive collaboration with teaching teams, relationship building with all students, building-wide leadership, and significant amounts of individual and group counseling sessions. Such sessions are critically needed, but often not possible due to high student:counselor ratios and many counselors’ involvement in non-counseling tasks like scheduling. See the *MSMB Journaling and Counseling Model* spotlight for more details.



*Olson students decorating their MSMB Journals [pictures from Olson's Facebook page]*

**Journaling.** Olson staff were inspired by the Foundation-funded learning trip to Boston during the initial planning grant where they observed the “Know Thyself” journaling curriculum created by Robert J. Comeau (at the time, an English teacher at Another Course to College, a Boston Public School). This experience helped staff develop a journaling process that became a central component of MSMB. At its peak, students would write for 20 minutes or more every 1-2 weeks in a personal journal in response to a set of prompts. Students were always given multiple prompts to choose to write to and the option to free-write or draw. These prompts covered a range of topics. These included the core MSMB questions (i.e., “From where did I come?”, “Who am I now?”, and “Who am I becoming?”) and community, school, and global events. Grade-level teacher and counselor teams would then read these journals together and provide non-evaluative feedback to students. Using a spreadsheet, the team captured student interests and potentially helpful points unique to each student. Some teachers used these insights for academic planning. In the same spreadsheet, the teams also used a tagging system for journal writing follow-up: 1) needing counselor follow-up, 2) keep an eye on student, and 3) student is showing IB characteristics. When students mentioned something that warranted the most intense level of follow-up, their entries would be flagged for attention by a school counselor, referral to an outside resource, or a mandated reporting process.

**Professional development and schoolwide commitment to intentional teaching and social-emotional learning.** As a part of the project and training that was already in progress at Olson, the majority of teaching staff received training in Developmental Designs and IB practices (estimated by school staff to be about 90% for both). Inspired by a Foundation-funded learning trip to exemplary New York City schools, program staff also created their own intentional teaching framework: Goals/Attention, Expressions of High Expectations, Expressions of High Support, Feedback to the Goal, Celebrations (GEEFC).

**Leadership that supported a vision and empowered staff.** A key component of this program was having school leadership that supported a bold vision for school change that was staff-driven and empowered staff to find ways to implement it while giving them the time they needed to innovate, collaborate, and practice new approaches to teaching and counseling. The principal entrusted his team of TOSAs and counselors to flesh out an aspirational vision and allowed specific tactics to emerge from the work. He made sure that all teachers received relevant professional development and had time to meet as a team to plan, read journals, and celebrate.

“[The] teacher leadership model that we had was a shared leadership, distributed leadership.” – *Olson Administrator*

**More relevant curriculum and interdisciplinary projects.** MSMB also aimed to include a significant number of interdisciplinary projects organized around the orienting questions of “Who am I now? From where did I come? Who am I becoming?” and integrated with the goals of the IB Middle Years Program. However, this component was never fully implemented. Although some of these projects were piloted during the planning grant and the first year of the program, interdisciplinary projects never became a systematic or wide-scale part of the Olson curriculum. However, many teachers did find new ways to include student voice and interests in their work from insights gained from journaling and through other approaches like “exit-tickets” to gain feedback from students at the end of a class period.

**Transitions and the End of the Program.** During the first year and a half of the pandemic, after a significant weeks-long scramble to make sure that all students had devices and internet access, staff made sure some key elements of MSMB continued. These included the counseling model, teacher-counselor teams, and an online journaling component. Counselors pivoted to providing virtual support to students and to connecting with families and began to run advisory. Journaling transitioned to an online platform. Olson staff made a concerted effort to continue celebrations during distance learning through awards for distance learning engagement and academic achievement. Other elements, like project-based learning, were mostly put on hold (with the exception of an 8th grade project). Overall, the major focus was placed on supporting students instead of trying to teach as usual. This included things like all-day video chats where students could check in and play games.

MSMB was not really relaunched in the 2021-2022 school year, likely a result of numerous factors. In the fall of 2021, as the school returned to fully in-person learning, two notable, destabilizing changes occurred. A planned district reorganization brought a significant number of new staff and students to the building; and the principal who had shepherded MSMB for the past three years took a position in higher education. New teachers were not trained on MSMB, new students were not oriented to MSMB, journaling did not start until halfway through the year (and in a very reduced capacity), a founding counselor left early in the year, and several teachers left Olson before and during the year. The counselor turnover meant that low student:counselor ratios and counselor embedding in grade-level teams were lost. This all happened in the context of the cumulative stress of the pandemic and a difficult return to in-person learning. Many new students came to Olson, not only moving to a new school, but moving to a school that was different than they had been attending before the start of distance-learning. For students who had attended Olson before, many of them had only attended Olson virtually, having started during the pandemic. Overall, the school saw an increase in negative student behavior and acting out that was not characteristic of the school during the year prior to the pandemic. The relatively high turnover in teachers/staff early in the school year, absences due to COVID quarantines, and shortages of substitutes, put extra stress on Olson teachers/staff and contributed to burnout and a decline in teacher/staff morale. A teachers union strike in the spring also disrupted school. **For all intents and purposes, MSMB ended in the fall of 2021, and the rest of this review will focus on results achieved between the fall of 2017 and the spring of 2021.**

Despite this end, many Olson teachers/staff members are still committed to MSMB and see the impact it had at its peak. Although Foundation funding has ended for MSMB, for those teachers/staff who are returning, there are hopes to relaunch aspects of it next year.

## RESULTS

From the early stages of full implementation, MSMB made a measurable difference in outcomes such as teacher retention, suspensions, and student grades. Feedback from Olson teachers/staff point to a significant impact on the school's climate, student-teacher relationships, teamwork between teachers and counselors, and student support. Within the first year, teachers/staff noticed a calmer school with less "drama and violence".

While society was just waking up to the need for more mental health support for students and stronger teacher-student relationships, Olson was already building and implementing a concrete model that seemed to work.

During the first year and a half of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers/staff reported that the teams built at Olson provided each other with a sense of family that kept them connected and provided students with persistent support during distance learning.

Ultimately, the program was not sustained, but the journaling and counseling components in particular stand out as concrete and reproducible ways to start building the foundational relationships and climate that can lead to real, lasting change in public schools (see the *MSMB Journaling and Counseling Model* spotlight). The program's measurable impact on teacher retention, grades, and suspension also show that a schoolwide commitment to this type of change can have a significant impact on climate and outcomes in a short period of time, something which often seems impossible in public schools.

**Improved student-teacher understanding and relationships.** Teachers/staff at Olson reported that journaling gave teachers deeper insights into students' lives and served as a foundation for building stronger student-teacher relationships. One teacher said, "We are getting more insight into what is going into their lives [and into their thoughts and feelings]." Understanding what was going on in students' lives changed how teachers responded to student behavior. Better knowledge of students' interests gave many teachers a new way to include student voice in their teaching. Example feedback from before the pandemic:

### WHAT TEACHERS SAY

"There was a good year and a half here, and it is really amazing to hear people talk about what Olson was like."

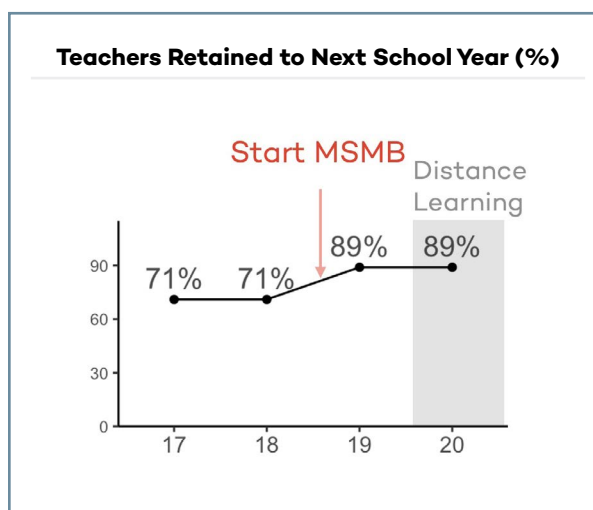
"Behavior is a typical issue in middle schools. The amount of drama and violence has dropped over the years, probably due to MSMB."

### WHAT TEACHERS/ADMINISTRATORS SAY

"The staff went from running away every year to coalescing and being here and really having a sense of mission."

"They [teachers] know, okay, if this is going on in my classroom and I've tried to handle it myself but it's not working, I know I've got somebody who can come and either just step out in the hall with the student, maybe just sit down next to the student in the classroom. I know that if I make a phone call to a parent as a teacher, I know that I've got my counselor on my teaching team to help support me."

**Teamwork and a profoundly different teacher and counselor experience.** Olson had struggled with teacher retention for years, losing approximately 30% of its teaching staff each year. Following the onset of MSMB, nearly 90% of teachers stayed at Olson, even during the first year of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike many schools, where counselors are responsible for non-counseling tasks like scheduling or managing students' disability plans, Olson counselors got to engage in actual counseling, collaboration with teachers, and school-wide leadership.



Counselors also provided support and coaching for their teaching peers. Teachers and counselors worked in teams instead of in isolation. According to the MSMB team, these teams created a family among teachers and counselors, helped them better support students, and sustained the school through distance learning. At its peak, grade-level teams met together to read journals, discuss student needs, and brainstorm ways to better serve students. The principal made time for team journal-reading sessions and other MSMB meetings a priority in the school's complicated schedule.

**New levels of student support.** Journaling gave students an outlet and connected them to support. MSMB lowered the student:counselor ratio from the typical Minneapolis Public School ratio of about 500:1 to about 200:1 (The American School Counseling Association recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1). This allowed counselors to focus more heavily on personal, social, academic and career development. This took the form of individual and small group counseling and dynamic participation with grade-level teaching teams. Counselors were also freed from some of the roles they often play in public schools like coordinating testing, scheduling, or serving as substitute teachers. Counselors would regularly facilitate meetings between teachers and students and teachers and families. They also served as another outlet for students who might have traditionally been sent for disciplinary action.

### WHAT STUDENTS SAY

“I feel like I have good relationships, they know me, they know I do my work. If I don't do my work, they know there's something going on in my life and help.”

“Counselors at Olson have helped me to get through the times where it feels like the world is crashing down, and where you feel trapped.”

“They've helped me become a better person – I can always go to them when I need them. They always encourage me to do my work and will actually help me do work, and that's a good thing.”

**New journaling and counseling models.** MSMB developed new journaling and counseling models (see the *MSMB Journaling and Counseling Model* spotlight for more details) that merit adaptation and implementation by other schools. As one Olson staff member put it,

“It’s incredible, it’s something that should be happening everywhere.” Systematic journaling is an accessible way for schools to address the needs students are bringing to school and build the foundational relationships that are a necessary precursor to student academic and social-emotional learning. The Olson staff shared their learning and model development in their professional counseling and principal leadership circles, across the district, at a national evaluation conference, and more broadly via social media like videos and blog posts — spreading the learning from this grant beyond school walls.

**Promising academic and disciplinary outcomes with room for growth in standardized test scores.**

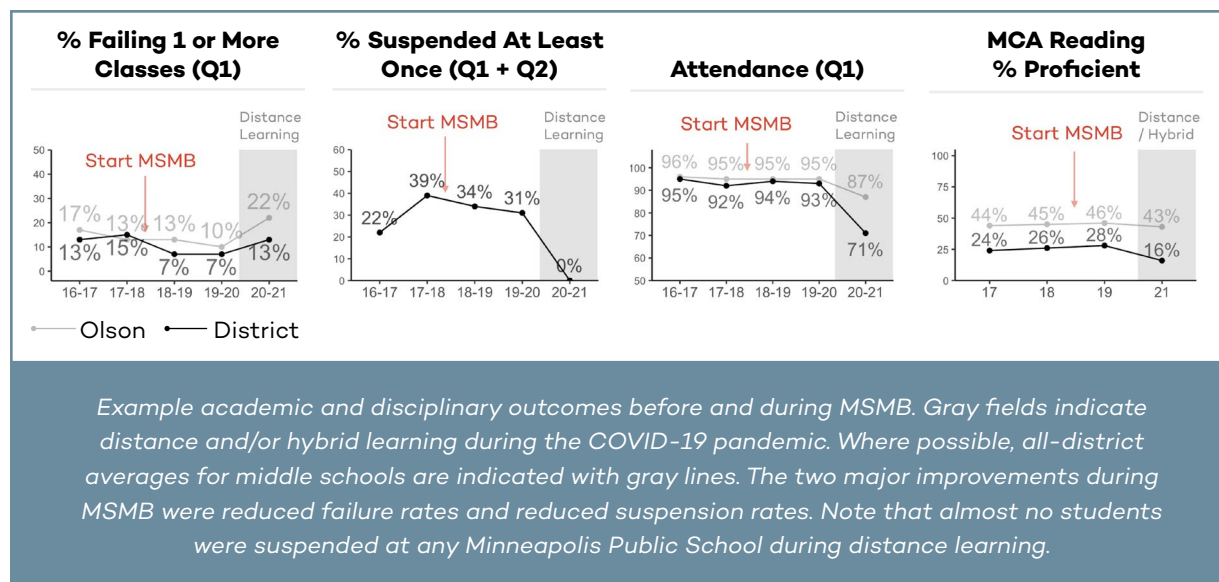
During MSMB, Olson’s high suspension rate began to fall and the rate at which students failed core courses was cut approximately in half. These improvements likely reflect the impact of MSMB on the student experience and teachers’ understanding of their students as well as intentional conversations about the impact of failures and suspensions on children. For suspension rates, they also reflect intentional decisions by behavioral deans to give children another chance and teachers’ ability to refer students to counselors instead of always sending them for disciplinary action. Regardless of the mix of causes, these improvements are critical — just imagine the impact of repeated suspensions and failure on a sixth, seventh, or eighth grade child. As one teacher put it, students “do better when they’re successful”, and MSMB was finding ways to do that.

**WHAT TEACHERS/ COUNSELORS SAY**

“I think the academic piece came along because ... [if] you don’t get suspended so much, you are present in school more, you’re probably going to be more successful.”

“You’re going to want to learn more from a teacher who, you know, cares about and, you know, wants you to be successful, not just, hey, you have to learn this. Like, no, I want you to be successful.”

Other outcomes like attendance and standardized test scores did not show improvement, and actually lost some ground during distance learning (note that attendance taking patterns likely varied widely across the district during distance learning and fewer students took standardized tests during distance and hybrid learning). Staff attribute the lack of improvement in proficiency levels on standardized tests to the high number of students who were coming to Olson already behind, and this is an area for future growth.





## Lessons Learned

### FOR GRANTMAKING AND EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

At a time when much of philanthropy is still trying to find ways to include community voice and engage in more equitable grantmaking, the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation staff has been designing, implementing, and iterating a “recipe” for grantmaking that has real potential for equity, voice, and impact. This recipe:

- **included community voice and leadership** in the design of the overall grantmaking strategy and problem statements and as members of the advisory committee,
- **empowered educators directly,**
- **provided a high level of engagement and learning and development support** from both Foundation staff and consultants, and
- **supported change through a small number of relatively, large long-term grants** through a phased process.

This placed support and commitment in one of the most historically under-resourced areas, a key component of more equitable grantmaking.

This recipe for grantmaking gave educators the time and support to dream and implement new, more impactful approaches to education. These new approaches had (and especially in the case of CCA, are still having) real impact on student-teacher relationships and understanding as well as the experiences and outcomes of both students and educators. This is reflected by promising quantitative results like strong student retention, graduation, and sense of belonging and support in CCA and improved student grades and teacher retention in MSMB. It is also supported by compelling qualitative feedback about the impact that these programs and this process had on educators at both schools and on developing identity and plans for the future among many CCA students. This grantmaking set out to impact the student experience, but it has also profoundly impacted the educators at two schools and promoted growth for the community advisory group and Foundation staff as well.

In the remainder of this section, we share some of the shortcomings and challenges of this work as well as lessons learned for grantmaking and educational change initiatives.

### SHORTCOMINGS

Not every aspect of these grants was a success. Some of the shortcoming included:

- **Unrealized program elements.** Some elements of the schools’ intended program designs were never fully or sustainably implemented.
- **Under-utilized support.** Schools did not always take full advantage of the coaching/consulting support that was available.
- **Finding time to plan.** Even with financial support for additional positions, finding time to plan during the summer and especially during the school year was often a challenge.
- **Including family voice.** Including family voice was a challenge that neither school created a consistent approach to addressing.

- **Building systematic, repeatable processes.** Building systematic, repeated processes, was also a challenge, with schools designing creative new approaches but not always making them a regular, repeatable part of how they teach or support.
- **Having enough time for real change.** The initial commitment of three years of funding may have been too short to build fully sustainable change – with MSMB failing to launch in its fourth year and Patrick Henry taking on many, but not all, of the costs associated with CCA and having to cut some elements (like the inclusion of English) going in to its fifth year.

## CHALLENGES AND IMPACT DESPITE THEM

This grantmaking took place in the context of both ongoing and unprecedented challenges for schools and society. Every year, district budget cuts challenged these programs and overall operations at the schools where they were housed. A global pandemic severely disrupted both schooling and lives, forcing schooling into distance learning and then hybrid learning and then in-person learning and then distance learning again before finally returning to fully in-person learning. In the midst of the pandemic, George Floyd was murdered in the same city as these schools and other violent tragedies like the killings of young children rocked the Northside.

Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid transition to distance learning had a major impact on these grants and this grantmaking process. But, these challenges continued even as schools returned to in-person learning in the fall of 2021. Schools faced challenges of chronic absences and heightened student mental health needs (with the U.S. Surgeon General issuing a December 2021 advisory on the youth mental health crisis that has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic). Additionally, district and school-wide understaffing and the resulting need for program staff to substitute wherever needed made it difficult to fully deliver, much less grow, the programs. As teacher/staff at the schools have mentioned, “it’s all hands on deck” and schools can be like “an emergency room.” School was further disrupted when the Minneapolis teachers union went on a strike in the spring of 2021 which lasted nearly three weeks.

In the face of these considerable challenges, these grants had an impact. At both schools, educators pointed to the community and processes built by these grants as supportive factors that helped staff more effectively transition to distance learning than they would have otherwise. At Olson, where MSMB has never fully relaunched, and while surviving the challenges and chaos of the 2021-2022 school year, teachers and staff talk passionately about the notable difference MSMB was making in the school, point to continued “islands of wonderfulness,”<sup>9</sup> and hope to relaunch the program. At Patrick Henry, CCA is going into its fifth year with a goal to continue to build its internship component and to be around for years to come. See the sections about each school for more details.

## IMPACT AND ADAPTING TO COVID

The arc of these grants and the Foundation’s approach for supporting them was profoundly altered by the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to distance learning in the spring of 2020. One and a half years into these grants, as the usual challenges of launching a major new initiative were starting to settle and programs were starting to systematize their operations and try out programmatic elements that were not fully implemented in the first year, schooling was abruptly thrust into distance learning.

<sup>9</sup>Quote is from an Olson staff member

Schools entered emergency mode and scrambled to get students the devices and internet access they needed to learn from home. Teachers and staff had to abruptly learn how to teach, connect, and support in a new way. Staff that had been planning and implementing both of these programs shifted to making house calls to drop off devices and to calling, texting, and video chatting to connect with and support their students in any way possible. Both schools made strong commitments to finding ways to not fail any students during the chaos of distance learning. The Foundation let schools know that the priority was doing “*whatever you need to do to support your students*”<sup>10</sup> and offered to free up resources for emerging needs and to make connections wherever possible. Most activities like convenings and learning trips were put on hold, and developmental evaluation support shifted to helping schools adapt to distance teaching and learning. Both schools reduced their programming during distance learning. CCA suspended internships and reduced its focus on project based learning. Olson paused the full development of MSMB but transitioned to online journaling and found ways to maintain high levels of student-counselor connection via virtual means and through counselors leading advisory.

In the 2021-2022 school year, year four of these grants, some suspended grant activities and programming resumed as school returned to in-person learning. CCA went on a learning trip and resumed staff step backs and the project-based learning approach they had developed prior to the pandemic. CCA also resumed internships at a very scaled back level. MSMB, however, never fully relaunched.

It is impossible to predict how these programs and their impact would have developed without the pandemic, but it is clear that their development has been anything but typical.

## LESSONS LEARNED FOR GRANTMAKING

Here we share some lessons learned for foundations that are interested in community-led grantmaking and educational change.

**Engage deeply and commit to long-term partnerships.** A key driver of impact in these grants was the engaged support of Foundation staff and consultants. For the Program Director, this meant a new way of working. The Program Director directly engaged programs, the district, and the broader educational ecosystem, and continues to do so. He worked directly with the district on financial and other details, always asked schools what they needed to be successful, and helped keep schools on track. Even as these programs wind down, he remains committed to connecting these programs to other resources/support and their future success. Grantees pointed to this direct engagement of the Program Director as a critical support for their work and successes.

Another key driver of impact in these grants was the long-term commitment made to the overall educational future of North Minneapolis, including its public school district and these projects/schools specifically. These grants signaled a real long-term commitment to improving education on the Northside and a willingness to partner with the entire Northside educational ecosystem.

Critically, this partnership has not been contingent on outcomes and has not been limited to working with the Foundation’s traditional partners. A community advisory committee member pointed to the Foundation’s willingness to engage in “*truth telling*”, shared learning, and

<sup>10</sup>Quote is from the Foundation Program Director

potentially riskier work with an entirely new set of partners as key aspects of this grantmaking strategy's success. On the individual program/school level, major change like this takes time. The relatively long timeframe of these grants, with an initial commitment of at least three years (eventually expanded to four years in response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic) gave time and space for change.



“Not only does he [the Program Director] want to fund the work, but he wants to see the work through. He asks challenging questions ... he’s coaching us on results... and he’s been flexible ... He’s been a trailblazer with connecting with district staff or district personnel that could be of support or a barrier. ... I do think the way Joel has set up the foundation and the collaboration and the partnership with the schools definitely is a model.”

– *Patrick Henry Administrator*

### **What does this mean for grantmaking?**

It really points toward an ongoing commitment to a small number of large grants with direct engagement from foundation staff. In this grantmaking, the relatively small number of grants allowed the Program Director to deeply engage in the work. This can be contrasted with maintaining a large portfolio of grants (through either strategic or responsive grantmaking) that results in such a large volume of grantmaking activities that Foundation staff are unable to deeply engage with individual projects or the ecosystem surrounding it. In this work, Foundation engagement was also maximized by the relatively long time frame of these grants. The original grants were for three years and evolved to become four and five year grants, and the Foundation’s involvement with these programs began even before that during the planning grants. This long time frame allowed relationships, trust, and understanding to develop and put the grants on a better path to success. It also allowed room for learning because funding was not contingent on immediate outcomes. For this type of work, the three-year commitment to these grants was a good starting point, but five years may have been better.

**Invest in learning.** Grantees pointed to the comprehensive learning and development support the Foundation provided as another critical support for their successes. The Foundation made a deep commitment to supporting the learning and development of these programs through Foundation events, learning trips, and ongoing support from developmental evaluation and other consultants/coaches. The teams were supported in establishing structure; designing their programs; learning from the feedback of students, educators, and community partners; and tracking impact. The phased approach of the grantmaking process encouraged exploration and testing of new practices before committing to a new approach. Learning trips provided another opportunity for inspiration and team building. Educators brought back concrete practices from each of the learning trips and reported returning as re-energized, stronger teams.

“We developed something from each trip, [it] became part of My Story, My Brilliance.” – *Olson Administrator*



“You guys [the developmental evaluators] in a lot of ways, keep us motivated, keep us focused. I think the support from you guys with the assessments of being able to speak to family and students about some of the successes and telling our story, I think it’s huge. ... Every time I’m around you ... you force us to pause ... you force us to think, you force us to reflect ... just even your questioning. And I think that is extremely helpful.”

– Patrick Henry Administrator

### **What does this mean for grantmaking?**

It means funding learning, not just grants. The learning and development support provided through the planning phase, learning trips, and consultants amplified educators’ ability to dream, design, and then improve the work. It also allowed them to tell the story of the work both internally within their school and externally to the district (helping to justify their major changes from district practices) and other audiences in a way “*that everybody could understand, so they could see the progress through the reports*”<sup>11</sup>. Focusing on learning and improving, instead of traditional accountability or outcomes also results in more equitable grantmaking because it does not privilege established organizations that already have the capacity to produce and report on a predetermined set of outcome-oriented results. A focus on learning and building together helps to center the voices of those most impacted by the work and support them in identifying the problems closest to them and building and implementing solutions.

### **Investing directly in educators may be a game changer for designing new ways of teaching, learning, and supporting students; but they need time and capacity to do this work.**

In contrast to government-led, researcher-led, or district-led change initiatives, this effort was led by those closest to the work. Educators and community members are closest to the problem and along with students have the most to gain from the success of any school transformation. They are also often only indirectly involved in educational design initiatives, taking direction from researchers or districts instead of directly designing new approaches to teaching, learning, and support. These grants help demonstrate the great potential of educators as innovators and designers and the impact of direct grants on their own practices and leadership.

Educators are also one of the key elements that needs to change in order for education to change. Funding educators directly made sure that change was reaching them, and it also had a direct, positive impact on their professional lives in a way that a grant to an external organization might not have had. This direct funding also built new educational leaders who are sharing these practices with others, with a level of influence that an external organization could never have.

“I think the most successful part was that it provided a chance for educators to dream big and to realize their ideas in a substantial way. It was a space that I think is, I don’t want to say unheard of, but very unusual ... [where] the problem definition and solution process was happening at the classroom-level ...” – Foundation Program Director

<sup>11</sup>Quote is from an Olson administrator

“I think it’s planning time, you know, I think teachers are already feeling stretched really thin. So, this takes like adequate planning time where you can really sit down and develop something.” – *Olson Teacher*

### **What does this mean for grantmaking?**

It simply means finding ways to directly fund educators’ work, either as a foundation or via an intermediary with a specific mandate to fund and support educators directly. This may be messier than funding an established non-profit or a university research center, and it takes a lot of direct engagement and support, but it helps tap into the unique insights of teachers and to design for the unique circumstances of each school. It also directly impacts teachers and their practices. And, this funding strategy can help support the new educational leaders we need, including in the case of these grants several new BIPOC leaders. There may be legitimate concerns that lessons learned in educator-driven design projects are not broadly shared, but these can be reduced by supporting the sharing of any learning developed so that others can integrate and adapt them, and educators are often the most influential voices for other educators. One aspect of directly funding educators that cannot be overlooked is making sure they have the time to innovate and collaborate on this type of work. This means building time for educators (for planning, for collaboration, for innovation) into any grant. This may include finding ways to reduce teaching load and fund summer work.

**Community-led grantmaking yields insightful, actionable, strategies; but takes a lot of effort, commitment, and trust.** This work started with a commitment to a neighborhood and a community. It also started with a commitment to co-designing a grantmaking strategy with community members and evolved to include an influential community advisory committee. The inclusion of the community in the co-design of the grantmaking strategy and education problem space and in the ongoing grantmaking process ensured that grantmaking was being led by “*well connected folks*” who have “*knowledge of the district, knowledge of the community,*”<sup>12</sup> and ensured that decisions were being made by those closest to the Northside. The community advisory process also built the committee members’ understanding of the factors that influence public education.

All of this took work, from community members, from Foundation staff, from consultants, but it has paid dividends. It takes time for committee members to become experts in education, it takes time to build relationships, and it takes time to learn and evaluate programs. This type of work also takes real commitment, trust, and a willingness to engage in an open-ended process with no set conclusion. The unique knowledge and insights of the community advisory group helped create an effective grantmaking strategy, fund projects that were likely to be successful, and provide feedback to grantees and the Foundation.



“I’ve seen a lot of foundations say they want community engagement, but I don’t think they know what that means. And they really don’t know how to loosen the reins ... foundations need to learn to trust people ... We need to trust that the solutions exist and that people need information and guidance and inputs and stuff, but trust people to come up with it.”

– *Community Advisory Committee Member*

<sup>12</sup>Quotes are from community advisory committee members

“Community-led grant making is a lot of work, but it works. It will lead you to fundable ideas that you would not have found otherwise.”  
– *Foundation Program Director*

### **What does this mean for grantmaking?**

It really requires a commitment to a well-defined community – in this case, North Minneapolis. It also means creating an effective committee with the right makeup and practices, resourcing it appropriately, giving members time to become deeply knowledgeable, and really listening to their advice – something the Foundation and its board did throughout this process. It also points to maintaining a manageable number of grants, so that Foundation staff have time to engage in the work required for community input and committee members can attend site visits of all potential and funded work.

This involves not only listening to the community, but being comfortable sharing power. It also involves funding new organizations and working in new ways with them – in this case funding and investing in educators directly, becoming an engaged facilitator instead of just a grant-maker, and focusing on learning as opposed to conventional evaluation or traditional accountability processes. It also means being willing to listen to the “truth” about a foundation’s grants and how a foundation shows up, and maintaining a long-term commitment even when things don’t always work out.

**Concrete practices like reimagining the way teachers and counselors work together, student cohorts, counseling, and journaling can improve relationships, experiences, and outcomes for both students and educators.** These grants had a significant impact on relationship building and were producing promising and measurable impacts on student and educator outcomes. Both programs were increasing student-educator understanding and relationships. In both programs, building teams of educators that integrated counselors in new ways was at the heart of these strengthened relationships and the support that came with it. At both schools, counselors were integral parts of the teaching team, not working in isolation. At both schools, counselors were able to focus on counseling and supporting students’ social emotional and personal development through working directly with students one-on-one, in groups, and in partnership with teachers in the classroom. At Olson, the counselors were also starting to influence teachers’ understanding of students’ social emotional health and they coached teachers on how to respond to students needs and when to refer. In MSMB, journaling provided a unique avenue for building understanding and relationships through students’ own words and educator feedback that built connections and linked students to support. In CCA, the cohort structure of the program provided a strong foundation for relationship building among students and between students and educators. This was amplified by the intentional, integrated, and persistent support and social emotional teaching and modeling of the CCA staff. In CCA, this work has launched a legitimate new school pathway within a public school.

These stronger relationships appear to be the start of significant changes in school climate and student and educator experiences, as revealed by promising improvements in key program outcomes. At Olson, MSMB was associated with improvements in teacher retention, student grades, and disciplinary outcomes. At Patrick Henry, CCA was associated with improvements in retention, graduation, and belonging. Both grants built new educational leaders, with staff assuming leadership roles in their buildings and sharing their learning in the building, in the

district, in Minnesota, and beyond. In both programs, educators reported being part of an incredibly unique, and at times career-affirming experience.

“Yusuf [Patrick Henry principal] has helped develop me into a leader, but also the Phillips Foundation has provided experiences where I could grow to be a leader ... The professionalization of teachers, I feel like you guys do that really well, inadvertently, the Phillips foundation does.” – *CCA Teacher/Staff*

“We had something so beautiful and I couldn’t believe it was my job that I got to get up every day and come here.” – *Olson Counselor*

“The impact on staff in the process of funding these projects ... we’ve had many [chances] to interact with staff and have witnessed them deeply engage in the design and development and adjustment of these projects over time ... it’s been rewarding to create spaces where they can do that and to have them take advantage of that.” – *Foundation Program Director*

One of the most promising lessons from this work is that there are practices that work to strengthen the relationships that students need to thrive. Even more promising, these practices can be implemented relatively easily at most schools given the proper resources. Most schools can reorganize into teams or cohorts, real counseling engagement takes money but it works, and any schools can implement journaling (with counselor support, coordination, and careful practices that ensure confidentiality and appropriate student follow-up when needed!). What these look like for different schools and students should probably be left to the wisdom of students, families, and educators (with support!), but they are all doable. As shown by these grants, these practices can drive real change in student experiences and outcomes in a relatively short period of time.

### **What does this mean for grantmaking?**

In these programs and in other emerging evidence, stronger relationships are associated with improved student outcomes (e.g., Scales et al, 2020). This suggests that focusing on relationships is a fruitful area of grantmaking for the foreseeable future. As these grants have shown, it works to support learning, development, grantmaking, and sharing around building strong student-focused educator teams, cohort models, intensive counseling, and journaling. Too often, we think that educational change is unachievable, especially in urban public schools, but these practices are working.

**This work is not possible without strong school leaders who empower and actively support their staff to design and implement change.** Change takes support from school leaders who are willing to back bold visions, empower their staff to design and implement them, and creatively resource and protect programs during their development. At both CCA and Olson, principals supported strong visions for their schools, but trusted and supported their staff to design and implement innovative, and at times risky, approaches to achieving them. They leaned into very distributed models of leadership. Both principals also protected their programs during development and found ways to work within district and other regulations to make sure they could hire and retain the right staff and innovatively teach and support students while still meeting requirements like instructional hours and learning standards. They also found time for their staff to plan, collaborate, bond, and learn.



### **What does this mean for grantmaking?**

It means seriously evaluating school leaders' involvement and support when making these types of grants. In this grantmaking strategy, the phased approach gave the community advisory committee and the Foundation a window into leaders and their teams through a lower stakes planning grant phase. This helped them choose leaders and teams who would likely be successful. It also may mean finding ways to support leadership development, especially around vision and distributed leadership practices. Supporting school leadership development was actually one of the goals that Northside community members identified as being critically important during the initial human centered design work that launched this grantmaking, and it warrants revisiting.

“School leadership is everything ... you need principals who have principles and vision and have a distributive leadership model and trust their staff. You need principals who are not bureaucratic and who don't just do things because some money came in. You need principals with imagination, and when you have those kind of principals, they have staff that embody those things too” – *Community Advisory Committee Member*

“My involvement is just making sure that what CCA does fits within the strategic plan primarily .... And then also just getting out of the way. .... My job is just to take barriers down. My job is to make sure that tomatoes are not thrown at them for being great ... And then my job is to bring them to the table so that they can spread the knowledge base amongst their colleagues. But the huge one is taking down barriers and giving them space to be creative.” – *Patrick Henry Administrator*

### **SUMMARY OF LESSONS LEARNED FOR GRANTMAKING**

- Engage deeply and commit to long-term partnerships.
- Invest in learning.
- Investing directly in educators may be a game changer for designing new ways of teaching, learning, and supporting students; BUT they need time and capacity to do this work.
- Community-led grantmaking yields insightful, actionable, strategies; but takes a lot of effort, commitment, and trust.
- Concrete practices like reimagining the way teachers and counselors work together , student cohorts, counseling, and journaling can improve relationships, experiences, and outcomes for both students and educators.
- This work is not possible without strong school leaders who empower and actively support their staff to design and implement change.

## About this Case Study and Limitations

This case study is based on interviews, surveys, focus groups, and data analysis conducted over four years as a part of developmental and impact evaluation support for the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation of Minnesota and its grantees. During both the planning and bold grant stages, we supported the teams at Olson and Patrick Henry in designing their programs; learning from the feedback of students, educators, and community partners; tracking impact; and adapting to emerging learning and events. This included helping the programs to clarify and iterate the program designs shared in this report. It also included attending program team meetings throughout the design, implementation, and iteration of these programs and providing frequent actionable feedback through participation in meetings and events, giving presentations, and sharing reports. This included the preparation and sharing of 14 interim reports focused on producing actionable feedback for program design and development and numerous presentations. These reports were based on interviews, focus groups, survey feedback, and design sessions with program team members, administrators, other educators, students, families, and community members as well as our participation in program meetings and events. They were also based on quantitative academic and survey data analysis of elements like grades, suspensions, retention and graduation, district climate surveys, and program-specific surveys. During the 2021-2022 school year, we also conducted a more summative set of design sessions, interviews, and case-study draft reviews with teachers, staff, administrators, Foundation staff, and community partners to identify and validate results and lessons learned.

The biggest limitation of this case study is us; we have been active participants in this process as embedded developmental evaluators and have worked with the schools for almost five years. The relational nature and long-term engagement of developmental evaluation means that we have come to personally know the schools, educators, and their students and have a strong commitment and personal interest in these programs' success. These relationships can increase an evaluation's credibility, use, and effectiveness for driving development and innovation. However, they can also affect the objectivity of more summative reporting. We have tried to address these limitations by carefully processing the available data, choosing wording that reflects the actual words and the frequency of their mention in interviews, using statistical analysis and key covariates where available, by dividing our own team roles into separate writing and critical validation roles, validating results and lessons learned with the Foundation and schools, and by engaging an external reviewer for this work.

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## SPOTLIGHT

# CCA Students and The Loppet Internship at Theodore Wirth Park

For eight 11th and 12th grade students from CCA, 1:00 pm on Wednesdays didn't signal a shift to the next class - it signified a shift to the great outdoors. Gabriel, Juan, Karon, Khristian, Vernon and a few of their peers from CCA participated in an internship through the Loppet Foundation at Minneapolis' Theodore Wirth Park in 2021-2022.



CCA Interns and Ray Aponte (far right) the Loppet Internship Site Supervisor  
[Picture is from Site Supervisor]

Loppet interns shared overwhelmingly positive experiences from their time in the internship. In a student reflection session, three major impact themes emerged. Students benefited from:

- trying new activities like mountain biking, tubing, skiing and snowshoeing (and loving them!),
- building bonds with each other and the site supervisor, and
- gaining leadership skills through organizing events for and teaching other students.

**Building physical, social, and leadership skills while trying new things.** During the Loppet Internship, CCA students gained exposure to new outdoor activities and sporting experiences that helped them develop physical, social, and leadership skills while also forming closer bonds with each other and the internship site supervisor, Ray Aponte.

“The thing with activities that we have at the Loppet, Theodore Wirth, is that they’re not traditional activities for kids of color. So being exposed to that, hopefully, sets them apart.” – *Ray Aponte, Loppet Internship Site Supervisor*

“...there’s just some things that can be learned out in the wild that can’t be learned in Target. You know what I mean? It’s a very unique experience.” – *CCA Internship Coordinator*

“[Some skills that I developed through the internship include] trying new things, working out, building social bonds with someone that is new.” – *CCA Student Intern*

“I’ve developed better social skills by going out and meeting new people and better speaking skills from going out and speaking to large groups of people.” – *CCA Student Intern*

“I am better at working with younger kids and leading activities. We went to an elementary school to teach kids a little basketball. We also went to a middle school and gave high school advice to 8th graders.” – *CCA Student Intern*

“The internship made me realize that everything is not just [about] basketball; I got to do new things there that caught my interest.” – *CCA Student Intern*

“[We] gained leadership skills. When we ran a field trip, I learned how to organize and take charge of events.” – *CCA Student Intern*

**Building bonds and authentic relationships.** Deep relationships with mentors is a central aspect of students feeling a sense of community that allows them to pursue deeper learning about themselves. This was particularly the case for students' relationship with Ray. Ray served not only as an internship site supervisor, but as a mentor and role model for the students. He made it a point to start a typical day at the internship with food and conversation.

“We come in, order food and sit down and talk. Sometimes we'll watch YouTube on the TV while we eat.” – *CCA Student Intern*

“[The] first and foremost [of my goals] is just to really get to know [the interns] as people and try to understand where they're at, what challenges and what barriers they might have, and what aspirations they have, and try to understand those more as a mentor to give advice and have conversations about where we're going or where they could go.” – *Ray Aponte, Loppet Internship Site Supervisor*

“The bonding was [one of] the biggest takeaways [from the internship] ... in this small group of people, I got 10 times closer to [my peers] than I ever would with others at school.” – *CCA Student Intern*

The informal nature of the time Ray spent with the students helped him build authentic relationships with them. Conversations without any agenda are critical for listening to students; they provide them the platform to talk about what is important to them with the response and attention of a caring adult mentor. The students spent some time talking about things unrelated to school and the internship, while at other times, Ray shared about life lessons that deepened their future focus.

“Ray is [the main person] we were with. He made us see that there are a lot of things we can do after high school and was a great role model.” – *CCA Student Intern*

Another example of Ray's flexible, organic approach to structuring the internship experience is that students chose the activities that they did for the day by coming to a group consensus.

“[For our daily activity,] we are doing something different almost every day. Sometimes we go to a school and work with kids, or we ride our bikes somewhere. – *CCA Student Intern*”

**A future focus and the real world.** Through the Loppet Internship, Ray and CCA teacher/staff worked to surround students with a community of support and create a cohort of support among themselves so that they could learn about themselves and their future while acquiring new skills.

Ray described how he talks with students to develop goals and visions for themselves and prods them to plan the support they would need to meet those goals.

*“... every once in a while, I preach about stuff, in particular your hopes and dreams and making sure you have a plan when you leave high school and what's that plan. What's plan B? ... And those conversations I know I had with them in a thoughtful, loving way.”*  
– *Ray Aponte, Loppet Internship Site Supervisor*

Internships have great potential to connect students to mentors and role models who can help drive their vision for themselves forward.

Ray emphasizes the important role internships play in connecting students to mentors and role models, people in their lives, who can help drive their vision for themselves forward; and in creating positive experiences for young people to draw from to make positive choices.

*“Internships are a glimpse, a window, a mirror, or lens, for young people to be able to see what that might look like and what they might want to do ... I just think it's so important, in particular, for Henry [High School] and North [High School] kids to be able to do that because then they also meet [people] ... I talked about nets, and I talked about people in your life that might be able to support you. And if you don't have those nets, you don't have that support if you don't see or experience.”*

*“The more positive experiences that you have growing up, the more positive experiences you're going to have to be able to make. I just see this as a positive experience for them to be able to lean on. So, when they're asked to make a decision later on, it's a positive one. And you can't expect people to make positive choices if they haven't had the opportunity to have positive experiences with positive choices.”*

Ray hopes that what “sticks with them [the students]” is that they continue to find ways to develop perseverance (grit), a network of social support for their future goals, and gain knowledge of self in real world.

*“... their hopes and dreams are super important to me. And so [I say to them] quite a bit: ‘what is it that you're going to do? What's your plan?’ And I'm hoping that they have enough grit to be able to sustain their plan because it's not easy as you know, in particular, for a black male, which predominantly they all are. You just get beat down, you get beat down quite a bit. And then suddenly, you're not following what you planned and then having enough people around you to support that plan is really what I worry [about] most ...”*

## MAKING THE INTERNSHIP WORK

Some characteristics of the Loppet internship program that made it successful in facilitating the growth and development of students included:

- **The cohort-based structure** which supported building relationships/bonds among students. Students kept each other accountable for showing up to the internship. According to Ray, it's important for students to be in a cohort and from the same school/class so that they have the benefit of having known each other before. It helps them develop positive team dynamics, though it can also present some challenges based on pre-existing dynamics among the teens. Ray also noted that, for internships where a student of color may be the only non-white person, having a cohort of other students of color can help them feel more comfortable and not feel like they have to conform to an organization that might be more reflective of white culture.
  - Ms. Rocca, a co-founder of CCA who coordinated the Loppet internship, adds that the cohort structure helps interns be more accountable in attending and participating.
  - *"Those boys are really busy, so I think the cohort, they can hold each other accountable, they could collaborate with one another ... I think, just cheering people on, becoming closer, and holding each other accountable."*
  - Ms. Rocca added that there's a challenge and benefit of interning with a cohort of students.
  - *"The challenge is that you may not push yourself as much because you can rely on others' strengths. The benefit is knowing and leaning on each other's strengths so you can figure out things together, such as, advocating for your needs at the internship site."*
- **Learning-based design of the internship experience.** Ray helped students master new skills by applying an adapted version of the experiential learning framework. He has them learn through the process of *"training, experiencing, and teaching."* He provides training to the interns by bringing in professional skiers, bikers, etc. so they can learn how to do new activities. The interns then experience the skill - they get to ski, bike, tube, etc. The interns then teach the skill to either their CCA peers or younger students. In one case, they taught over 50 of their classmates from CCA how to ski at Theodore Wirth Park.
  - The mentorship of the internship site supervisor. Ray's background as a principal and as a man of color helped him connect with students. Ray's approach of being flexible, responsive, kind and supportive is important as well.
  - *"He knows the education system, he knows students, he knows how to operate with them." – CCA Internship Coordinator*
  - *"A key person at the internship is Ray because he is very friendly and makes sure everyone feels welcome." – CCA Student Intern*
- **Transportation for students.** Transportation can often be a barrier to participating in internships. In this case, a couple of the students had cars and could drive. When needed, Ray was able to pick students up with a van.

## SPOTLIGHT

### MSMB Journaling and Counseling Model

Journaling and counseling were central parts of MSMB. Together, journaling and counseling contributed to building stronger student-teacher understanding and relationships, supporting students' identity and other social emotional development, and connecting students to support. At its most systematic, MSMB journaling took place in all core classes across all grade levels. It happened every one to two weeks with writing cycling between core courses. Journaling was organized by a teacher, counselor, and/or the MSMB coordinator, and students' responses were read and responded to promptly by grade level teams (usually within a week). Journals were always kept in a locked cabinet when students were not actively using them. MSMB allowed Olson to create a comprehensive school-wide counseling program with a counselor integrated into each grade-level team.

These two practices supported one another. Journaling connected students to support provided by counselors and helped counselors to better understand students. Counselors helped lead the journaling process, helped teachers make sense of and respond to student entries, and helped coordinate support for students when journaling surfaced issues that needed attention at Olson or from a professional outside of the building (including mandated reporting or mental health referrals).

#### WHAT TEACHERS SAY ABOUT JOURNALING AND THE COUNSELORS

"Journaling allowed me to set aside curriculum and take time to really get to know my students. Teachers have a million responsibilities in the classroom. Setting aside time specifically for relationship building was beneficial (and really a necessity) in my classroom. Students were able to open up and share things about their lives that I would not have had the chance to get to know if we had not journaled. Students were so excited to get their journals back and read the feedback from their teachers. Students felt heard, and the relationships we built allowed my students to excel with academics in my classroom."

"It's absolutely incredible for building relationships with students and like building relationships with students is the foundation, [it] should be the foundational practice of every educator."

"Teachers just needed that counselor, like stand shoulder to shoulder with them, even in the classroom. Just knowing that the counselors right there, you know, when I start to tread on some of this potentially emotionally difficult or traumatic stuff that kids might share, and that's helped them a lot."

"I cannot overstate how positive it has been for our school to have the counselors, the extra counselors."

"More counselors more counselors ... they're an incredible resource, you know. I mean they can only share so much, like they can't share private data, but students having a place and another trusted adult that they know it is going to be safe is transformative."

## IMPACT

**Stronger teacher-student understanding and relationships.** Journaling gave teachers new and deeper insights into students' lives and served as a foundation for building stronger student-teacher relationships and understanding. Teachers got a window into their students' lives that they did not have before and had an opportunity to connect with students on similarities that they found in student responses. Understanding what was going on in students' lives changed how teachers responded to student behavior. Better understanding students' interests gave many teachers a new way to include student voice in their teaching.

**New levels of support for student mental health and personal development.** The act of journal writing in itself supported student mental health and personal development. Common themes in student writing included family trauma, losing loved ones to COVID-19, goals students had, excitement about things, and student voice about what they wanted to see in school. Writing also connected students to support from the teaching team, counseling support in the form of individual and group counsel sessions, or outside referrals when needed.

Every student knew their counselor and many took advantage of individual and group sessions. Counselors helped teachers design journal prompts, projects, and lessons. Counselors also coached teachers in supporting their students. Students responded positively to the support offered by counselors. Counselors helped teachers learn new skills for supporting students' social emotional learning needs and teachers felt empowered by the support they had from counselors.

I think in the context of the counselors and having that really strong relationship with the counselors, I think that gave teachers a lot of courage because the question is ... if I have kids write in their journal and I start hearing all kinds of stuff, what do I do with it? – *Olson Teacher*

**Journaling can inform teaching and support and be a valuable channel for student voice.**

Some Olson teachers and staff used journal responses to inform SEL lessons and academic planning – “*thinking about how I can embed what students are talking about*”. For example, using a spreadsheet during reading sessions, the team captured student interests and potentially helpful points unique to each student and some teachers used this insight for academic planning. In another example, counselors helped design and deliver classroom lessons around bullying and homophobia, something that came up in journal responses. Counselors also created counseling groups based on themes gleaned from journaling (e.g., a grief/loss group). Journaling was also used to help students reflect at the end of the quarter on what they did well that quarter, what they would like to improve, what grade they wanted, and what they needed to do to reach those goals in the next quarter. This type of reflection helped teachers to follow-up and encourage students and helped teachers inform each other of student goals and to work together to help students achieve them.

“So we understand stressors that are going on in their lives, as well as interests of theirs. Then we can incorporate those interests into our and planning, which then makes academics much more appealing.” – *Olson Teacher*



**Teamwork and support for teaching teams.** The inclusion of a counselor at each grade level and regular collaboration in the classroom and via team meetings and journal reading sessions created a new type of teaching team where everyone at Olson felt like they were in it together to support student needs. Teachers felt like they had support with students and had a new window for understanding their students' needs and responding effectively. When challenges did arise, teachers could refer students to counselors or have help in conversations with students and families.

“So supportive adult teams having the extra counselors is game changing. I cannot stress how incredibly helpful it has [been]... just as a teacher, but also like seeing the impact it has on students having more counselors. I can't imagine having gone through the past couple years without them. Cause I was at Olson for one year before we got the MSMB grant and then after, and it's like, oh my gosh.” – *Olson Teacher*


“I think having extra support staff, because we're not only the kids' counselors, I would argue that we're here for the adults too. And so they also felt like they had somebody who supported them in their work. And I think lastly it was admin support. Right. Like I think everybody really felt supported and cared about.”  
– *Olson Counselor*

**Improved school climate.** At the peak of MSMB, Olson was becoming a calmer school filled with students who were more excited to be at school, and everyone we interviewed pointed to counselors as playing a major role in this transformation.

## KEY LESSONS FOR MAKING JOURNALING AND COUNSELING WORK

### Journaling works best when:

**It is confidential (this is must!!).** Journals should be stored in a secure, locked space when not in use. Contents should not be shared without permission and should be unidentifiable, and there should be sensitivity about topics that should not be shared at all. Confidentiality should be emphasized during training for teachers and journaling kickoffs for students.

<p style="text-align: center;"></p> <p>---</p> <p>Students are sharing their own life experiences and are allowing you to read about them. They are TRUSTING you. Please be sure to <b>keep students' information private</b>.</p> <p>There should be no conversation about students' stories in hallways, and any integration in the curriculum should be anonymous (nobody should be identifiable). Finally, journals should be stored appropriately.</p>	<p><i>Olson training slide about journaling and confidentiality.</i></p>
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## Mandated Reporting

As educators, **we are mandated reporters**. If any of the following information is revealed, it **MUST** be reported to the school counselor, social worker, or administration:

- Student is thinking about or has hurt themself
- Student is thinking about or has hurt someone else
- Student is/has been hurt by someone else

*Training slide about journaling and mandated reporting.*

**It is school-wide, systematic, coordinated, and prioritized by the administration.** MSMB journaling worked best when it happened in every subject. This helped build school-wide buy-in among students and teachers. Good journaling does take time, and someone should coordinate this process, making sure journals are kept in a safe space, setting up times to read journals together, and setting up the slides that were used for weekly journaling prompts (prompt creation should be a shared activity). School leaders should make time for training and journal reading, make sure there are necessary resources like coordinator time and supplies for students to decorate their journals. They should also make sure that other school staff (TOSAs, behavioral deans, and even administrators) can support kids who are journaling.

It has a clear launch that communicates the purpose (the why's) and the process (the how's) to both students and teachers. Students and teachers know why they are journaling. Students have clear expectations about writing sessions (e.g., quiet voices, time spent writing or number of sentences written, their choices including the option not to write). Students know their writing is confidential with the exception of indications of harm (to self or others) and know they do not have to share either in their journals or during any conversations that come later. Teachers are trained and new teachers are looped into the process.

At Olson, the counseling team trained all teachers on the importance of confidentiality and the multi-level referral process at the start of the year. Students were also given the opportunity to decorate their journals, an activity they greatly enjoyed.

### Part of My Story, My Brilliance involves journaling

Journaling gives you the opportunity to write and share what ever is on your mind. Journaling is theraputic--it helps us work through good and hard thing in our lives. It helps us grow. The purpose of our journaling is to help you get to know yourself better, and to help you reach your goals.

You can't do anything wrong when journaling--you just write whatever is on your mind on a topic.

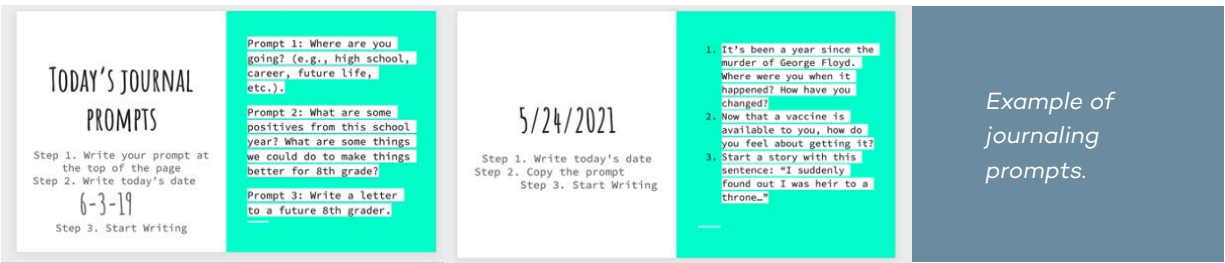


### A few things you should know about journaling:

1. You will get a notebook you will do all of your journaling in.
2. Journaling is personal, and the only people looking at your writing will be your teachers and yourself.
3. If you write about things that explain you are in danger your teachers have to reach out for additional help.
4. Your journals will stay in school.
5. You will be given the opportunity to share what your wrote about with your classmates, but you dont have to share.

*Student introduction to the journaling process.*

**Prompts are thoughtful and time/event relevant and offer students choice (including the option not to write).** Early on, some students will choose not to write. Giving the option of not writing or drawing instead of writing can help bring these students along. Teachers and counselors can also help scaffold student writing and build strong relationships with students by sharing their own responses to the prompts. At Olson, students were always given multiple prompts to choose to write to and the option to free-write or draw. Prompt options were responsive to school, community, and global incidents and events, designed around the core MSMB questions, and sometimes tied into the curriculum or current school projects.



**Teachers & counselor teams read, tag, and respond to student writing together.** This gives teachers the opportunity to identify common themes and to workshop around student needs and concerns with counselors and with each other.

“We’ve been lucky that we’ve had team time and we’re able to connect with each other. ... We can sit and we can look at these journals and talk about students together in a room as we’re reading them in real time. And just that connectedness that we got from that and the feeling of support with each other as well ... it was just really, really nice.” – *Olson Teacher*




**Students get timely, thoughtful feedback and are connected to services as needed.** Effective feedback was not evaluative and connected with students about their interests and common ground. At Olson, counselors coached teachers on how to give effective feedback. Students usually received feedback within a week. Using a spreadsheet, the teams used a tagging system for journal writing follow-up: 1) needing counselor follow-up, 2) keep an eye on student, and 3) student is showing IB characteristics. When journals could not be read right away, they were scanned to identify any concerns that needed immediate attention.

“Writing back and sharing common ground things that they had also experienced and students being able to read that and understand like, shoot, my teacher went through this too.” – *Olson Teacher/TOSA*

“If you write it [your feelings] down, they give you feedback and try to comfort you.” – *Olson Student*

“That [feedback] started that positive loop of the kids would want to share more because something came out of it.” – *Olson Teacher*

### Journal Tags

-  Immediate attention: may fall under mandated reporting
  - Threatening to hurt themselves, someone else, or are being harmed
-  Counselor\* follow-up: not detrimental to student’s wellbeing
  - Conflict mediation, academic, social/emotional concerns
-  Shows IB character traits and should be considered for student leadership opportunities.

*Example journal tags for tracking student journaling.*

**Learning and insights from student journals inform teaching or school practices.** Journaling can inform teaching and school practices and be a valuable channel for student voice. For example, Olson teachers and staff have started to do this through tracking student interests and using them for academic planning and by using insights from journaling to inform SEL and mental health lesson planning and interventions (e.g., group counseling and classroom lessons).

### Counseling works best when:

**There are enough counselors to keep student:counselor ratios low and to allow counselors to engage in counseling, collaboration (with one another and teachers), and leadership.** This work is only possible when there are enough counselors and the majority of the counselors' time is spent working directly with or indirectly for students. The American School Counseling Association recommends that schools maintain a ratio of 250 students per school counselor, and that school counselors spend at least 80 percent of their time working directly with or indirectly for students. At Olson during MSMB, each counselor served approximately 200 students versus the typical district average of approximately 500 students for each counselor. Combined with a commitment from the school principal, this allowed counselors to focus on *“personal, social, academic and career development”* instead of non-counseling tasks like adjusting the schedule or substituting for teachers. It also allowed them to focus on lots of individual and small group counseling. Counselors also had time to interact with teachers and students daily, serve in leadership roles (on the EET and ILT teams), leverage data to identify individual student's needs, and connect with families. Students knew who their counselors were and counselors began to “loop” (move through the grades) with their students so that these relationships would continue through a student's time at Olson.

“All three of us almost knew every single kid in the building for a little bit there before the pandemic.” – *Olson Counselor*

“I know a lot of friends in the district who are counselors, you know, they're in charge of scheduling, master schedule you know, running 504s, like doing 504s for the entire school, like all these different things, which yes, they're important and somebody needs to do them. But if that's solely on our plates, we're not able to focus on relationship building and figuring out what the students actually need.” – *Olson Counselor*

“So I feel like our role here at Olson is like what the American School Counselor Association says our role should be. Right. I also think that it helps us to help our staff too. Because not only do we get to know these things about the kids ... Like the teachers have the opportunity to build these relationships too. Like they know the kids better than we do.” – *Olson Counselor*

**Counselors are integrated with teaching teams and are in classrooms.** School-wide culture and climate change are maximized when counselors are physically going into classrooms to co-teach and connect with students and staff. Counselors support teachers in gaining perspective on student behavior and their social emotional needs. Counselors can also support teaching by helping to guide SEL and advisory. At Olson, counselors had time to connect with teachers school-wide and work on individual student needs. In MSMB, counselors were an integral part of

teacher teams, regularly attending team meetings in addition to being present on all journaling days and journal reading sessions. Counselors collaborated with teachers on journals and in responding to broader themes and needs of the school by helping with lesson development around SEL (e.g., lessons around bullying and homophobia, needs that emerged from student journaling). They also went into classes to co-teach and connect with students. Counselors facilitated student-teacher and family-teacher meetings and provided informal emotional support to teachers.

“The teachers were able to get a lot more support in the classroom ... I think having a second adult in the classroom is very important but especially having an adult who is very familiar with mental health concerns and how that might affect the academics of the student and that made it a very positive experience for our teachers and students.” – *Olson Counselor*

**There is support and funding from school, and preferably district, leadership.** The value and role of counselors is often not understood at either the district- or building- level. Demonstrating the value and need for counselors is critical to implementing expanded and transformative counseling that breaks down traditional silos. This work also requires funding. Philanthropy can provide a start, but ultimately there needs to be sustainable public funding.

**Teachers, students, and parents are bought-in and there is a schoolwide commitment to positive climate and training in concrete classroom strategies for SEL.** Counseling engagement works best when there is a clear understanding of the counseling role among students, teachers, school staff, and parents/families. Counselors cannot do this work alone, so there should also be schoolwide commitment and training in building a positive climate including concrete strategies that can be used in classrooms.

**There is time and space for this work.** Counselors and teachers need time for this work, to collaborate, to connect on students’ needs, and to plan. Counselors need space for confidential conversations. Counselors need to be freed up from some of the administrative, non-counseling tasks that often fall to them.