

# Ideas in Action

## Innovative practices and strategies to take beyond the COVID era



### Building student and family relationships with Navigator

When the COVID-19 pandemic required schools to move to virtual learning nearly overnight, MNPS leaders were concerned about maintaining relationships between students, their families, and schools and ensuring students' and families' needs were being met. To address these concerns, MNPS launched Navigator, an initiative to help grow relationships between students and MNPS staff that also helps ensure students and families get the resources they need. **Each student in every school is assigned a teacher or other staff member as their personal Navigator, who regularly checks in on the student and their family.** While the program plays out differently across schools (such as an online survey, weekly one-on-one time, or regular phone calls home) and across tiers (a preschooler and a high school student need different interactions from their Navigators), the benefit is consistent: Navigator helps schools maintain the connections necessary to help students thrive.

**“ We have seen an increase in requests for services, but also in our ability to provide a quick turnaround to meet families' needs. - Hillwood High School Assistant Principal ”**

MNPS created scripts to guide Navigator conversations and an online dashboard that houses Navigator check-in data, helping to speed up the process of referring a family to what they need. This allows schools to effectively and efficiently connect families with resources such as a counselor, social worker, food, or housing assistance. Education Resource Strategies reports that **5,600 MNPS teacher and staff Navigators have made 180,000 check-ins to nearly 83,000 students and families, resulting in 1,500 referrals to necessary services in the Fall 2020 semester alone.**



### A judgment-free space

*As part of Hillwood High School's Navigator weekly check-ins, Hillwood sent home a weekly survey, asking families what resources they need. However, staff soon realized that many students, rather than their parents or guardians, were filling out the survey.*

*As a result, Hillwood adjusted the Navigator survey to be more high-schooler friendly – still asking about needed supports, but also about students' social and emotional well-being. After making this shift, Hillwood saw a 30% increase in requests for food.*

*Hillwood found that Navigator provided a safe, judgment-free space for students to ask for help. As high-schoolers, they were aware of what their family needed, but also felt seen by the survey questions and the responses they elicited from school staff.*

*Hillwood found that students felt even more comfortable using the Navigator online survey than requesting help in-person, providing a private and reliable check-point, avoiding potential embarrassment students can feel from asking for help in front of peers.*



# Building school culture through authentic relationships

NPEF created the Thriving Schools Framework to shine a light on the conditions that must be present in schools for students to thrive. The framework is centered around the academic achievement and growth we want for students, but also how they develop agency—we want them to be inspired and motivated, to be socially and civically engaged, and to be happy and confident learners.

One of the framework's six conditions is an inclusive and supportive school culture, which is one that welcomes and supports students and families from all backgrounds and learning styles and is reflected in equitable access to opportunities and experiences.

Navigator has provided schools with the tools to continue building a school culture that makes students and families feel heard and welcome, and in some cases, family involvement and student-teacher relationships have improved beyond what they were pre-COVID. **Inglewood Elementary saw their Panorama teacher survey data go up 18% in the family relationships category this year—a huge increase—and Inglewood's principal credits this largely to Navigator.** While Navigator itself is a structured program, the quality time spent between students and teachers can remain spontaneous, authentic, and fun. "I like that she asks me how my day was, and what I've been learning. We'll just talk about anything," says a 3rd grader at Inglewood Elementary, sharing that his Navigator "makes me more happy to be in school."

**The structure of Navigator allowed us to mirror the strong relationships we already had before COVID-19 in a virtual setting.**

- Inglewood Elementary  
School Principal

## A continued investment

While Navigator received push-back from some educators at first—adding another responsibility to their overflowing plate—the support from the district's central office has made the transition more seamless.

By providing scripts and suggested activities, the district is helping teachers implement the initiative without too much added preparation. **In many cases, it has become just a more formalized version of what many schools were already committed to pre-pandemic.** The fact that the district also culls the data from completed check-ins helps schools speed up the referral process for getting the student or family what they need, increasing the capacity of schools and helping build trust with students and families.

Schools that have provided built-in time for Navigator activities have seen additional success with educator buy-in. Inglewood principal Ashley Croft says this was a big

commitment she made to her teachers when introducing Navigator, scheduling in specific time for the program that did not interfere with their existing prep periods, but still providing flexibility on when and how they met with students.

**Navigator is part of MNPS's "Every Student Known" strategy, which prioritizes meeting the individual learning and social-emotional needs of each student.**

As students and staff return to in-person learning, Navigator's infrastructure for intentional family communication and student-teacher relationship-building are still proving beneficial, especially as some students and educators continue to remain remote. The district has shown a clear commitment to Navigator, and more and more schools are beginning to customize the program to meet the unique needs of their students and families, showing that the benefits are likely to grow with a continued investment.

To learn more about NPEF and the Thriving Schools Framework, visit [www.nashvillepef.org](http://www.nashvillepef.org)