



“Every Student Known”:

Building Systems of Support Through Nashville’s Navigator Initiative

MAY 2023 By Michelle Sedaca

NAVIGATOR

Connecting each student to a path of success



“Every Student Known” has become the mantra of the Metro [Nashville Public Schools](#) (Metro Nashville), which pair students with a caring adult, called a Navigator, to ensure students feels known, cared for, respected, and supported. This commitment across the entire district originated as a response to Covid disruptions, but it has become a philosophy underpinning a personalized, relationship-based strategy—what [The EdRedesign Lab](#) (EdRedesign) calls [Success Planning](#)—for

meeting students’ needs. In the 2021-22 school year (the latest complete school year for which data is available), 5,600 Navigators regularly met with 61,000 Metro Nashville students. This overview distills lessons from EdRedesign’s full case study on Metro Nashville’s experience in order to inform other school and community leaders interested in adopting personalized, relationship-based strategies to support children and youth.

METRO NASHVILLE IN THE 2021-22 SCHOOL YEAR

Number of students paired with a Navigator

61,000

Number of Navigators

5,600

Number of check-ins

700,000

Number of referrals to student support staff

2,400



Navigator In Action: What Is It and How Does It Work?

Responding to the strong felt need to reconnect with students and meet them where they were, Metro Nashville leaders made two pivotal decisions during the planning phase: that Navigator would seek to serve all students rather than just a subset, and that any school personnel could serve, with training, as a Navigator. The district also devised key roles to support the Navigators, including Navigator Leads and Navigator school leadership teams.

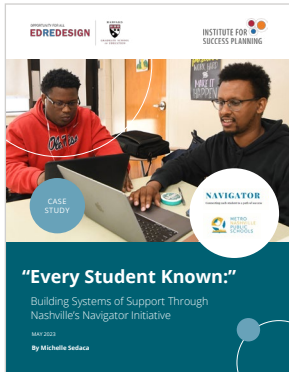
Navigators can be teachers, front office staff, or cafeteria workers, among others. They are responsible for nurturing trusting rapport with students through monthly check-in meetings, which are held during personalized learning time or advisory periods. Through these conversations, Navigators identify students’ needs, strengths, and interests, and facilitate their access to school-based and external community-based resources, activities, and other opportunities through a process called collaborative referrals. Navigators record information from the check-in meetings using Microsoft forms, which are linked to the district’s student information system. On a weekly basis, youth use a student-facing app called Sown to Grow, which enables them to reflect on their goals and needs and communicate them in student-led conferences during check-ins with their Navigators. Currently, there are approximately 12 students per Navigator at the elementary level and 15 students per Navigator at the middle school and high school levels.

Navigator leadership teams monitor school-level data and trends as well as link students to services and resources. Navigator Leads are school-based staff who offer direct support and guidance to Navigators.

Currently, Metro Nashville provides Navigator training as part of the district’s fall in-service opportunity and convenes Navigator Leads for a monthly meeting. Schools offer their own training related to the Navigator initiative at the beginning of each school year, reviewing roles and responsibilities and covering any related changes. An important focus of this training is on relationship building. Throughout the year, Navigator Leads and school leadership teams assist Navigators as necessary, while the district provides targeted support to individual schools and their student support teams depending on their needs.

Navigator’s Early Progress

Metro Nashville’s Navigator initiative has made impressive progress in record time. During the 2021- 2022 academic year, the second year of implementation, Navigators conducted over 700,000 check-ins with students, discussing their strengths, interests, and needs and facilitating their access to essential supports and services.¹ In addition, 61,000 students regularly utilized the Sown to Grow platform to reflect on their feelings and experiences.² These weekly reflections yielded nearly 2,400 alerts, which were responded to by student support staff.³

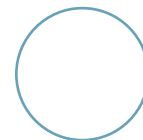


To learn more about Metro Nashville’s Navigator initiative, view the full case study [here](#).

Key Lessons for Successful Implementation

Local leaders in Nashville identified several lessons for successful adoption of a personalized student support initiative. These include the following:

- *Identify a Collective Felt Need, Connect to the Vision, and Coalesce Leaders at All Levels:* Those seeking to launch a new effort should bring leaders at all levels into the fold in order to ensure collective support, making sure to connect to a broader vision and providing the support and accountability to fulfill the commitment made to students and families.
- *Build on Existing Elements and Develop Over Time:* Leaders can take an inventory of existing elements and assets and build on what they already have. To improve the effort over time, collecting feedback and recommendations from those who are directly involved in the initiative is key.
- *Establish Non-Negotiables with Freedom to Innovate:* According to Metro Nashville leaders, the right mix of non-negotiables and flexibility helps ensure that the initiative isn’t top down but is instead owned by each school.
- *Start with the Data System You Have and Improve it When You Can:* District, school, and community leaders can maximize current data tools for student support initiatives and then gradually customize depending on their needs.
- *Align Resources through Strategic Partnerships:* Those interested in administering student support initiatives should identify viable partners that offer a breadth of quality services, activities, and programming that can meet children’s and families’ needs.
- *Prioritize Funding and Investment for Personalized Student Support:* Many district, school, and community leaders are leveraging pandemic relief funding for student support initiatives. Simultaneously, it’s important to identify diverse funding sources and prioritize personalized supports in the budget to ensure that they are sustainable beyond individual grants.



©2023 The President and Fellows of Harvard College

Photo credit: Select photos courtesy of Metro Nashville Public Schools. Stock images licensed from Adobe.

Endnotes

- 1 Sown to Grow, MNPS End of Year Summary, June 2022, internal document.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.