



CASE  
STUDY

**NAVIGATOR**

Connecting each student to a path of success

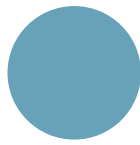


# “Every Student Known”:

Building Systems of Support Through  
Nashville’s Navigator Initiative

MAY 2023

By Michelle Sedaca



"Every Student Known" is not just a feel-good phrase on a t-shirt—though it is that too—in the Metro Nashville Public Schools (Metro Nashville).



#### 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**

Rather, it embodies the commitment of the entire district to ensure that every student feels known, cared for, respected, and supported. This philosophy served as a springboard for designing a personalized, relationship-based strategy—what The EdRedesign Lab (EdRedesign) calls Success Planning—during a particularly tumultuous period in 2020 when the district confronted multiple crises. It has since become an essential district-wide approach designed to pair every student with a caring adult, called a Navigator. 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.

In early March of 2020, powerful tornados in Nashville displaced students and families from their homes and damaged school buildings, while the Covid-19 pandemic swept across the nation shortly afterwards. In response, the district pivoted to remote learning, like countless districts across the

country. Students logged onto Microsoft Teams for class, some engaged and others not. Far too many children and youth were absent altogether. Metro Nashville decided to continue remote schooling in the fall of 2020 due to the ongoing pandemic.

As the 2020-21 school year began, district leaders were concerned that students had been disconnected from school—in many cases, since the previous March—and worried about the adverse impact of the pandemic in their lives. "I realized that we had to have a way to know what kids were going through and what they needed. And not just for the sake of learning, but for the sake of surviving," said Dr. Adrienne Battle, the district's director of schools. "Our Navigator initiative grew out of a felt need. Parents, educators, community members—everyone was concerned about our students. The answer was Navigator—a way to touch base with our students and make sure we were meeting students where they were," Dr. Battle explained.



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Dr. Adrienne Battle,  
Director of Schools,  
Metro Nashville  
Public Schools

While the global pandemic offered the impetus for Metro Nashville to start the Navigator initiative, the district had already been championing its “Every Student Known” vision through a personalized, whole-child approach. District leaders consider Navigator integral to this overarching vision. “We found that we need Navigator no matter what space we’re in. It is here to stay for the foreseeable future,” Dr. Battle affirmed.

One of the architects of the initiative was Dr. Keri Randolph, then the executive officer of strategic investments for Metro Nashville, who brought the concept of Navigator to the district based on an idea she had learned about during her work at EdRedesign while in her doctoral program. “The felt need was there for kids, parents, nonprofits, and our educators. It was that felt need that we were able to leapfrog into that moment,” Randolph said, reflecting on the launch of the Navigator initiative.

After a short, intensive planning period, district leaders introduced the initiative in the fall of 2020, assigning educators and school staff in a wide range of positions to serve as Navigators to all students. Metro Nashville’s approach of starting with what they already had in order to launch the initiative and building additional elements over time is a key feature of its successful implementation. Leaders didn’t wait until every component was ready for prime time. Rather, they moved forward with what they had in order to address the urgency of the moment and the strong felt need for greater connection to students.

The case draws on interviews with district and school leaders and staff, students and families, and organizational partners.

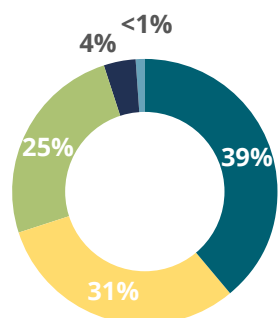
This case study distills lessons from Metro Nashville’s experience in order to inform other school and community leaders interested in adopting personalized, relationship-based strategies. The case:

- ✓ Provides an overview of the district and related programs and initiatives supporting children, youth, and families;
- ✓ Chronicles the inception and evolution of the Navigator initiative, as well as highlights its progress to date; and
- ✓ Highlights key lessons identified by district leaders to enable successful implementation.





## METRO NASHVILLE PUBLIC SCHOOLS STUDENT POPULATION



- African American
- Hispanic
- White
- Asian
- Hawaiian Pacific Islander and Native American

**~35%**

of Metro Nashville students are economically disadvantaged

**27%**

are English-language learners

**12%**

are students with disabilities

## Metro Nashville Public Schools: District Overview

Metro Nashville comprises over 150 schools that serve more than 80,000 students, making it one of the largest districts in the country.<sup>1</sup> The district has a diverse student population, which is approximately 39 percent African American, 31 percent Hispanic, 25 percent white, 4 percent Asian, and less than 1 percent Hawaiian Pacific Islander and Native American.<sup>2</sup> About 35 percent of Metro Nashville students are economically disadvantaged (Tennessee uses a more restrictive definition than the traditional method of identifying students living in poverty based on free- and reduced-price lunch, indicating that the 35% figure may understate the percent of low-income students), 27 percent are English-language learners, and 12 percent are students with disabilities.<sup>3</sup>

Complementing the Navigator initiative, the district oversees several other programs aligned with its "Every Student Known" vision. These include Community Achieves, which partners with community-based organizations to refer students and families to a host of resources and enrichment opportunities; Family Resource Centers, which provide various supports to families, such as GED classes, English-language classes, and counseling; the H.E.R.O. program, which assists families experiencing housing instability; and Communities In Schools, a wraparound student support model, among others. Metro Nashville also offers a free high-dosage tutoring program called Accelerating Scholars and a free summer learning program called Promising Scholars. Recently, the

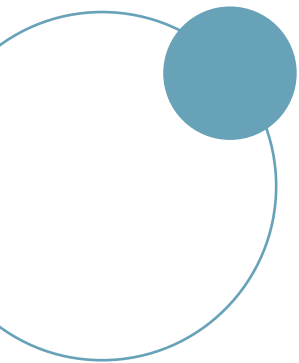
district introduced transition plans to support students progressing from elementary school to middle school, middle school to high school, and high school to postsecondary.

In addition to these district initiatives, Metro Nashville is a member of EdRedesign's Success Planning Community of Practice, a national cohort of communities developing personalized approaches that seek to prepare all children to grow, learn, and thrive. Through this cohort, local communities have an opportunity to learn from leaders in the field, cross-pollinate ideas, exchange resources, and engage with other practitioners. EdRedesign hosts monthly webinars and in-person workshops to support the Community of Practice, as well as offers individualized coaching and tools and resources.



"Navigator is for every student, not just the ones we think need it."

Dr. Adrienne Battle,  
Director of Schools,  
Metro Nashville  
Public Schools



**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.

## The Navigator Initiative: Launching with the Urgency of Now and Adapting Over Time

### *Determining the Scope and Defining Roles*

During the initial planning phase, Metro Nashville leaders made a pivotal decision about the student population that Navigator would serve. "Navigator is for every student, not just the ones we think need it," said Dr. Battle, emphasizing the initiative's universal approach. The district also devised key roles to operationalize the effort, including Navigators, Navigator Leads, and Navigator school leadership teams.

Early on, the district enlisted a wide range of school-based personnel to serve as Navigators, focusing on any staff who could cultivate a strong relationship with students. As such, Navigators can be teachers, front office staff, or cafeteria workers, among others. At the elementary level, Metro Nashville encouraged schools not to assign the student's classroom teacher as Navigator but rather a teacher or other school person who isn't responsible for evaluating the child's performance. "For you to be a Navigator, you really just have to care about kids," said Dr. Michelle Springer, who serves as the district's chief of student support services..

Navigators aren't expected to provide students with specialized supports such as counseling. Rather, they are responsible for nurturing trusting rapport with students through regular check-in meetings. 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. In most cases, Navigators aren't school counselors, school psychologists, or social workers because those staff are already delivering services to students who are referred to them, as well as often serving on the Navigator school leadership team.

Schools are responsible for selecting Navigators and assigning cohorts of students to each Navigator. Metro Nashville recommends that schools form small cohorts to provide a manageable workload for Navigators and to facilitate the development of strong relationships. 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. Metro Nashville also encourages schools to pair Navigators with students they already know to build on existing bonds. These assignments are intended to continue as students move on to new grade levels within the school, providing continuity as youth grow and progress over time.

During the 2020-2021 school year, which marked the first year of the initiative, all students attended school remotely for the first half of the year and then could choose whether to continue remotely or attend in person during the second half of the year. For those participating in remote learning, Navigators conducted virtual weekly check-ins with students during the school day or after school. In-person students had check-ins during the school day, often during personalized learning time, or outside of the school day via phone or video conference. Check-in meetings

By the end of the 2020–2021 academic year, Metro Nashville had conducted more than 360,000 check-ins and made nearly 3,000 collaborative referrals to match students with an array of essential services.

were initially held weekly and later transitioned to biweekly.

During check-ins, Navigators used optional scripts created by the district (detailed information regarding onboarding and training is described in a later section). These scripts assisted Navigators with addressing a wide range of needs and collecting actionable data related to technology access and virtual learning conditions, as well as basic needs that may have been exacerbated by the pandemic, including food security and housing stability. In addition, Navigators aimed to support students’ academics, social and emotional wellbeing, and enrichment.

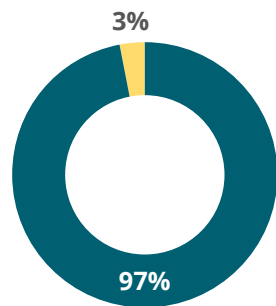
By the end of that academic year, Metro Nashville had conducted more than 360,000 check-ins and made nearly 3,000 collaborative referrals to match students with an array of essential services.<sup>4</sup> The Navigator initiative was starting to make a difference for both students and teachers alike (while multiple types of personnel serve as Navigators, the majority are teachers). According to district school climate survey data from the first year, students perceived an increased sense of belonging and stronger relationships with their teachers, while teachers indicated greater connections to families.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the Navigator function, Metro Nashville identified other key roles necessary for the initiative’s success. These include Navigator leadership teams and Navigator Leads at each school. Comprised of school administrators, social workers, and counselors, Navigator leadership teams were established to monitor school-level data and trends as well as to link students to services and resources. Members from this team participate in multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) meetings, which include teachers, counselors and social workers, and administrators, who routinely review student needs that have been submitted by Navigators through the collaborative referral process. During MTSS meetings, staff are assigned to address these needs, which are categorized according to different tiers. Tiers 2 and 3 require a greater level of support, while Tier 1 involves universal prevention for all students, including high-quality instruction and social-emotional learning. Navigator Leads are school-based staff who offer direct support and guidance to Navigators. They help to coordinate and support Navigators through coaching, assessing student needs, and assisting with referring youth to services.



**To systematically track student needs and referrals, Metro Nashville initially decided to use existing technology and created Microsoft forms that Navigators would complete to capture this information.** Metro Nashville built district- and school-level Power BI dashboards, which displayed data from the Microsoft forms. This allowed the district to monitor needs at specific schools as well as broader trends, while individual schools could assess needs within their own schools. The district also created a dashboard with a geo-coded heat map for community superintendents that enabled them to identify neighborhoods with higher levels of need.

#### NAVIGATOR PARTICIPATION IN THE FIRST YEAR



- Families participating in Navigator
- Families opting out

#### *Connecting to the Why and Aligning with Existing Initiatives*

Asking teachers and school personnel to take on additional responsibilities during the pandemic and widespread staff shortages was daunting. Nevertheless, the strong felt need among educators and school staff who were eager to connect with students and families to bridge the isolation caused by remote learning helped to drive strong support for the initiative, as did one-on-one conversations with individual schools. As part of these discussions, Metro Nashville articulated how Navigator aligned with the district's vision of "Every Student Known" and existing student support initiatives, such as the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) mentioned above and other complementary initiatives, including Communities In Schools and Community Achieves. "Everything feeds through the Navigator initiative. We have a pretty comprehensive package of support for each school, and Navigator is the throughline to that support," described Dr. Springer.

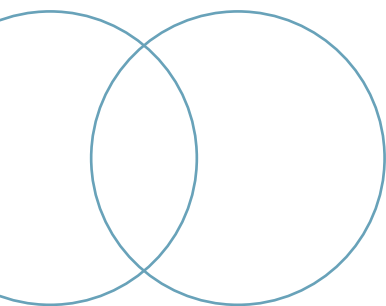
By consistently evoking this throughline, district leaders fostered a shared mindset across schools. As Executive Principal of McMurray Middle School Dr. T-Shaka Coverson powerfully expressed, "The Navigator initiative has proven to be a transformative force within our middle school community. Through its comprehensive approach, it has cultivated a nurturing environment where students not only thrive academically but also develop vital social and emotional skills."

#### *Communicating the Navigator Initiative's Value*

Metro Nashville leaders were also intentional about communicating the

value of the initiative to the Metropolitan Nashville Education Association, which is the local teachers' union, and the Metropolitan Nashville Board of Education. According to Randolph, key moments during the early days of implementation were instrumental in fostering support for the effort. Director's Teacher Cabinet, a teacher shared how the initiative was helping her reconnect with students after being apart during the pandemic. In another instance, during a district presentation on the Navigator initiative to the Board of Education, a school board member who is also a parent described how the effort is "a lifesaver" for her daughter.

District leaders maintain ongoing contact and communication with the Metropolitan Nashville Education Association and the Metropolitan Nashville Board of Education. Although the Metropolitan Nashville Education Association lacks collective bargaining rights, the union is still influential in the district, according to Dr. Battle. Metro Nashville regularly meets with the union to identify what's working well and what's not in schools across the district. Metro Nashville also informs and updates the Metropolitan Nashville Board of Education about its initiatives, including Navigator and its impact on students. By "constantly reinforcing our why," Metro Nashville has successfully garnered support for the Navigator initiative, according to Dr. Battle. The district's ability to clearly convey how the initiative could benefit every student ultimately led the overwhelming majority of families to participate in Navigator in the first year with only 3 percent opting out.<sup>6</sup>



An important focus of Navigator training is on relationship building.

"We talk from day one about how Navigators develop these relationships [with students]. Having those conversations is a lot easier if they've built a relationship."

Dr. Celia Jolly,  
Academy Principal  
of ADC/Engineering  
Academy at Hillside  
High School and  
Navigator Lead

### Creating Training Materials and Scaffolding

Given the urgency to introduce Navigator in the fall of 2020, Metro Nashville leaders quickly created onboarding and training materials designed to give Navigators across the district concrete, easily accessible support for their new roles. District leaders produced video tutorials and a comprehensive handbook that outlines expectations for how schools should implement the initiative and offers guidance on the process. The handbook features scripts, which are available in multiple languages, to assist Navigators in conversations with students and families. Questions may include: *What's something you're looking forward to this year? What are some things you like to do outside of school? What's one thing you wish you had help with right now?* The handbook also contains a list of resources such as translation services and crisis service providers, among others. In addition, the handbook links to information related to submitting collaborative referrals for external supports (Navigators complete the form and support the referral process), as well as a Community Resource Guide covering a range of available services and programs. Finally, the handbook includes tips for families to support their children's learning based on age group.

Complementing these resources, Metro Nashville delivered district-wide trainings on the Navigator initiative. In order to offer differentiated support to schools and promote accountability, the district required that each school submit an implementation plan at the start of the school year. The district reviewed each school's plan and provided targeted support as needed. As an example, if a school indicated that they had only two

Navigators, the district could step in to help the school identify how to increase the number of Navigators to reduce caseloads. Or, if housing security was identified as a challenge at a school, district leadership could deploy its Homeless Education Resource Office (HERO) to offer direct services.

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. "We talk from day one about how Navigators develop these relationships [with students]. Having those conversations is a lot easier if they've built a relationship," described Dr. Celia Jolly who is the academy principal of ADC/Engineering Academy at Hillside High School and serves as Navigator Lead. 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.

In addition to participating in Navigator-related professional development, staff are required to complete training related to protecting student data and maintaining confidentiality. According to Dr. Springer, the training prepares staff to effectively utilize data to link students to wraparound supports and instructs them on how to keep the information confidential and share only with the appropriate personnel.





### *Strengthening Navigator by Amplifying Student Voice and Agency*

After the first year of implementation, Metro Nashville leaders identified clear areas for improvement and deepening of their Navigator initiative. Rather than Navigators always taking the lead and directing conversations with students, schools wanted to empower youth to reflect on their goals and needs and be able to communicate them during check-in meetings with their Navigators. In addition, district leaders heard concerns from schools regarding the check-in meeting cadence and Navigator workload. Metro Nashville leaders identified these issues based on feedback collected through multiple channels, such as office hours with school teams, executive director (principal supervisors) discussions around a school’s Navigator data, and input from administrators during monthly principal meetings.

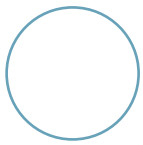
Metro Nashville was already utilizing a student-facing app called Sown to Grow in one school that focused on social-emotional and academic health. Based on the positive response, the district decided to adopt Sown to Grow district wide during the 2021-2022 school year. According to Rupa Gupta, Sown to Grow’s cofounder and CEO, the platform seeks to “engage students, be easy for teachers [to use], and build a scalable system in the school.” When students log onto the platform, they are prompted to choose an emoji to describe how they’re feeling and can share reflections in an open-ended field. Then teachers log onto the tool to review students’ reflections and provide feedback, which young people can view when they log in. Teachers can type their own comments or utilize AI-generated

responses that Sown to Grow produced in collaboration with social workers. Costs for the tool vary with both school- and district-based pricing available.

While implementation was districtwide, school leaders decided how they wanted to incorporate the Sown to Grow tool into their weekly schedules. Some chose to integrate Sown to Grow during advisory period, while others embedded it into morning meeting or personalized learning time. Students were then assigned to cohorts in Infinite Campus, the district’s student information system, and used the app during the designated time slot that schools had selected.

Sown to Grow student data is stored solely in the app and doesn’t link to Infinite Campus. Since Sown to Grow is a student-facing tool, access to student data is limited to the student, the teacher that the student is assigned to for the weekly Sown to Grow check-ins (their personalized learning time, homeroom, or advisory teacher), principal, and select members of the Navigator school leadership team.

While Navigators do not themselves have direct access to the Sown to Grow student data, the intention is for the students’ use of Sown to Grow to feed into the Navigator check-in meetings. To this end, district leaders jointly developed with Gupta’s and colleagues’ guidance a student-led conference system in which youth are encouraged to share and discuss their Sown to Grow reflections with their Navigators. In this way, students are empowered to communicate their candid thoughts, feelings, and ideas with their Navigators, with the goal that this will lead to deeper, more impactful discussions. If a student discloses any



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Rupa Gupta,  
Cofounder and CEO,  
Sown to Grow

alarming information, whether in their Sown to Grow data or in their Navigator check-in meetings, the school personnel will follow the collaborative referral process described earlier, in which they complete a form that is reviewed by student support services staff who refer the student to the appropriate services. In addition, school leadership team members monitor Sown to Grow data and can respond to any flagged issues.

By using Sown to Grow, Metro Nashville was able to adapt the Navigator check-in cadence. Since students now had a regular touch point with school staff on a weekly basis, the district shifted the expectation for the existing Navigator check-in meetings. Instead of meeting weekly, Navigator check-ins would now occur monthly, resulting in a lighter workload for Navigators. Navigators record check-in meetings using Infinite Campus.

While families can choose to opt out of the Navigator initiative at the beginning of the school year, students are required to participate in the weekly Sown to Grow check-ins since this tool is considered instructional technology used by students during the school day. According to Rebecca Wolfe, who wears multiple hats including school social worker, Navigator Lead, and Co-Navigator at Antioch Middle School, the Sown to Grow tool allows staff to address issues in real time, while Navigator monthly check-ins provide a space for holistic conversation with a student about their life. "I think the system we have in place is really beneficial for identifying needs and building relationships," Wolfe said. "They're not empty check-ins. We're doing this for a purpose."

Since students view and access their own data, they can observe trends over time. "Learning can be elevated when students can see their own trajectories and trends over time and draw connections," Gupta said. "That's where they start to learn, 'What strategies work for me?'" This feature of Sown to Grow, along with the student-led conference model, has enabled Metro Nashville to more purposefully center students' own experiences and perspectives in the Navigator initiative as well as enhance their self-reflection and goal-setting skills and build trust. Amplifying student voice and agency is an important feature of the Navigator initiative.

#### *Iterating and Improving with Additional Navigator Features*

Now in the third year of Navigator, Metro Nashville leaders continue to hone the initiative. The district streamlined its data platform by linking the Microsoft forms completed by Navigators to Infinite Campus, the district's student information system. Infinite Campus interfaces with another districtwide system called Data Warehouse, which houses students' grades, attendance, and behavior-related information. In this way, the Navigator-related data is readily accessible and stored in one place. The district also sought to more actively involve families and designed a personalized data dashboard using its existing student information system, which allows caregivers to view their children's academic, social-emotional, attendance, and behavioral data as well as any services they may be receiving. According to Dr. Springer, the dashboard enables "families to make informed decisions about their children's needs."

Personalized, relationship-based approaches can help students acquire what researchers refer to as social capital, connecting them to opportunities and activities where they can gain valuable skills and expand their networks.



In addition to improving its data platform capabilities, Metro Nashville is augmenting the initiative to include transition plans as an important component. When Navigators conduct monthly check-ins with students, they are expected to jointly create a plan with each student in order to set academic and other goals for students in the transition years. These plans are entered into Infinite Campus. Finally, another district focus during the 2022-2023 academic year involves further differentiating professional development through creating tiers based on each school’s level of implementation. Some schools may need overall guidance, while others may seek deeper and/or targeted support in a specific area.

### **Navigator’s Early Progress: Broad Reach, Candid Reflections**

Metro Nashville’s Navigator initiative has made impressive progress in record time. During the 2021-2022 academic year, the second year of implementation (the most recent full year for which data is available, Navigators conducted over 700,000 check-ins with students, discussing their strengths, interests, and needs and facilitating their access to essential supports and services.<sup>7</sup> In addition, 61,000 students regularly utilized the Sown to Grow platform to reflect on their feelings and experiences.<sup>8</sup> These weekly reflections yielded nearly 2,400 alerts, which were responded to by student support staff.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the number of check-ins and referrals, school leaders are monitoring whether the initiative is leading to positive outcomes for students by utilizing social-emotional learning metrics, such

as student engagement, attendance, and behavior, among others. Social-emotional learning represents a key focus area for Metro Nashville; additional domains are literacy, numeracy, attendance, and transition planning.

Reflections from students, families, Navigators, and district partners confirm the value of the initiative. Abenezer Haile, a senior at MLK Jr. High School, attributes the regular check-ins and close rapport he has developed with his Navigator Zach Fox, who is a social studies teacher at MLK Jr. High School, with motivating him both in and out of the classroom. As an example, Haile credits Fox with encouraging him to apply to become a student member of the Metropolitan Nashville Board of Education. In this role, Haile has learned vital skills, including how to effectively advocate for issues important to him and his peers, work as part of a team, and communicate. This example also illustrates how personalized, relationship-based approaches can help students acquire what researchers refer to as social capital, connecting them to opportunities and activities where they can gain valuable skills and expand their networks.<sup>10,11</sup>

Haile also believes that the initiative has enhanced his overall communication skills and ability to express himself. “I think just the person that I am ... has changed drastically because of my relationship with Mr. Fox [who serves as his Navigator],” he shared. “He’s one of those people in my life that pushes me to not only achieve my academic goals, but also achieve personal goals, such as where I want to see myself in a couple years and what type of person that I want to be. As a teenager sometimes it seems like I don’t want to talk to people,

“I know that there’s someone I can talk to in school. I know there are other people, but one other person to talk to feels really good.”

Isaac Whitson,  
Fifth grade student,  
Andrew Jackson  
Elementary School

but if you have the person [Navigator] that’s coming to you with the right questions, it becomes easier to open up.”

Fox echoes a similar perspective, observing both students’ increased motivation and greater communication skills. “Students have matured in ways that go beyond just your normal typical adolescent development. [They] have far more capacity to have meaningful conversations with one another about things that are totally nonacademic than they otherwise would have,” he observed. According to Fox, these positive outcomes occur when Navigators already have pre-existing connections with students, providing a foundation of mutual respect and trust. As such, he strongly recommends strategically pairing Navigators with students that they already know. In Fox’s case, he has known his advisory students since they were in 7th grade.

In addition to nurturing strong relationships with students, Navigators are able to forge closer bonds with other school staff. “I love Navigator because I’ve built relationships [with students and teachers] that I wouldn’t have otherwise,” said Wolfe, Co-Navigator and Navigator Lead at Antioch Middle School.

At the elementary school level, the initiative is also showing promising effects in children’s lives. According to Isaac Whitson, a fifth grader at Andrew Jackson Elementary School, his Navigator—who is also his physical education teacher—supports him in multiple ways during their monthly check-ins that occur during personalized learning time (PLT). As an example, his

Navigator has helped him expand his circle of support. “I know that there’s someone I can talk to in school. I know there are other people, but one other person to talk to feels really good,” Whitson said. The fifth grader also perceives benefits from using Sown to Grow each week, such as enabling him to more readily share his feelings. “Sown to Grow gives me a chance to put my thoughts down instead of keeping them to myself,” he explained. His mother agrees. “Sometimes kids communicate better and easier in front of a screen and are more open to sharing exactly what’s going on with them,” she said.

Ms. Whitson, who also has a son in third grade who attends the same school as her older son, sees additional positive impacts related to Navigator, including enhancing her children’s sense of belonging, boosting their relationship-building skills, and knowing who to go to for support. “As a parent, I feel good knowing that there are people invested in my children at the school. It helps to know there’s that extra layer of support,” Whitson described. “My children feel that they belong at the school and there are adults that care about them. Not just about their grades, but about them as a human being,” she added.

Firsthand accounts about the initiative’s early success are helpful for maintaining ongoing support for the effort. As a next step, Metro Nashville is considering hiring an external agency to conduct a formal evaluation. This would enable the district to rigorously assess the Navigator initiative and demonstrate impact on a host of student outcomes.



The district’s success in garnering strong buy-in across different levels of leadership was vital for advancing the Navigator initiative.



### **Accelerating Personalized, Relationship-Based Approaches: Key Lessons for Successful Implementation**

Metro Nashville’s experience in planning and executing the Navigator initiative is instructive for other district, school, and community leaders. Local leaders in Nashville identified several lessons for successful adoption of a personalized student support initiative, which are distilled in the following section.

#### *Identify a Collective Felt Need, Connect to the Vision, and Coalesce Leaders at All Levels*

Metro Nashville leaders came together around a common vision using the opportunity the pandemic provided and the felt need across all stakeholders to reconnect with students, which has been instrumental for propelling and sustaining their Navigator initiative. As director of schools, Dr. Battle coalesced leaders at all levels to champion the overarching vision of “Every Student Known” and to elevate Navigator as an essential element. By consistently articulating how the Navigator initiative could address the felt need and advance the district’s overarching vision, Dr. Battle and other Metro Nashville leaders marshalled support among school leaders, teachers and school staff, and families and students, helping to instill it into the culture and mindset of each school. Metro Nashville has continued to amplify this vision and make the case for Navigator as crucial for actualizing its vision. In doing so, district leaders have consolidated support for the initiative as a key strategy both now and moving forward. The district’s success in garnering strong buy-in across different levels of leadership was vital for advancing the Navigator initiative.

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*

Metro Nashville designed Navigator as a strategy that could bolster and align with student support efforts already happening in schools. Rather than wait until the district had all the optimal components in place, such as an integrated data system, leaders proactively responded to the moment and used what they already had to get started. District leaders leveraged existing elements, such as the multi-tiered system of supports, and designated time blocks, such as personalized learning time and advisory periods, to embed Navigator within current efforts. As a result, Metro Nashville was able to further strengthen its system of supports, facilitating students’ access to a range of personalized, comprehensive resources. By regularly gathering feedback from schools, the district learned what was working well and what could be improved. It introduced the Sown to Grow tool and further supported and refined Navigator, introducing a family-facing dashboard as well as adjusting the check-in meeting cadence.

Metro Nashville’s approach suggests that 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.

“There is not really a cookie cutter approach [to Navigator]. You have to tweak it to fit the needs of your school, your tier [elementary, middle, or high school], and your kids.”

Dr. Celia Jolly,  
Academy Principal,  
ADC/Engineering  
Academy, Hillside High  
School

### *Establish Non-Negotiables with Freedom to Innovate*

Metro Nashville struck a careful balance between mandating districtwide non-negotiables and granting flexibility for schools to adapt and innovate based on their own context. “There is not really a cookie cutter approach [to Navigator],” noted Dr. Jolly, the Hillside High School administrator and Navigator Lead. “You have to tweak it to fit the needs of your school, your tier [elementary, middle, or high school], and your kids.”

Empowering schools to configure Navigator based on their individual needs and settings, while adhering to district guidelines was instrumental to widespread adoption. According to district 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*

To meet the moment, district leaders decided to use existing technology to implement the initiative quickly and avoid planning paralysis and delay. Over time, they revamped their approach to improve the user experience and more readily collect data. Most recently, the district has created a personalized dashboard to make data accessible to families.

Metro Nashville’s experience shows that district, school, and community leaders can maximize current data tools for student support initiatives and then gradually customize depending on their needs. Sophisticated technology isn’t necessary for implementing a personalized, relationship-based approach. Instead, use an existing data system to get started and then refine over time based on funding and capacity.

### *Align Resources through Strategic Partnerships*

The district identified critical needs from its initial data dashboard and sought to align resources to address them. For example, it responded to growing mental health needs in the district by expanding its contracts with mental health providers. In another instance, Metro Nashville recruited community-based partners to provide families with food based on data showing that students living in the northern part of Nashville were experiencing greater food insecurity. As previously noted, Metro Nashville also leads other initiatives complementary to Navigator, including Communities In Schools and Community Achieves. These efforts increase schools’ capacity to match students and families with comprehensive supports and services.

Forging and maintaining partnerships with local organizations and agencies enables districts and schools to link students and families to an array of resources. 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*

The promising results of the Navigator initiative to date led Metro Nashville to invest pandemic relief and operational funding in the effort to provide students with personalized support. This has enabled district leaders to continually refine the approach. For instance, they allocated funding to augment their data platforms and tools, such as Sown to Grow and a personalized

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Dr. Adrienne Battle,  
Director of Schools,  
Metro Nashville Public  
Schools

dashboard for families. Meanwhile, schools have directed funding dispersed by the district to support a range of student services. While pandemic relief funding will eventually end, Metro Nashville is committed to sustaining the Navigator initiative as signaled by its decision to prioritize the effort in its budget. By undertaking a formal evaluation, Metro Nashville can further demonstrate Navigator’s impact, which can help galvanize continued support for the initiative.

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. By using data to measure impact over time, leaders can garner and sustain support for the initiative. The [Children’s Funding Project](#) offers tools, resources, and assistance to local communities seeking to develop their financing strategy for child and youth services.

## Looking Ahead

Metro Nashville leaders are hopeful in their pursuit of the district’s bold vision as they continue to strengthen and expand the scope of the Navigator initiative. “I’m so optimistic about what we can accomplish and how we can continue to redesign and reimagine the way in which we support all of our students,” Dr. Battle said. Looking ahead, the district’s thoughtful, systemic approach to ensuring that every child is known can guide other school and community leaders embarking on similar efforts.



## About The EdRedesign Lab

EdRedesign provides catalytic support to the cradle-to-career place-based field to drive systems-level change and open personalized pathways to well-being, educational attainment, civic engagement, and upward mobility. To support this growing field to effect transformational change that serves the needs and talents of individual children and youth, our work focuses on talent development, actionable research, our Institute for Success Planning, and our By All Means coalition. Our mission is to ensure the social, emotional, physical, and academic development and well-being of *all* children and youth, especially those affected by racism and poverty. We strive for a society characterized by racial, economic, and social justice.



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## Endnotes

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