

Building Teacher Leader Capacity



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DAVID W. CARTER HIGH SCHOOL | DALLAS ISD

Identified Area of Opportunity

My current problem of practice at the David W. Carter High School, an urban high school, centers on building instructional capacity and leadership skills for teachers. The Dallas ISD Campus Climate Survey results, a compilation of responses from campus faculty and support staff published semiannually, demonstrate a need to improve campus culture and systems, and provide teachers with timely, actionable feedback to improve the quality of instruction. Student Perception Surveys findings present a three-year stagnation in student engagement, below the district average and well-below neighboring feeder elementary and middle schools. All the 9th grade students are promoted from Atwell Middle School, the only school out of 40, in the district with a Texas Agency Accountability Rating of Improvement Required. The attendance rate for 9th grade students is 91%, well below the district average of 94%. Carter High School is within 10 miles of five suburban, open enrollment school districts. The zip code for Carter High School is home to a third of the public charters schools in the county. Families that live in the Carter High School community have myriad of choices for their children's education. As we seek "to be the superior scholarly selection" for families in our community, Carter High School must be positioned to provide the students from our academically struggling middle school with research-based support structures and systems to help our incoming 9th graders in transition to high school. Carter currently serves 1250 students. For Carter to return to a campus of approximately 2000 students; we must have a strong, viable curriculum and quality instruction all day, every day that produces noteworthy outcomes in student achievement. It is my assertion that the instructional implementation gap in 9th grade is a key leverage point to moving the needle on the aforementioned data points.

By way of inquiry, I am seeking to know "What leadership moves will position me to best support my teachers with improving the teaching and learning experience for 9th grade students?" Without question, timely and targeted feedback to teachers around student engagement will improve teacher performance, thereby improving and thus allowing all students to have a positive experience in the classroom through deep connections to the instructional content and strong relationships with teachers. Studying the aforementioned question will allow me to focus on three strategic key actions: improving student achievement, improving the quality of instruction, and improving campus climate/culture. To quantify and assess progress and goal attainment, I will use the Dallas ISD Campus Climate Survey (fall and spring administrations), Student Perception Survey, Teacher Spot Observation Rubric-Student Engagement Indicator, and Student Attendance Report.

Initial Conditions and Reasons for the Project

I'm Jonathan Smith, the proud principal of the David W. Carter High in the Dallas ISD, Home of the Cowboys. I serve a campus of 1250 students with nearly 75% economically disadvantaged, 70% African American, and 27% Hispanic. Carter is an inner-city neighborhood school with rich traditions. We have excelled over decades in athletics with numerous state championships in multiple sports and have many well-known professional athletes as alumni. While we will continue to celebrate the accolades and achievements in athletics and the arts, academic achievement is our area of opportunity. With low 9th grade student attendance, stagnant student perception survey results in the domain of student engagement, and underperformance in all three 9th grade state-tested subjects (English I, Biology and Algebra I) compared to the district; my effort as an instructional leader must be directed toward building teacher leader capacity so that I am freed to coach teachers with timely and targeted feedback to improve performance in the classroom. Our students need strong, healthy relationships with their teachers and relevant, engaging lessons all day, every day.

David W. Carter High School endeavors to realize our vision "To be the superior scholarly selection for the comprehensive, community high school learning experience in the Dallas ISD." Carter High School is a neighborhood school which serves 1250 students, 70% of whom are African American and 25% who are Hispanic. Over 75% of the student population are economically disadvantaged which is further compounded by the harmful effects of generational poverty such as violence and student drug addictions. To combat these obstacles, our students must overcome; Carter High School has Finance and Information Technology Academies for students to gain National Academy Foundation industry certificates. We also have Project Lead The Way – Law certification which allows students to immediately become employed as 911 operators following high school. Carter's newest attraction is our Collegiate Academy which allows students to graduate high school with an Associate's Degree in Law, Finance, Web Graphics or Information Technology. We are excited to celebrate the students' growth in academic achievement, as Carter earned two distinctions based on our state accountability for the first time in 10 years. Double-digit performance earned our campus two distinctions in the areas of English Language Arts (English I - 46% & English II - 44%) and Math (Algebra I - 81%). Our students also scored well in the areas of US History and Biology, 96% and 76% respectively. Even with vast improvement in English Language Arts & Reading, we are still underperforming the state by 10 percentage points. Forty-seven of Carter's 90 teachers (52%) are in year 11-20, yet we turnover 20% annually most of which are teachers with 0-2 years experience.

Based on the 2018 Student Experience Survey findings published by Panorama Education, Carter remained stagnant with an overall positive response score of 67%. While there were nominal increases in the areas of classroom environment, expectations and rigor, pedagogical effectiveness and supportive relationships; we made no progress from the prior year in student engagement with a positive response rate of 51%. In four of the six domains on the survey, our campus scored 2-3% below the feeder pattern. While we saw remarkable academic achievement progress and were publicly acknowledged by district senior officials, much of this progress had to do with the weekly implementation of data processes (data digs, backwards planning, intervention plans) and classroom compliance. Our school attendance rate continues to hover between 93%-94% overall, but our Freshman rate is only 91%. Thus, we are left pondering, "How can we increase student engagement?"

David W. Carter High School is known for stellar performance in athletics and the arts. Often, we devote more time and energy into celebrating student accomplishments in athletics and in the arts, and consequently less time celebrating student academic achievement. We must strike a balance and engage every learner in such a way that engagement is perceived, college and career readiness is achieved, attendance is improved, and campus culture is enhanced. The responsibility rests with me as a leader to build teacher capacity and leadership density so that I am freed to coach teachers with timely and targeted feedback to increase student engagement. My professional goal, noted in my principal appraisal goal-setting document, is to advance from proficient to exemplary in this indicator as prescribed by the performance rubric.

Diagnosis/Deeper Understanding

Taken from the words of Archilochus, "We don't rise to the level of our expectations, we fall to the level of our training." As a fundamental belief, we hold that for every unit of expectation a unit of support is due. "The mission of David W. Carter High School, leaders and learners of like vision, is to construct, for each student, a solid foundation for measurable success in higher learning and preparedness for career opportunities." In keeping with our mission, our work is to ensure that the necessary supports and training were offered to our teachers and teacher leaders. As such, my ally and I met with our campus assistant principals and instructional coaches to gain from their perspective what types of knowledge and skill gaps were prevalent on our campus. We also engaged the Campus Instructional Leadership Team, a group of teacher leaders on the campus, from a similar angle. Lastly, we used information learned from the Campus Needs Assessment conducted by our Site Based Decision Making Team to inform our training efforts. The following are the faculty/staff learning opportunities provided:

- Ruby Payne – Generational Poverty Faculty/Staff Training – August 2018
- Marzano’s High Yield Strategies/Total Participation Techniques – August 2018
- Backwards Mapping/Curriculum Alignment Training – August 2018/ PLCs – ongoing
- Performance Planning – Prior to each six-week grading period
- Student-led Parent Conference Training – October 2018
- Pre-Teaching Training with SPED Inclusion Teachers – November 2018
- Texas Behavior Support Initiative/ Crisis Prevention Institute Training – December 2018

While efforts were made prior to the training opportunities to understand faculty and staff misconceptions in relation to key teaching best practices, informal conversations with teachers revealed that most faculty/staff meetings held in prior years focused chiefly on operational matters. While some teachers sought out new learning independently, many teachers missed out on years of progress in the teaching profession. Teachers were professionally malnourished as opposed to professionally maturing. Thus, our campus had been operating in silos of excellence and silos of ineffectiveness because structures for professional learning were not conducive. I discovered that what I had broadly diagnosed as a lack of “will” was really a smokescreen for deficiency in “skill”.

As I apply the ORID Question Framework, presented by Dr. Carolyn Riehl, I recognize the need for a shift in thinking, a “new story”. Our campus has traditionally been recognized for athletics, but, in keeping with our mission, it’s time for the campus to be recognized for academics as well. All stakeholders must work to overcome antiquated ideas concerning, teacher-student interactions, rigor and instructional practices and effectively using data to drive instruction. As stated earlier, teachers are willing to make the shift, but must be provided the tools, training, and support needed for the campus to achieve success.

Actions and Steps Taken

Below, please find the methodical progression of our work to date:

Action Step	Person(s) Responsible	Timeframe	Evidence of Completion
Interview Administration Team/Coaches and Campus Instructional Leadership Team	Fellow/Ally	July 2018	Focus: Teacher instructional practices, improving student engagement, and increasing rigor, logistics of classrooms due to building construction, professional development plan
Analyzed the Campus Needs Assessment for professional development needs	Fellow/Ally	July 2018	Presentation of Findings with Campus Instructional Leadership Team and Coaches
Designed New Teacher Professional Development Day and yearlong calendar	Fellow/Ally/Campus New Teacher Coordinator	August 2018	Trainings to include: Classroom management, best practices, backwards planning, Marzano's

			High Yield Strategies.
Planned Faculty/Staff Start of School Professional Development Week	Fellow/Ally/Administrators/Coaches	August 2018	Included: Book study (Ruby Payne), cross curriculum best practice strategies, review vision/mission statement, collaboratively work on campus improvement plan
Presented New Teacher PD	Fellow/Administrators/Coaches	August 2018	Publish a compilation of campus best practices
Presented Faculty/Staff Start of School PD Week	Fellow/Ally/Administrators/Coaches/Teacher Leaders	August 2018	Individual reflections from PD participants and presenters
Content PLCs Teachers use PLCs, to model best practice strategies,	Fellow/Ally/Coaches/Teacher Leaders	Ongoing	Evidence will be included in weekly lesson plans, weekly common

engage in backwards planning with grade level teams, complete data digs, develop intervention plans and create common assessments			assessments, and six-week instruction plans.
Teacher Professional Development Day	Fellow/Ally/Administrators/Coaches	October 2018	Surveys
Faculty/Staff Climate Survey	Fellow	November 2018	Disaggregated report by department
Student Equity Survey	Fellow/Campus Intervention Coordinator	December 2018	Disaggregated report by grade level and other demographics
Teacher PD Early Release Days	Ally/Campus Administrators/Coaches	December 2018	Performance planning documents
Teacher Professional Development Day Focus: Promoting Cognitive Rigor through	Fellow/Ally/Administrators/Coaches/Teacher Leaders	January 2019	Second Semester unit essential questions and 'big ideas'

<p>Classroom Questioning. Department heads and instructional coaches provide training effective use of questioning techniques and strategies.</p>			
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Challenges and Growth

Our immediate tactical plan was to develop a yearlong professional calendar based on the varied needs of our current teaching staff. We recognized that this calendar required differentiation based on skill level and skill set. We also had to be mindful of timing of certain professional development activities to avoid a professional learning overload that would in turn create implementation gaps; the difference between what we know and what we put into practice. To ensure we are sufficiently addressing long-term needs, we deemed it prudent to break our “new teacher revolving door” cycle. Beyond the end of this school year, we are customizing an ongoing support system for teachers in years 0-3, and teachers new to our campus so that we do not lose traction with the capacity we are currently building. As a component of this project, we are creating an ongoing mentoring program for new teachers and teachers new to the campus, where experienced teachers will be responsible for providing instructional and emotional support. This year serves as our baseline, and we would like to shift future professional development to be largely differentiated with at least two-thirds of the trainings being teacher-planned and teacher-led.

Outcomes, Monitoring, and Planning

Stakeholder	Work Product
Teacher-Leaders	Teacher Leaders host Learning Walk Wednesdays to observe implementation of best practices and campus trends for future professional development.
Committees	<p>Social Emotional Learning Committee formed to design and enact implementation of EduGuide app for student-staff interactive lessons.</p> <p>Campus Culture Systems Team organized to conduct strategic reviews of campus systems to look for continuous improvement upgrades, research practices and customize for the campus in training.</p>

Students	<p>A cadre of 12th graders are mentoring 9th graders as part of their leadership service projects. Mentorship includes providing guidance in the BAG (Behavior, Attendance, Grades) components.</p> <p>Sharp reduction in Tier II attendance truancy measure for 9th grade students. Ninth grade Pre-AP Algebra I, English I and Biology demonstrated double digit gains from previous year on the Fall 2018 Assessment of Course Performance final exams.</p>
Community/Site Based Decision Making Team	<p>SBDM, parents, and alumni have formed an oversight committee with my blessing to lend support in managing our \$59 million bond construction project. Oversight committee members have professional background in construction management, procurement, engineering, and/or architecture.</p>
Plans Underway	<p>K-12 Neighboring Feeder Vertical Alignment Summer Collaboratives</p> <p>Incoming 9th Grade Two-Week Transition Camp to pre-teach 1st Six Weeks Core Content and acclimate students to the campus culture and expectations.</p>

In the words of the 1970 hit single by The Carpenters, “We’ve only just begun”. In my estimation, the spark for our campus had very little to do with me talking about the project and how it was necessary for me as an instructional leader to be freed up to provide instructional support; our campus was ignited by seeing me turn over a full professional development day to teacher leaders to plan and execute. More than providing teachers and staff with a wealth of professional development offerings, learning by doing spoke volumes and shifted the conversation. Teachers were looking for more than a facade from me, they demanded follow-through. While every intricate detail of the teacher-led professional development day was not perfect; it was powerful and productive.

Noted journalist Sidney J. Harris writes, “The two words 'information' and 'communication' are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.” Our campus is now starting to experience communication at a level unlike before. An unexpected consequence of this communication manifested in our Fall Climate Survey, where staff acknowledged a noticeably higher trust level with me solely as the principal, but not so with the rest of the instructional leadership team. Prior year’s data had this number reversed. The abrupt change in leadership practices placed more direct and pointed accountability on assistant principals, coaches and counselors to own their work. Thus, we are working the distributive leadership model with our instructional leaders that will serve as a common basis of mutual accountability for staff and leaders alike. Staff will get a clear picture of what is expected from each leader, in that, for every unit of expectation for staff, leadership owes a unit of support. Our focus is on clearly delineating key look-fors in this mutual professional relationship and network of professional trust.

Several committees and teams have organically come together as a necessary byproduct of principal-deliberate moves to command the calendar and focus on 9th graders and their instructional needs. While there is a positive energy flowing throughout the campus of teachers taking ownership of the work, a watchful eye is maintained to monitor territorialism among those who don't believe there is not enough work to go around. While we are seeming to hold steady with overall 9th grade academic performance, we are seeing positive signs in the Pre-AP assessment data, posting double-digit gains from prior year’s performance. Pre-AP students represent roughly a third of each grade level enrollment on our campus.

This project has proven to be both a blessing and a burden. As principal, my support system has now liberated me to see with a clearer lens just how much is truly needed to eradicate this age-old problem of middle school to high school transition for our campus. The problem is multilayered and will not be a quick fix. Our work moving forward will include:

- Strategic plan to recruit and retain quality professional educators for 9th grade instruction. The revolving door syndrome had plagued the campus and made it difficult for vertical articulation.
- Schedule and engage in K-12 vertical alignment meetings for all educator job types
- Create a two-week 9th Grade Transition Camp to pre-teach core instruction and acclimate the students to campus expectations and culture.
- Design differentiated professional learning plans for each 9th grade teacher that will enhance skill set, close professional knowledge and practice gaps, and support the varied needs of the learners.

Reflections on Leadership and School Development - Fellow

The Cahn Fellows Program could not have come at a better time for me professionally or personally. I was grappling with how to improve the quality instruction and learner outcomes for this year amid budget and personnel cuts. Though our student enrollment increased by more than 100 students, the district's staffing allocation model changed drastically. For the 2019-2019 school year, Carter High School lost two assistant principals, one guidance counselor, and two security monitors. The thought of the staff losses and inheriting an academically poor performing Freshman class became overwhelming. There was no way that I was going to succeed for students at the scale and depth necessary doing it the way I've always done it. Change and growth were mandatory, so I thought. Not so; there were several high school principals, this year in my school district, that adopted a different philosophy. The results of refusing to adapt have been strained relations with supervisor and central office, declining academic performance, job dissatisfaction, and health problems. Quoting American businessman, Ron Williams, "Having no choice doesn't result in innovation and performance improvement." In addition to embracing the need to improve my skill set, the 'will-set' to change was required. Cahn opened my eyes to what could be and gave me the space, structure and time to embark on the journey.

I was particularly moved by the *Leading with Spirit* sessions by Dr. Young. Understanding the 'Context for Change' is better preparing me to build systems through design thinking. I am able to more clearly perceive a problem of practice and address the process, the person, and the product in a balanced manner. *Ways of Knowing* have caused me to truly reflect on my method and mode of communicating with my staff. The onus is on me as a campus leader to connect with the teachers and teacher leaders I serve in ways that connect to their preferences and personalities - ways that say I value you enough as a person to learn how to best undergird your development.

The Cahn Fellows Program had broadened my perspective and appreciation for diverse solution paths to tackle some of the most difficult challenges in urban education. The opportunity to interact with talented professional developers, colleagues and mentors from across the country has been priceless.

I learned more about my ally, Stephone, in the first few hours of our Cahn work together than I knew about her in the four years I've known her. Knowing Stephone better has helped me push her out of comfort zone to become a more confident leader. Stephone has great leadership instincts, she has always been a 'go-to' person for mentoring inexperienced teachers. Stephone practices sense-making and does not shy away from her high expectations for her students despite home life setbacks. Stephone needed an opportunity to emerge to the forefront in her role, from informal to formal leadership. Stephone is now comfortable leading meetings, engaging in critical conversations, and operating in our distributive leadership model. Stephone no longer finds it necessary to participate in unwarranted check-ins with me, she knows the path and is blazing the trail.

Reflections on Leadership and School Development - Ally

Before this year I had not put much thought into school leadership and development; but, overnight I found myself enrolled in a 12-month Master of Education Leadership program and the Cahn Ally Program. I was overwhelmed to say the least. I switched from being the teacher to once again being the student. After the July session, I begin to wonder what in the world had Mr. Smith signed me up for. There was so much information to grasp; as I listened to the speakers and participated in the various conference activities, I kept thinking, "this is good information, but when is someone going to tell me how to be a leader." I was waiting for someone to say, if you want to be a good leader you have to do this..... or these are the rules good leaders follow..... But, that's not what I was told. While I learned about Ways of Knowing, Social-Emotional Leadership, and Action Learning Conversations; I also learned that leadership is about me as an individual. Leadership is about me learning and growing as an individual, in order to effectively lead, I must understand who I am and how my beliefs and experiences shape my actions, decisions, and perceptions. Myles Munroe said, "True leaders don't invest in buildings... They invest in people.... Because success without a successor is failure.... So, your legacy must be in people". The Cahn Ally program invests in people, my principal and mentor, Jonathan Smith, invests in people. Although, all the participants in the program come from different states, school districts, and backgrounds, they all have a passion for the people they serve: teachers, students and their community. It has been beneficial for me to hear the struggles and challenges other campuses and principals face; to know that I am not on an island, but there is a community of educators committed to "building people". When I reflect on the various Cahn projects, the topics vary; from meeting students social –emotional needs, to ensure a culture of equity, to providing supports for students and staff; I realize the common thread in every project is building capacity, in students, teachers, and community.