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Principles in Practice: High Tech High CARPE College Access Network

Cultivate a learning culture

High Tech High (HTH) is a school-development organization based in Southern California that includes a network of 16 charter schools and the HTH Graduate School of Education (HTH GSE). In 2018, HTH GSE's Center for Research on Equity and Innovation launched the CARPE College Access Network (CARPE), a collective of schools across Southern California with a shared goal of increasing the number of students who are Black, Latinx, Indigenous or from low-income backgrounds who apply, enroll and ultimately go to schools they are likely to graduate from. The network's school-based improvement teams — made up of school and district leaders, teachers, counselors, and students — collaborate to develop and test interventions related to four key drivers of college access. In just four years, the network has supported member schools in improving FAFSA and Dream Act completion, CalGrant Awardance, and college enrollment rates.

 This case explores how CARPE's network leaders have cultivated a learning culture in the network.

When you walk into the CARPE College Access Network convening, there's something different in the air. In a bright, breezy room flanked by palm trees and a bustling playground, the room is buzzing. Excited chatter and laughter rings out as participants move around the space eager to reconnect with peers from other schools. Dipping into conversations throughout the day, you pick up on a common ethos, an optimism and a belief that big change is possible and that it's already in motion here today. There is, in short, a palpable CARPE culture: a community identity defined by the network's shared values: equity, joy, curiosity, collaboration, authenticity, customization, and care.

This culture didn't emerge from thin air. Since the network's launch, the CARPE leadership team has been intentional about fostering behaviors and mindsets that will provide a sustainable foundation for the challenging work of collaborative improvement. Leaders have (a) codified and applied shared values, (b) created cultural markers of community membership, and (c) pursued improvement in their own leadership practice.

Codify and apply shared values

When network participants join CARPE, they become part of the larger High Tech High community, whose bedrock design principles of equity, personalization, authentic work, and collaborative design shape structure and strategy in all High Tech High schools. Another core value — a belief in "symmetry of practice,"[1] the idea that "what's good for kids is good for adults" — means that these principles, along with others like joy, humor, positivity, curiosity, and care, extend beyond the K-12 classroom and into the culture and design of adult learning spaces like the CARPE network.

For many participants, internalizing CARPE's core principles requires resetting deeply-held and often unexamined mindsets picked up over years in the US education system. This gives a special significance to the practice of surfacing, naming, and making sense of CARPE's core values. Leaders go out of their way to make community values visible, capturing them in meeting norms, sprinkling them liberally across the network's tools and materials (e.g., protocols), and articulating them verbally during coaching and at convenings. Over time, being clear about the network's values has amplified impact by making it easier for participants to spread these principles as they lead improvement initiatives outside of the network in their home contexts. To support this work, leaders and coaches regularly "pull back the curtain" and explain how network design and facilitation decisions reflect the network's ethos.

Most of all, CARPE leaders know that naming values isn't enough — they model them in their own practice and help participants do the same. There is, for example, a playfulness in the way CARPE leaders facilitate convenings that models the joy HTH has found so

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[1] Riordan, R., & Caillier, S. (2019). Schools as equitable communities of inquiry. In *Sustainability, Human Well-being, and the Future of Education* (pp. 121-160). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

critical to sustaining improvement work. This seemingly minor implementation move is actually foundational to the network's success in two ways. First, it demonstrates the power of a key community value as participants find convening activities engaging, learning concepts "stickier," and the work enjoyable enough to persist even when the going gets tough. And second, it presents a model for how participants might bring that value to life in their own work.

Create cultural markers of community membership

CARPE's success has also relied on leaders cultivating and maintaining a sense of community identity. As a multi-district collective with a leadership team that cannot mandate participation, network leaders must incentivize participation by making CARPE a community to which participants truly *want* to belong. This depends, first, on drawing clear lines around CARPE, defining and differentiating it from other communities that members participate in.

CARPE | college access network

The construction of CARPE's community identity began with simple strategic move: giving the network a unique name. At the network's first convening, participants were greeted with symbols of their new membership in CARPE, including cohesively branded tools, resources, and personalized notebooks all stamped with the network's bold logo and quippy tagline, 'Seize the challenge to improve college access.". Though CARPE's logo and branding have evolved as the network has grown, the network name has endured and become part of the community's lexicon, giving shape to a unique community in-group.

This seed of collective identity planted by the network's name has blossomed as leaders have fostered a sense of belonging and ensured that participants feel kinship and collegiality with each other. Because most network participants don't work in the same schools, traditions like raucous post-convening game nights and happy hours have been essential to expediting the development of community bonds. As essential are the efforts leaders have made to build and honor deep relationships with each team, for example, by making personalized t-shirts for participants that had labeled themselves "FAFSA Nagging Queens." These expressions of care are of critical importance to the network's improvement goals: when adults, like children, feel a sense of belonging in a community, they're more prepared to be vulnerable, collaborate, share and learn from failures, and invest time in the success not just of their team, but of the entire collective.

Pursue improvement in their own leadership practice

CARPE's leaders position themselves not as removed network facilitators, but as co-learners in the network. Weekly checks-ins, "design days," monthly reflection meetings, and frequent collaboration with leaders from other HTH and external networks create the structures for the team to assess patterns across network data, build theories to explain these trends, and brainstorm adjustments to network strategy and design in response.

Critically, the leaders use these improvement efforts to model learning-leadership in action, raising up participant expertise, soliciting and acting on feedback, and staying transparent about their own failures, missteps, and learning. A typical example comes from CARPE's inaugural convening, where a senior leader stood in front of a packed room to publicly share a piece of feedback he'd received:

> **I got some feedback last night at the event that I really appreciated and want to reference.**
> [CARPE participant] told me, "Okay, good, we have an aim to better serve Black and Latino kids, but I don't see a lot of talk about race in this room." I so appreciate that being called out…We're going to need to get better about that at High Tech High. We're going to need to do some work individually and as a community to do that. Thanks for calling that out.

This statement wasn't just theater: while being open about a misstep was a smart approach to modeling public learning, CARPE's leaders' verbalized commitment to personal and institutional improvement is always accompanied by follow-through. After this event, leaders continued to pursue a rigorous individual and institutional learning effort around the intersection of improvement and racial equity work, sharing with participants their progress along the way. The authenticity of the leaders' everyday commitment to improvement is recognized by participants and has helped build trust across the community.

Appendix: Note from CARPE participant

The following email, sent by a CARPE participant to the network's leadership team, illustrates how powerful explicitly articulating values can be in supporting participant meaning-making and ownership of shared work . * **

Hi CARPE team,

I had a vision of sorts recently, likely due to a lack of human contact, too much time staring at a computer screen, and possibly dehydration, but nonetheless it happened.

I saw how the CARPE work we have been doing is a wonderful example of the Design Principles in action. I'd love to work on building out this idea and sharing it more broadly but I'd need help in figuring out how best to do this. Anyway here is my attempt to explain my thinking. I visualized this as a sort of diamond shape with Equity at the top as the focus, Authentic Assessment at the bottom as the base, and Collaborative Design and Personalization at the two sides.
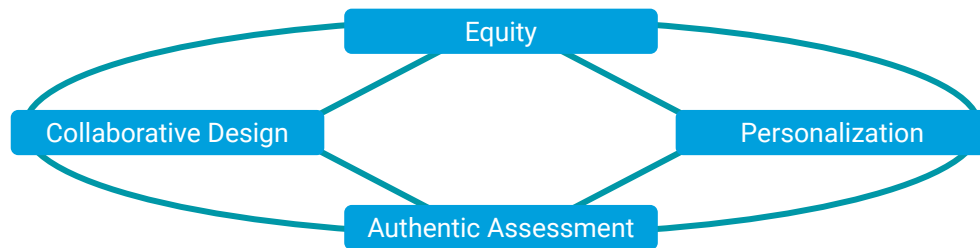
[…] Here's each principle broken down:

Equity - The goal of our work is at the very top, is the clear driving factor, and is completely Equity Focused. This clarity and consistency of our Equity mission is so powerful and important. I love that at every convening we recall the goal and recommit to it as a group. I find this consistently helpful in keeping me on track and remembering why I am doing this work.

Authentic Assessment - Another aspect of the CARPE work that has been so valuable is the continual grounding in data that matters […] For me Authentic Assessment is about holding ourselves and our students accountable to metrics that really matter. This can be big satellite data like GPA, test scores, predicted graduation rates, attendance, survey data, FAFSA numbers, etc. And it's also the really important personal narrative data via one-on-one conversations, student and parent stories, and empathy interviews. The important thing is it is grounded in real data that has real effects on our student's actual lives. It's been so valuable to be constantly presented with useful and meaningful data to help guide our work and keep us grounded in reality.

* Email edited for length

** Diagram recreated based on participant description

Collaborative Design - Working with the CARPE network has really helped us develop an improvement team here at HTHI and more broadly with the network. I love the way the CARPE hub pushes us to share and collaborate. I also love that we have brought in other stakeholders like parents and students into the conversations. The encouragement to bring in more voices and all work together to improve feels like the essence of great collaborative design.

Personalization - This is the final piece that really fell into place for me this year. I think CARPE has done a great job at constantly pushing us to focus on the individual students. Even when we are looking at big satellite data and larger trends, in the end it always ends up with the individuals. Also, I think we have made some of our greatest improvements by creating specific lists of students who need more support and making sure someone was connecting with them on an individual basis and really meeting their personal needs. This is where the magic happens. Every student is unique and CARPE has really shone a light on this and encouraged engagement on this level. I credit so much of our success this year to an increase in our capacity to and willingness to really meet every student where they are at. Like our students expressed to us in the empathy interviews and I have paraphrased to "Optional is not Equitable," […] Overall I think CARPE has done a great job of continually reminding us of the individual students and always thinking about their experience and their needs. Always supported by the data but never losing sight of the individuals who we are actually trying to serve.

Finally, I think the whole improvement science structure holds this entire framework together. If you imagine it as the outline around the four Design principles that both connect the 4 parts and holds the whole thing together. I really appreciate how the CARPE hub is constantly pointing us back to our goal (Equity), forcing us to look at the data (Authentic Assessment), encourages us to collaborate with each other and across the network (Collaborative Design), and always reminding us to focus on the individual students, their experience, their success, and their story (Personalization) Also, I just find the whole improvement science structure and cycles very helpful to staying on track and actually making progress towards our goals for our students.

Maybe this is helpful or useful?

Cheers!

- Will
Senior Math Teacher at High Tech High International