

Caring School Community Teacher Spotlight: Carrie Landheer, Oakland, CA

By Emily Cremidis | Categories: Educator Spotlight, Classroom Community

Collaborative Classroom is proud to spotlight Bay Area native and 4-5 combo teacher Carrie Landheer of the Oakland Unified School District in Oakland, CA.

In an interview with Emily Cremidis, Carrie shares the impact of the CASEL SElect Caring School Community curriculum across her tenure at Garfield Elementary School. Thank you, Carrie, for sharing your insights with us!



Carrie Landheer

Tell us a little about yourself, your school/district, and the students that you serve.

I am a fifth-year teacher. I started teaching in 2016 right after college. I joined Teach for America (TFA) as my path into the classroom and was placed at Garfield Elementary School in Oakland. I've been there ever since. I love Garfield—I just think it's an amazing community of really dedicated adults. Not only the staff but also the families. Everyone who comes in and out of the building and also does work behind the scenes at home cares so much about the students and their growth. That makes me excited to show up every

day.

The students, of course, are what make me love that community. They show up excited to learn and be there at Garfield. It really is a community school because it offers a lot of wrap-around services: meal services, counseling services. It's a school I am proud to be a part of.

To go back a little bit, I grew up in the Bay Area, in the hills. I definitely grew up knowing I was experiencing an education that was really different and just a life in general with privileges that were really different from people in my immediate area. That was a big part of what brought me into TFA and looking at education from a social justice lens, and ultimately brought me to Garfield itself. It's really great to be part of a community in the Bay Area that is not only different from where I grew up but is teaching me so much more about the Bay Area than I ever knew growing up in the hills so close by.

What is the most rewarding part of being an educator for you?

I think it's being able to create an environment where students can really be themselves. When we just have moments where students are laughing with each other and making jokes, and sharing about their lives, but also asking each other questions about each other's lives.

They're learning about their peers, but also the greater world around them. They learn about their peers by sharing, and when I see them comfortable in being who they naturally are, that's when I feel fulfilled—that they're able to be who they are with their peers and their teacher.

How long have you been implementing *Caring School Community*? Tell us a little about your implementation.

I was part of the field testing phase for *Caring School Community*, Second Edition. I started with the routine of the morning circle piece first. As I developed in practice and had more capacity, I began to do more and more. I incorporated the class meetings, the supporting work within the topic weeks, and then closing circles. This last year, I implemented the whole program and it was really neat to see my implementation grow.

What do you appreciate about *Caring School Community*?

It really gives the teacher and students structure in terms of expectations and for the routines to be successful. I always appreciate having more tools to lean on and that I can pull. When there isn't a topic week to meet our need, I can use the structure to create one. I like being able to pivot and tailor the structures more on my own.

For example, there was an accident near our campus that involved a student's family and we needed to process what happened. *Caring School Community's* open week gave me the structure to address that specific situation.

What have you noticed about your students' learning and engagement?

I have seen my students grow in their ability to use tools, space, and language to talk about their emotions with their classmates.

In my early years before I was fully implementing *Caring School Community*, students had a harder time sharing their feelings as opposed to their preferences. I could always do a morning check-in meeting about their favorite color, but something more vulnerable like what they're proud of [was more challenging]. Looking back, I don't know that I'd created that sort of space in my classroom.

Caring School Community really gives students more of an access point to talk about emotions. (I'm thinking about the Feelings cards.) It's not necessarily your emotion yet, but you're naming the emotion and times when other people might feel that emotion. It gives students the tools to start talking about emotions. It's scaffolded, intentional, and not just thrown at them in a circle whip around. I really notice students building more of a capacity and comfort to talk about emotions without looking uncomfortable.

When we are assembled in the classroom, I get lots of requests for class meeting topics, like if something happened on the playground or just something that the students were interested in talking about.

For example, this year the class has expressed interest in talking about the January 6 insurrection and how it interacted with the Black Lives Matter movement. That is something now that we can jump right into having a class meeting about. That would be something my students would name. They can say, "We should have a classroom meeting about this." They understand that there are structures in school where we can discuss important things. That's there for us.

How has *Caring School Community* affected or changed your own teaching and learning?

Caring School Community has helped me understand my students on a deeper level because they are now capable of telling about themselves on a deeper level. Now that my classroom is a more open space and students feel more comfortable being vulnerable, I understand my students on a deeper level.

That's obviously helped me understand who my students are as people, and helps me improve my practice. When you know your students better, you're going to be a better teacher. You're going to be able to picture them in every lesson you plan and incorporate their interests. It's cyclical in that way: When you get to know your students, your whole practice is improved. It's in the way you show up to connect with your students.

"Caring School Community has helped me understand my students on a deeper level because they are now capable of telling about themselves on a deeper level . . . When you know your students better, you're going to be a better teacher. You're going to be able to picture them in every lesson you plan and incorporate their interests. It's cyclical in that way: When you get to know your students, your whole practice is improved. It's in the way you show up to connect with your students."

We talk a lot about growth mindset. Now students are more willing to embody that mindset and it carries over to Math and Reading. I think it's because they feel more comfortable in general. They also feel more comfortable sharing what they love the most in the morning circles. They've learned to extend conversations with "because," and now that structure is in place and carries forward in academic places.

What advice or insights would you share with an educator who is new to *Caring School Community*?

In my opinion, *Caring School Community* is not meant to be a one-size-fits-all approach. Every teacher is the expert on their class and should be empowered to use what will empower students. Different years need different things. Don't be afraid to start with what feels right for you and where you're at and where your students are at! That's what's helped me come to where I am today with *Caring School Community*.