

Carey Swanson



Carey Swanson is the Chief Program Officer for Literacy at Student Achievement Partners. Her journey has been guided by a curiosity around creating educational systems where every child has a chance to thrive. Today, she leads efforts to reimagine literacy instruction across the country, bridging research and practice, and advocating for more equitable, joyful, and rigorous learning experiences.

A Spark of Passion

Carey began as a classroom teacher, where she quickly realized the importance of collective learning and team collaboration.

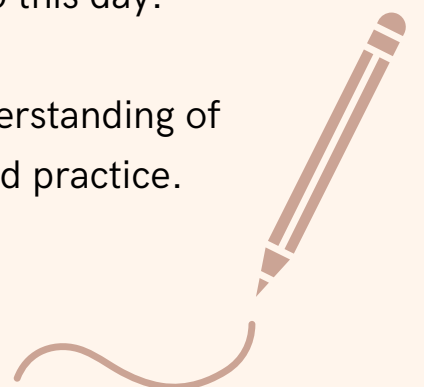
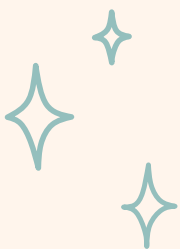
"I was constantly thinking about how to best work with and learn from the educators in my grade team and school," she reflected. This drive eventually led to her roles as a mentor teacher and coach, where she supported her colleagues in strengthening instruction and building school-wide capacity.

Working in school settings, Carey felt dissatisfied with her curriculum guides and professional learning sessions. She saw a need for evidence-based pedagogy and training to better serve students. Considering how she could fill this gap, she sought opportunities for leadership development. "I wanted to find a program that was both high quality in terms of leadership development and thoughtful about the schedules and needs of full-time working educators," she recalled. She found that balance in the Summer Principals Academy.

Lessons from SPA

Carey described being inspired by SPA's emphasis on self-awareness and reflection. "My time at SPA was the first time I was part of an education or professional learning experience that was grounded in self-awareness," she said. "This was unique at the time and remains unique to this day."

At SPA, she deepened her understanding of leadership as a people-centered practice.





She learned that true leadership is not about positional authority but about fostering authentic relationships, adult learning, and shared capacity-building. This intrapersonal foundation helped her better navigate difficult conversations, empower others, and remain grounded amidst change.

What resonated most was the idea that leadership must be flexible, responsive, and human.

"The intrapersonal skills of leadership depend on a strong sense of self, including an ability to reflect, make changes as needed, and see other points of view. This grounding can make the difference in relationship quality and authenticity."

Leading Literacy

Carey served as a school leader and instructional coach for several years after graduating from SPA. However, a personal move prompted her to step outside the school setting, bringing the SPA leadership mindset along with her. She transitioned into roles that allowed her to shape literacy work at a systems level, eventually becoming Chief Program Officer for Literacy at Student Achievement Partners (SAP).

At SAP, she now collaborates with schools, districts, and nonprofits to co-design tools and solutions that support research-aligned, joyful, and rigorous literacy instruction.



"The most rewarding part of the work that I do is collaborating with partners in education...to co-design a solution that is going to ultimately support an element of the work of students in their literacy classrooms."

The work is "necessarily nuanced, complex, and best done in partnership, rather than in isolation."

Her recent publication in *The Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* exemplifies this approach. Focused on foundational literacy skills for older students, the article advocates for embedding joy and multicultural tools into instruction—especially for adolescents still building core reading proficiency. Carey hopes that educators take away a "conceptual understanding" and "concrete, actionable items" to help leverage students' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds as assets in their education.

This work reflects a broader shift in the field, one she sees gaining momentum in recent years: "The post-COVID education landscape has laid bare inequities that have been baked into our system for ages, and more teachers, educators, and others in the education community are asking, how can we best support older students?"

Carey has played a key role in spotlighting the unique needs of adolescent learners, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, who are too often overlooked in traditional conversations around foundational education.

Looking Ahead

To Carey Swanson, educational leadership is all about promoting empathy, evidence, and equity in school instruction—no matter the setting. Her career is a testament to what's possible when educators use their skills in self-awareness, collaboration, and relationship-building to build instructional resources for students and teachers outside the school building. Whether in the classroom or national education spaces, her work continues to shape how literacy and leadership intersect to transform students' lives.

