

#1 Opportunity Culture Audio: An Opportunity Culture Principal Reflects

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SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: Welcome to Opportunity Culture Audio! I'm Sharon Kebschull Barrett of Public Impact, which leads the national Opportunity Culture initiative focused on extending the reach of excellent teachers and their teams to many more students.

Today we're going to hear from Jenny O'Meara, who until 2021 served as a principal for a middle school using Opportunity Culture roles. When O'Meara stepped away for a sort of sabbatical she created for herself, we sat down for a wide-ranging conversation about leading an Opportunity Culture school.

O'Meara's district, Edgecombe County Public Schools in a rural part of North Carolina, does not shy away from innovation. The district keeps a laser focus on bringing as many opportunities as possible to its students, who come largely from economically disadvantaged households. So it went big with its Opportunity Culture plans, redesigning school roles across the district. In an Opportunity Culture school, teachers with a record of student learning growth and an ability to lead adults can become multi-classroom leaders.

Multi-classroom leaders, or MCLs, continue to teach part of the time while leading small, collaborative teams of teachers, paraprofessionals, and, in some schools, yearlong, paid teacher residents. With help from advanced paraprofessionals, some of the team's teachers may also extend their reach to more students, while keeping instructional group sizes manageable. Those in Opportunity Culture roles earn substantial pay supplements funded through reallocations of regular school budgets, making them sustainable.

Principal Jenny O'Meara began with one multi-classroom leader in fall 2017. That MCL, Casandra Cherry, led the team of sixth-through-eighth-grade math and science teachers. Both Principal O'Meara and Ms. Cherry were named as two of the 12 Opportunity Culture Fellows in 2019. Tragically, Ms. Cherry passed away suddenly in August of that year; you can read a tribute to her on the Opportunity Culture website.

When Principal O'Meara and I talked, she began by highlighting the power of having Ms. Cherry alongside her. As you'll hear, they always called each other just "Cherry" and "O'Meara."

JENNY O'MEARA: I'll start with what worked well. I think, especially from the very start, having somebody who fully owned the vision for a content area, having somebody who was able to drive the vision forward collaboratively with the team was so critical. I think teams sometimes really struggle to do that on their own without leadership. Having someone there to like really bring the team together and say, 'No, no, no, we are a team, we work together, we are in this together, these are all of our children' is just so important. I think having somebody who is teaching alongside of them is like the second level of importance because it's like, 'okay, great, you're not just an administrator coming and telling me what to do, you're like, on my team, you're doing it with me and like, we're in this together.'

So I think like that allowed for like some transformational trust among colleagues that I don't think exists in most schools.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: That “transformational trust” that O’Meara notes is part of the culture change she saw, especially in math.

JENNY O’MEARA: I also think it allowed for like a really strong and clear vision from the team that they were all bought into. I remember they were just so focused on, what did they call it, it was so funny...um, math esteem, they just came to this conclusion like if we do nothing else, we’re going to make sure our kids just have a ton of math esteem and believe that they are capable of mathematics. And then, like the first year we did Op Culture, we saw that show up in our math results especially for sixth-grade math that year. I mean, of course, that wasn’t the only thing but like they had like their eye on this thing and then they did all the other important work that had to happen while still making sure like no matter what these kids will believe in themselves. I mean, and I just have to say, like, as a principal—like I can’t do that work with teachers, I don’t have the opportunity to do that and so, you know, having someone to lead that work was, I mean, just amazing. I could see the change, I could see kids engaging in math in ways in like, January that they definitely were not engaging with math in September.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: With Ms. Cherry leading the team, O’Meara saw major shifts by midyear. When the school year began, she heard kids saying...

JENNY O’MEARA: I hate math, I’m not good at math, you know, I suck at math, math is stupid, I hate it, I’ve never been good at it, I’ll never get good at it. And it did get to a point where like you could hear kids things like “This is hard but I know I can do this work.” I think it made a huge difference for a lot of the kids and I think, I think it helped the newer teachers have more loving expectations for lack of a better phrase because they knew like, ‘okay, our kids don’t believe in themselves, my job is to get them there.’ And, I don’t know, that created space for something really lovely, I think, in those classes. I saw a lot more risk-taking happening in those math classes as time went on. I’m thinking about one teacher in particular who, I mean, he just was doing these really interesting activities with kids and he was like willing to let them make mistakes and they were willing to make them—they were having really great discussions. I think it’s because they started that building of that, we want kids to believe in themselves because we already, we already believe in them, we need to get them there now.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: Ms. Cherry received training in leading her team from Public Impact, which founded the Opportunity Culture initiative, and the nonprofit New Leaders. O’Meara envied the teachers on Cherry’s team, who got support like O’Meara once longed for.

JENNY O’MEARA: I was a math teacher myself and I did not have an MCL. And I think in my second year I was like the “most senior math teacher.” It was me and five first-year teachers and that’s like kind of the story in eastern North Carolina right now, I think. And I remember we, our school had partnerships

with some like outside coaches who would come once a month, you know, I mean I used to beg those people to come meet with me.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: In contrast, an MCL provides daily support, and knows—and is accountable for—all the students on the team.

JENNY O'MEARA: To have it in your building every day and they know your children and they know your children really well and they know you; I think like, that's the piece that's like so important.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: But, O'Meara says, it wasn't all smooth sailing.

JENNY O'MEARA: One thing that Cherry and I got wrong early on I think we weren't as mindful of honoring the expertise that the teachers were also bringing to our space. I think we could have done a lot better with that. I think when the coaching is 'I come in and I tell you what to do,' it's really unproductive.' I think when the coaching is 'You have a lot to offer, like let's reflect together. Let's see what you're thinking and where you're at and what you think you need supports with and we'll build from there together.' I think that's when it became really powerful.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: Along with coaching, getting co-planning support from an MCL is critical, O'Meara says.

JENNY O'MEARA: That upped their confidence because it's like, 'okay, I'm planning the right thing.' I remember as a teacher being like 'I'm googling stuff, I don't even know if I'm planning the right thing. I'm learning how to unpack standards on my own.' And then I think the other piece was the co-teaching. I think that was really, really, really important, um, and I just think having somebody in the building who can model best practices for others and who can model like how to interact with kids in a way that gets kids willing to answer difficult questions and not give up on them and think really critically about something, I think that was really important. So I think all of the pieces combined is the thing, you know, one of those is not more important than the other but then I think all the pieces combined with letting the teacher drive their learning and honoring what that teacher brings; I think that's when like the magic happened.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: When she was a new teacher, O'Meara relied in part on some videos of how to teach, such as the "teach like a champion" videos.

JENNY O'MEARA: I was able to give it in my own flavor but I do think that sometimes some of the moves I made were harmful for kids because I didn't have somebody to say, like 'yeah, it might be in that video and it might be, you know, 'like whatever' right now.' What's the impact on the child when you say the words like that? I think having a thought partner who can really process that is just critical. I mean, even if the MCL were to watch a video with the teacher together and help them process like what are the pieces here that like will definitely get us where we want to go? What are the pieces here that we

think might be harmful to a student's identity that we will not do in this building? I think that kind of coaching and guidance is just so important.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: Looking back, O'Meara says she thinks every principal who has the chance to redesign their school using Opportunity Culture models should do so.

JENNY O'MEARA: I mean, if someone is thinking about it I would say do it, first of all. I would say, collaborating with your district leadership is critical, you can't do it alone, right?

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: And then, once you have your plans in place, be prepared every year to revise them as needed—and always be ready to pivot and adapt.

JENNY O'MEARA: I think the thing that I had to learn was we would have this perfect plan, right, we would have the perfect Opportunity Culture plan, we'd have the perfect master schedule plan, we'd have the perfect plan for the year and two weeks later, you know, someone got offered a higher paying job in Wake County or I don't know, like, so many things can go wrong because a school is just like a mini version of society. And so, I think like the advice I would give is just, like, be ready for the unknown and it doesn't matter how perfect your plan is and just be ready to collaborate with the folks on your team. I think one thing I didn't get right that I wish I had was, I wish I had over-communicated more about the MCL role and, like, why we needed it. Probably the most important thing a principal can do in terms of over-communicating Opp Culture is connecting it to the school vision, like every time. "Don't forget folks, this is what we're up to and here is how the strategy helps us get there" and just making it really clear to everybody, like this is our vision, here's our strategies, and Opp Culture is a big one of those strategies that helps us get there.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: Careful hiring for the MCL role also proved critical.

JENNY O'MEARA: I think as a principal, you have to be really clear on like what are the mindset skills and orientation you want this person to come with and like, what are the other skills that like you could help them build over time. And I think if you are really clear on that you can get somebody who may be, is going to struggle but if you can help them like productively struggle they could become just a phenomenal teacher leader. And I think I used to always look for somebody who was already a 'expert' but I didn't need an expert, I needed somebody who was like, willing to lead a team and learn alongside them.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: And when you've hired great MCLs, listen to them.

JENNY O'MEARA: When your MCL comes to you and tells you you're doing something wrong, just like listen because you probably are. And that takes so much courage for them to come tell you that—you know what I mean, like golly, I can think specifically of like three or four moments when Casandra Cherry came to me and she was like 'O'Meara, I think this is a mistake and here's why.' And like in the moment I was like, 'Oh no, this is terrifying or this is a reflection of my leadership or this is', you know, I'll be real

right now, like I think principals who say that they don't get defensive are just liars because like, all of us, like that's going to show up and that's okay to let it show up, but like notice it and then choose something different, you know. And so, like when she would come to me, you know, in hindsight now I'm like gosh, she probably processed that with other people in her life, she probably thought a lot about how she wanted to say it and she probably said it in a way that she thought might be gentle enough for me to hear it. And so, like when teacher leaders do come to you, I mean, anybody really, like you gotta hear them and like, in my experience 9 out of 10 times they're totally, either they are like really, really correct, they're really right or they're missing a big chunk of information and you get to fill that gap now to make sure that they see the whole picture. I just think like, you know, if I could go back to my first year and slap myself around and be like 'you need to be a better listener right now, this is not about you' you know, I would. You just get caught up in stuff sometimes I think.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: And for O'Meara, it was always about focusing on the students—listening to them, and doing everything she could to lead her team in making school a joy-filled place.

JENNY O'MEARA: The other thing I learned is just how important it is for us to also design with our students. And, when we got our MCLs interviewing kids to say 'what's your experience like in school, when are you happiest during the day, when are you most frustrated during the day?' I think that really helped us understand the student experience in a way that unleashed some new designs in our school model that may not have been accessible had we not listened to kids. And so I think, like we always say 'kids first' but then we still design for kids, we make the experiences for them, and then kids are like 'this is boring', and we're like 'but I worked so hard on this for you.' I think there's something there and I would love to see school leaders encourage MCLs to be like the lead empathizers with the experience of children and to really embed that into the work that they're doing with their teachers. I would just encourage leaders to always strive for the balance between taking the long view on a child's future in education, and like EOG scores. I think finding the balance in all, like we'll never find that balance, I think striving for that balance is one of the most important things that leaders can do, especially with their MCLs. As an MCL I'm going to be very EOG driven because my name is on the scores right, or test-driven, whatever it might be depending on the state, and I think it's the job of the principal to help everybody remember, yes, these scores matter at the end of this school year but what matters more is the life this child is living ten years from now. And so, what experiences are we making sure this child has to live the best possible life and to be like the wholest version of themselves and to be an agent of change and feel like they have that power in this world. I think, for me, that tension was the most difficult tension I navigated as a principal and I think people should just strive for balance knowing you'll never get there but I think that it will work out in the end.

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: Thank you again to Jenny O'Meara for taking the time to share her thoughts. Don't miss the bonus clip in which she talks about introducing a morning time for students intended to help them start every day with a teacher of their choice, available on the Opportunity Culture website. And keep an eye out for more from Opportunity Culture Audio.

Bonus Clip

SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT: In this clip, Principal Jenny O’Meara explains one way Phillips Middle School in Edgecombe County, North Carolina, worked to create stronger bonds between students and teachers, to be sure that all students felt a place to belong.

JENNY O’MEARA: We went through this process and we came out with this phrase, and it was just “Phillips is the perfect place to learn and experience love and belonging.” So like that became our phrase, like I put that everything. I said it all of the time, I like kept it in my office, love, learn, belonging, like those are the things that we are doing here. I think we decided to do it because when we listened to kids we just, I mean, no one feels like they belong in middle school, period. I don’t care how you identify, like you don’t think you belong in middle school. But also like, I mean, a lot of society messages, in particular black and brown kids that like, they don’t deserve to be loved and that they’re not valued right. And so, we knew we had some extra work to do I think. And so I think the thing that really helped us do this well during the pandemic was before the pandemic we had created our morning meeting time called Banner and the kids get to choose a teacher they start their day with. So like we want you to start the day with a teacher you love. They ranked their teachers, ~~they forced ranked their teachers,~~ and we try to give them one of their top three right. I mean like, how powerful is...to me like that one design choice is everything because I hated starting my day with a teacher I didn’t like. I know kids today don’t like that either so like, now I start my day with somebody I really love and who I know loves me and there’s only like ten or twelve other kids in this space with me and we structured it to really try to make that time such that kid felt safety and belonging in the morning because then like, they could use their prefrontal cortex the rest of the day. And I think that that was huge for us so we ended up, during the pandemic we were able to leverage that time, we call it Banner. And we were like really able to leverage that time to say like to every teacher, ‘these are your twelve babies, you own them, if you can’t get in touch with them, here’s what you do next.’ Like if these kids are missing a lot of days, here’s where this goes. And then, the kids they trusted their Banner teachers. And also in banner, like a huge part of Banner is identity, and so we’d been talking about identity for a while and we hadn’t really dived into how do we integrate this into our school as much as we wanted to. And so, we actually spent time in Banner during the pandemic giving kids space to think through how they identify and what that means for them and how they want to create a sense of belonging for themselves in this world. And I think that, I think it made a big difference.