

#### #4 Opportunity Culture Audio: Advice from an Opportunity Culture Director

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**SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT:** Welcome to Opportunity Culture Audio. I’m Sharon Kebschull Barrett, and today we hear from my interview with Anne Claire Tejtel Nornhold, who leads the Opportunity Culture work in Baltimore City Public Schools. Nornhold will be transitioning out of this role in spring 2022, so we asked her for reflections on what worked well and advice for other district Opportunity Culture directors. To learn more about the roles we discuss and the Opportunity Culture school staffing redesign process, see the links on [OpportunityCulture.org](https://OpportunityCulture.org).

As Baltimore City’s Opportunity Culture lead, Nornhold focuses on identifying schools that want to use Opportunity Culture staffing models and helping each school design the Opportunity Culture implementation that best fits the school. She oversees the candidate pool that schools draw from to fill their new roles, and the development of the accountability framework for those roles.

Nornhold first came to Baltimore City Public Schools in 2000 as a Teach For America corps member. After teaching for 11 years, she took a district-level role working on the district’s new “model pathway” idea to give teachers ways to advance their careers.

**ANNE CLAIRE TEJTEL NORNHOLD:** I feel very passionately about retaining our very best teachers, making sure that they don't leave to do other things but that they stay working with our kids, and I was a little bit disheartened by how a lot of people were making it onto the model pathway, but it wasn't having the intended impact of actually changing outcomes for kids—and so I felt disheartened by that because student success, student potential, students being able to live their best lives is what I have a really strong sense of urgency around. And then I heard about Opportunity Culture, and I was like, “Oh, this sounds like what's been missing,” and so I kind-of like threw myself into the work. The district didn't have someone they had picked to pick this up and start implementing it, and so I kind of took it on concurrently with my other position. And then the following year I did it solely and stopped doing the pathway work.

So, it was really something that appealed to me because I think that there are two main ways we can improve outcomes for our kids—we can hire better-prepared teachers, stronger teachers to begin with, or we can improve those that we already have, and so this really spoke to me. I had heard about it from a colleague a few years before, and she had said, “Oh, you would love this” and so then when I heard it was coming to the district, I was like, “Oh, this is, this is great—I want to do this.”

Hiring any teacher is just a struggle, regardless of their caliber or preparation, and I don't see that being resolved in the immediate future. So, that just makes Opportunity Culture even more important as a, you know, whoever you are, if you come in, we believe in your potential to improve and do what's best for kids if you're willing to collaborate and put in the effort to do so. So, I just love the, the growth mindset, like Opportunity Culture is just—it's just grounded in growth mindset and believing that everyone can get better.

**BARRETT:** When Nornhold began to learn about how to lead Opportunity Culture work in Baltimore, Public Impact consultants impressed upon her how much a strong selection process for the new roles

could predict overall success for students and teachers. Opportunity Culture educator roles include the multi-classroom leader, or MCL, team reach teacher, and paraprofessionals known as reach associates.

**NORNHOLD:** We have spent a lot of time thinking and tweaking and refining our selection process for folks in Opportunity Culture roles. We've done so much thinking about it and going back and forth, and we, I think, have landed on a model that for the most part selects really strong folks. And so I do think that the vast majority of the MCLs and team reach teachers and reach associates that we select to be placed in the pool are phenomenal, and they are really, like, doing groundbreaking outstanding work in closing achievement gaps, and so working with them is just, like, the best part of my job.

**BARRETT:** Nornhold, the district's accountability office, and Public Impact worked together to create a selection process for a district talent pool from which each school can interview candidates for its Opportunity Culture roles. The selection process gauges the impact each teacher applicant has had on student learning growth. Initially, the district created a value-added model, looking at its data for candidates who were in the top third of student growth, making more than a year's worth of learning growth each year with students. They also looked for those whose results were strong in at least two out of the previous three years, to focus on those with results that stayed steady or trended up.

Applicants also submitted essays that included information about how they collect and analyze student data, and they had to submit their own data from the most recent year as well, which was especially valuable for non-tested grades.

**NORNHOLD:** We wanted to see how they presented a compelling case for data, that they had led students to achieve and had analyzed and what next steps would be for that data.

**BARRETT:** When Covid hit, some data-gathering was paused. Without all the data it previously relied on to generate the value-added scores, the district changed the selection process to ask that teachers submit three years of data, including beginning-, middle-, and end-of-year scores to help the district determine growth.

**NORNHOLD:** We've had a lot of challenges with candidates accessing data because of the pandemic and just because, like, a lot of this is just not accessible to teachers after they finish teaching these kids, and so I worked again with the Office of Achievement and Accountability to create a process by which teachers could request their previous scores for their students. And that was just like, we need a better process because that was just one person pulling this data for me, and he had a full-time job and it was just, like, really arduous to get all that done in a timely way. After they complete this application, anyone who earns passing scores goes through a behavior event interview, and if they earn the scores necessary to move on from there, we do an evaluation check. We just make sure that their evaluation scores are solid, if there are no red flags, et cetera, and then they're placed in the talent pool, and principals can hire anyone from that pool.

**BARRETT:** Additionally, the district dropped one of the essay questions in favor of having multi-classroom leader applicants respond to a video of someone teaching, detailing how they would coach that teacher—an idea Nornhold got from the Opportunity Culture selection process in Indianapolis Public Schools.

**NORNHOLD:** We don't expect our MCLs to come in knowing exactly how to coach others, but this is a really great way to see if they understand good instruction. So, the questions are, "What are this

teacher's strengths? What are this teacher's areas for growth, are the students in this classroom poised for success based on what you've seen, and what would be your next steps with this teacher, and how would you get your teacher to be able to be successful in those next steps?" So, we really like that as a question.

**BARRETT:** The process needs further refining, Nornhold says, before the district broadens its use. The district so far considered only internal candidates, with a focus on math and English.

**NORNHOLD:** So, we currently do not accept folks who are external to the district. That was a conscious choice, because we wanted to make sure we got the selection process really nailed down and consistent before we started expanding—not only the content areas, but also the folks who are applying for roles.

**BARRETT:** Even without accepting external applicants, the district has always been able to create a pool with more than one strong candidate per position.

**NORNHOLD:** One piece of advice for other district leaders is, it's really good to have a deep pool, but not if that means compromising the standard to which we hold our candidates. So, in my head I've had this internal battle where I think, "Oh, but I really want these schools who want to do Opportunity Culture to have candidates to do the roles," and then I remind myself that there's no point if it's not going to be a super, super strong person. So, I would say never sacrifice quality just to have more folks in the pool. Just make sure that the ultimate goal is like, "Is this someone who's going to be transformational, is this someone that you feel a hundred percent good about putting in that pool," and if that means that we don't have multiple candidates for each vacancy, so be it.

**BARRETT:** To hire reach associates—advanced paraprofessionals who support multi-classroom leader teams—the district has somewhat mitigated the shortage of applicants by tapping into the substitute teacher pool.

**NORNHOLD:** That was a really great way to deepen our pool with folks who are actually doing the work and are used to, kind-of like, not knowing which class they're going to be in next and being really flexible and having these, like, core competencies that we want for this role, too. So, that's a nice little trick to have in your back pocket, to tap into your substitutes.

**BARRETT:** The district also has created an accountability rubric that Nornhold is proud of, though she notes that it, too, is a work in progress. It was meant to help ensure that MCLs have their intended impact and began as a way to track their coaching, borrowing from systems that Opportunity Culture schools in Indianapolis and Chicago used.

**NORNHOLD:** The tracker captures as succinctly as possible but also, like, still in a pithy way, what MCLs are doing and the impact they're having. And so it's a tool where they record the coaching actions that they've taken, the team teachers with whom they've implemented those coaching actions, the single highest-leverage action step that each team teacher is working on from week to week, and it's broken up in weeks, and they have a dropdown for the coaching action, and we just tried to make it super, super user-friendly but also able to capture really important data.

There are formulas that count how many times each team teacher has had an observation or has been co-taught with or has been modeled for, et cetera, and so our first idea was we just need to make sure that MCLs are doing this tracker, and then it grew into OK, not just the tracker, but also part of the

tracker is the MCL setting goals for team teachers, both teacher practice goals and teacher and student growth goals. So, a teacher practice goal could be something like, by the end of the year I want to be able to break students up into flexible groups based on current data every two weeks, or whatever it is, something that would really move the needle on their instruction.

**BARRETT:** The district provides a guidance document explaining how to set these goals and create benchmarks for them.

Having MCLs work with their teams to set student growth goals is key, Nornhold says.

**NORNHOLD:** We want MCLs to impart to their teachers how important student growth is and to set ambitious but attainable goals, so that even if they end up not quite meeting those goals, they've made enough progress that they can feel really good about it. So, we do a lot of work with MCLs on, like, "How do you set goals with your team teachers; when should that happen?" It can't happen the first couple weeks of school, you have to have that relationship. You have to get to know the teacher's practice, you have to gather BOY data, et cetera, but setting those really meaningful goals and just, like, relentlessly pursuing those goals for kids. So, I think there is a lot of other stuff there, like, you want the kids to love classes. You want kids to have this joy factor. You want kids to have all their needs met. That is, I think, beyond the scope of what we're able to gather, and so the most important metric for us— notwithstanding that all the others are very important, but the one that we look at most closely—is, "Are students actually making gains, and are they making more gains than they would be making if their teacher wasn't working with an MCL?"

**BARRETT:** The tracker becomes part of the MCL accountability framework. Nornhold notes that checking that MCLs are completing the tracker may feel like "just a compliance thing," but it's crucial for the district to know how MCL teams are doing and whether those team teacher goals are being met. An MCL rubric filled out by the principal also helps gauge MCL performance and impact, based on how team teachers improved between their first and second formal observations. In an MCL's first year, the district collects this data and assesses the MCL's performance but considers it a "practice" year.

**NORNHOLD:** The way that I picture it is, folks will conduct the evaluations at the district level and then make recommendations to principals about whether that MCL should retain their position or not retain their position. It's also very much a developmental tool, so we want to use the results, especially from that first year, to see where the trouble spots are with our MCLs and use that to redefine our focus on support and professional development and coaching for next year. So, it's not just like a "check the box, is this MCL doing a good job or not," it's also, like, "where are the weak spots; what do we need to even refine about the tool itself, and what do we need to refine about the way we're supporting our folks."

**BARRETT:** Along with the obvious challenges posed by the pandemic—in particular, Nornhold says, of protecting release time for MCLs when so many teachers were out sick—she identifies as an ongoing challenge the fact that the strong selection process does not guarantee a great fit every time. She spends a lot of time considering what went wrong when a hire doesn't work out, because, she says:

**NORNHOLD:** It just is bad for the program—you know, anytime a principal has a bad experience with an MCL, it just makes them think a little bit less about the rigorous selection process and how well-vetted these folks are, et cetera, so we try to do a lot of work on making sure that principals know that even though these folks are on the talent pool list, you have to find someone who's a good fit for the culture

of your building. I think that's also probably a comfort to other districts, because I think, to a certain extent, that's just unavoidable. Like when I've looked over and just reflected on, "How could this have been avoided?" I just think, like, this person's data was really, really good. This person presented really well in the interview; they scored really well. So, I think just knowing that there are always going to be some folks that slip through the crack. There's no perfect system and not beating yourself up about that and just having this accountability system so that for the folks who do fall through the cracks, we can very objectively say, "Hey, we looked at all these different measures of your work, and it's just not measuring up to what it needs to be, so let's see how we can support you."

**BARRETT:** Then, she says, the district can focus on supporting the person to improve or move on—because the district must always focus on what's best for kids.

And she notes that the quality of the staff is the most important thing not only at the school level, but also at the district office.

**NORNHOLD:** I've already spoken about the quality of the folks for MCL, TRT, and RA roles, but also the quality of folks at the district office who are doing this work, who are going to be the ones supporting the MCL. We have to have people who are resourceful and have a sense of urgency and don't just talk about working hard, but actually really work hard and have a growth mindset and are willing to do anything it takes in order to make this program successful.

Especially for small districts where every person who's working on this matters so much more, that needs to be a person who's fully capable and is going to put in a full work week of everything they need to do in order to comprehensively fulfill their role, and that means being a really good planner, and being able to manage all these different buckets, and being prescient about things coming down the road and planning for them, and foreseeing challenges and following through and fulfilling responsibilities. I mean, it's kind of like the principal versus the teacher, right? So, if your MCLs are amazing and the district leadership is not very good, the MCLs will still like keep things afloat, but they're not going to do as well as if they have a principal who's supporting their growth and creating a positive learning atmosphere and making sure that they get all the resources they need. So, I think there's an analogous situation with, like, the district office needing to also be very strong so that Opportunity Culture can really thrive in a district.

**BARRETT:** Nornhold also believes it's important to have a district-level person to provide strong support and professional development to MCLs, rather than relying on each school's administration to do so. That person can provide individual support, especially for teachers new to the MCL role or in schools that don't yet have many MCLs, and create a network of MCLs who support one another. In Baltimore, MCLs across the district get together formally once a quarter, but more often informally.

**NORNHOLD:** I do think it's an important role, so the way this role is designed is going in and observing the MCL in practice, giving the MCL feedback, making sure that the MCL is completing the tracker, and providing professional development based on what the needs are for MCLs. So, I do think that MCLs, especially early in their careers, just like early-career teachers, really need that touchpoint and really need someone whose sole focus—not the principal, who's got 27,000 things to handle—but the district coach's role, that person's sole focus is, "How can I support you—tell me how it's going, let's try this, let me watch you in action, let me give you some feedback, you're just going to get better and better," like, that sort of thing. I think that's really, really important, and that's been vocalized by our MCLs, both

when they get that support and also when they're not getting that support and they just, like, really want it.

It's also a big selling point for schools. So, when we do the principal information session and we say, "OK, this is all the support that your folks are going to get—they are going to have this summer professional learning before the school year starts, they are going to have this person at the district office or people at the district office who are coaching and coming in and helping them improve and..." that's like a real selling point. Principals love the idea that their folks are going to be part of a cohort. And, I mean, I think part of this role is also, like, linking MCLs together, right? Like, kind of nurturing this community of people who have this shared experience, which I think is possible to do without somebody who is leading the charge at the district office, but much more challenging. So, everyone just gets better. Everyone has something to learn from someone else, and then teachers and students benefit as result. So, it's a win-win."

**BARRETT:** And what are the wins the district sees? Nornhold says student growth continues to look promising this year, as well as data on how much teachers on MCL teams increased their scores on formal observations.

And school culture metrics, such as rates of attendance, suspensions, and office referrals, were also promising when she reviewed middle-of-the-year data.

**NORNHOLD:** I was able to compare attendance at OC schools and suspensions at OC schools to other schools, and OC schools did a lot better than the district as a whole with suspensions and attendance, so that was really encouraging—like, almost every school was like way above average on attendance rate being good and suspensions being low. So, that was great.

**BARRETT:** Another powerful data point, she says, is the annual Opportunity Culture survey of educators in Opportunity Culture schools. Nornhold noted that the results are not as high this year as usual, which she attributes in part to the ongoing stress of Covid—and to when the survey was given, at the lowest point of the year, during the Omicron surge.

**NORNHOLD:** We love that survey because it cuts the data in so many different ways. So not only does it cut it by school and by OC and non-OC position, but it also looks at the whole district. And that's a really compelling—like, we got a lot of folks who strongly agree or agree that OC is making a big difference, increasing collaboration, improving instruction, making a difference for kids, like, all these things, that they wanted to continue, I mean astoundingly high numbers which is awesome.

**BARRETT:** Longer-term, Nornhold sees an ongoing need for more data, such as comparing teachers who have and do not have an MCL, and more disaggregated student data. She also wishes for a straightforward way to track teacher retention rates and the reasons behind teacher departures, with a focus on how well they retain the people they *most* want to keep.

**NORNHOLD:** That's what we want. That's what retention should mean, not just warm bodies in classrooms, you know?

**BARRETT:** Strong support from the top also matters, Nornhold says, with the district's superintendent and chief of staff publicly supporting Opportunity Culture implementation and expansion.

As Nornhold leaves, she sees strong Opportunity Culture momentum in the district.

**NORNHOLD:** The principals who have these folks working for them are really pleased, and I mean, there are these little anecdotes all the time about principals saying they don't know how they would have gotten through the pandemic without their MCLs, and the principals who have zeroed in on the potential of Opportunity Culture to serve as a great recruitment tool to get talent in their buildings. They just, like, figured something out that other principals really need to figure out, because it's just, it's really great. So, principals for the most part love it. We had three schools our first year just as a little pilot because we got started late with implementation. We added six schools the next year, we added 11 for this current school year, and we're adding another six-ish next year. So, there's been steady growth. I think that's a testament to the positive buzz, and principals talking to each other, and principals are not going to do this if they don't hear great things.

I have district office stakeholders from all different offices wanting to meet with me and ask me about Opportunity Culture and how can we learn from what you've done, and I think that's very exciting. There's this, like, desperation for something that works, and people have clung on to Opportunity Culture as something that's beginning to get traction in the district. So, I think that's probably the most exciting thing and the most successful thing that we've been able to accomplish.

**BARRETT:** Ultimately, Nornhold says, her message to other Opportunity Culture directors is the importance of staying focused on quality.

**NORNHOLD:** The most important thing is quality. Don't sacrifice quality for anything. Just keep the kids at the forefront of your mind when making all your decisions, right?

**BARRETT:** Thank you again to Anne Claire Tejtel Nornhold, and to learn more, visit [OpportunityCulture.org](https://OpportunityCulture.org).