

#5 Opportunity Culture Audio: Comprehensive Communications Strengthen Opportunity Culture School

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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 hear from Julie Shields, principal since 2003 of Bearfield Primary School in rural Hertford County, North Carolina.

Julie Shields deeply understands her school community. She knew Bearfield Primary needed some new solutions for its students' struggles—and she spotted a potential answer just before Covid hit, when Superintendent William Wright proposed becoming part of the national Opportunity Culture initiative. Having schools create small teaching teams led by proven excellent teachers known as multi-classroom leaders, or MCLs, struck Principal Shields as a way to change academic outcomes and enhance the caring atmosphere of the school.

SHIELDS: *We were at a point in, and we need Opportunity Culture because we need to basically grow—professionally as teachers, but also, as family members. The children need to be more aware of not just their own teacher but have that same family atmosphere, so they know their teacher, they know the other teachers in the grade level, and then, when you implement it more in the school, it's a bigger family, it's a bigger cultural difference that has made just us all grow.*

Opportunity Culture has strengthened the relationships across grade levels because we all want to hear what each other is doing, because we're all on the same team. So that's what I've seen—the cultures strengthened across grade levels, and therefore, every child is being taught by an excellent teacher and that's our goal. If you're the MCL, you're coaching the other teachers to become excellent teachers; so, you're reaching more children and ultimately, every child in kindergarten, first, second, and third now at Bearfield has that opportunity and that's what we're striving for.

BARRETT: Shields sensed that getting staff buy-in and understanding of these big changes to the school required deliberate, continual, focused communication about the 'what' and 'why' of Opportunity Culture models. Her sense is underscored by data—the more successful Opportunity Culture schools typically score higher on questions about communication on the annual, anonymous survey of Opportunity Culture educators. Bearfield Primary's score on this part of the survey put it in the top five of Opportunity Culture schools nationwide, with 98% of those surveyed agreeing that the school provides ongoing communication about its staffing model.

So, after seeing some Opportunity Culture schools in action in other districts, how did Shields introduce the concept to her staff? She began by presenting it to meetings of each grade level—over Zoom, during the height of Covid in 2020.

Bearfield Primary serves kindergarten through third grade. The first- and third-grade teams, she says, latched on to the idea—and those were important, with third graders being the school’s only grade to take state end-of-grade tests, and first grade typically being the school’s largest grade.

SHIELDS: *They embraced it without even knowing that much about it. We went through the PowerPoint presentation and everything, but those two stood out, whereas the rest of them were like hesitant. So, that’s why we started with first and third.*

BARRETT: Shields kept up a steady stream of communications from that point on.

SHIELDS: *What I did to keep on communicating is I would do videos, sometimes on a Sunday evening to prepare for the week, and I would always add information about Opportunity Culture. I would also showcase them in my emails. I would send emails out about congratulations to and named the people that were the MCL’s and giving them kudos for what they were doing—kept it out in front of everything, not waiting and doing it just once a year. And everybody kind of got used to that and as the year would progress—even though we were doing it virtually, they wanted to be a part of that. They wanted to see the results, but they also wanted to be a part of that to get the results for our students.*

BARRETT: Shields wanted to capitalize quickly on that desire to be a part of what was happening, to get the school in its second Opportunity Culture year to 100 percent implementation—meaning all grades would have MCL teams.

SHIELDS: *And so, kindergarten became excited and so did second grade because our current first- and third-grade staff that had implement it first, they actually had a meeting for them to ask any questions; led by the MCLs, the TRTs and the reach associates, not led by me. That was more important than anything.*

BARRETT: That meeting was the teachers’ idea; initially, Shields had proposed videotaping them talking about their Opportunity Culture roles to share with the kindergarten and second-grade teams. But the MCL teams from first and third grade proposed that they lead a Zoom meeting instead.

SHIELDS: *I was amazed at the participation and the questions. They saw the passion that the MCLs and the TRTs and, also, the reach associates displayed, and it was real. It wasn’t someone telling them what to say, it was real.*

BARRETT: The results for these teams, both academically and in giving students more adults to bond with, had quickly become apparent, Shields says.

SHIELDS: *I think, third-grade and first-grade staff that were Opportunity Culture but also those that were not Opportunity Culture could tell what had happened with their teaching; that their teaching improved, their students knew more than just them, they were heavily involved with the MCL that was supporting their classroom. So, it’s a win-win situation, so I think everybody saw that and we wanted 100% of our staff participating and supporting it. And not only from our Opportunity Culture staff but we have to have the support from the other staff for it to work. For me, as a teacher, I would have loved to have had another teacher come in and give me ideas, which we did, but our children need more now than when I first started teaching, and especially after a pandemic. So, what better way than to have a support system.*

BARRETT: Even though her focus on communication is leading to 100% implementation, Shields knows she has more to do.

***SHIELDS:** I have left a group out, not left a group out on purpose, but we really need to get our parents and community aware about it. They've got to know, not only do you have a fabulous teacher, but she is also a teacher-leader and she's making a difference with more than just your child, but other students and, and growing herself. So, I need to do better at that, you know, that communication piece with our parents and community.*

BARRETT: Shields is thinking about how to showcase one or two Opportunity Culture educators each month, to highlight for parents how children have excellent MCLs leading their teachers. And she's thinking about other ways she can help parents visualize what's happening in the school even if they don't yet want to or can't come into the building, such as through short videos. She also wants to explore the possibility of sharing information about Opportunity Culture schools through a quarterly meeting the superintendent has with local ministers.

Within the school, maintaining the messaging during regular meetings and through videos explaining the staffing changes becomes key, to keep reminding the staff of the 'how' and 'why' of Opportunity Culture work—tying the roles to student learning growth, and to the educators' growth.

***SHIELDS:** We've all decided Opportunity Culture needs to go back on their agenda, their weekly meetings—not just the meeting that I have, the vertical planning, but also the weekly meetings that they have for planning, when the whole grade level gets together, and when they plan for the following week or plan for two weeks in advance. And Opportunity Culture needs to be revisited at every one of those meetings to keep it, you know, alive within their grade level. I think, Opportunity Culture needs to be on that agenda just because it's made such a difference.*

And, you know, I don't want us to lose that drive and lose that enthusiasm. The excitement has got to stay alive on my part so everybody else feels that same excitement and that desire: I want to be in that position, I want to continue to do this. So, I want it to be at the forefront of our beginning of the year meetings, our weekly meetings, our vertical planning sessions, you know, we're going to be doing lots of things this year other than Opportunity Culture, but it has to be at the forefront.

BARRETT: Setting that foundation also helps ensure that Opportunity Culture implementation stays solid if a principal retires or moves to another school, Shields says. Regular, district-wide meetings of Opportunity Culture educators can further strengthen that foundation, along with the solid support she sees at the district level for Opportunity Culture implementation.

And as she looks ahead to the coming year, Shields expresses gratitude for the school's educators taking on Opportunity Culture implementation when they did.

***SHIELDS:** For this to happen during the pandemic, this is exactly what we needed because now we have the tools to help our students. Not to catch up—I don't like that word catch-up. It's all about growing, and Opportunity Culture has given us the PD and the positions that we are funding, it's going to make our students grow even more. And that's what they love so much, they talk about—when the MCL's and all of them—when they go out in public, and they see a child that's not assigned to their classroom, that's assigned to another*

classroom, it's like, 'oh, that's one of my teachers.' It sends chills up me, you know, I'm just like 'yes, that's what you want to hear!' So, this came, it was like it was meant to be. With Opportunity Culture with me, and this was a word that was used constantly, it is a game changer. It changed everything we did, how we looked at everything. I would say, if you want your teachers to grow, which will increase student growth beyond anything we've ever seen before, this is the tool.

BARRETT: Many thanks to Principal Shields for talking with us. To learn more, and to see a brief video clip of Shields talking about the crucial Opportunity Culture role of reach associates, see OpportunityCulture.org.