

## Opportunity Culture Audio #7: Making the Most of Opportunity Culture Innovations

**SCOTT MURI:** This is a revenue-neutral, creative way to think about how to improve outcomes for kids and build and edify your teachers, and it doesn't cost you a dime.

**SHARON KEBSCHULL BARRETT:** I'm Sharon Keschull Barrett, and this is Opportunity Culture Audio.

As superintendent of the Ector County Independent School District in Odessa, Texas, Scott Muri generates a lot of press coverage. In 2019, he surprised observers by announcing that he was leaving his high-performing Texas district to head to Odessa—known for oil wells and high school football, but also for extreme teacher shortages and struggling students. The president of the Ector County board said he wondered whether Muri had “lost his mind” when he applied for the job, and Muri acknowledged that it would be a “monumental challenge.” But Muri thought he could make a difference, in part by bringing the Opportunity Culture model to Ector County—and in August 2022, his many efforts to lift the district led his to being named as a finalist for Texas superintendent of the year.

**MURI:** So, I've used Opportunity Culture in a variety of different districts—was introduced to it in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and so understood the power and potential of Opportunity Culture; and then, coming here, was quickly faced with a significant teacher shortage where 18 percent of our teachers were missing on the first day of school in 2019, and we didn't replace a single one. So that's 356 teacher vacancies day one and subs all year. And Opportunity Culture, that's one thing that would help us, is to reduce the reliance on substitute teachers. Number two, this district needed to improve academically and so, Opportunity Culture provides a situation in which more students have access to the most effective teachers, and we needed that. And then a third one, really for me as a teacher myself, I wanted opportunities for teachers to spread their wings, and we needed to think differently about the role of the teacher. So once again, Opportunity Culture provides a scenario in which teachers get to teach and coach and mentor their peers and really develop themselves and their colleagues to become excellent professionals. So, for a variety of reasons, it made perfect sense for Ector County ISD.

**BARRETT:** Those teachers who get to coach and mentor their peers are called multi-classroom leaders, or MCLs. Chosen in part for their record of high-growth student learning, MCLs provide support and coaching for a small teaching team, leading lesson planning, data analysis, and instructional changes. Accountable for the results of the learning of all of the team's students, MCLs earn a significant pay supplement.

Each of the district's first Opportunity Culture schools went through a design process to plan MCL teams and implementation, and the district asked Texas Tech University researchers to study the effects of that first year with these teams in place.

**MURI:** I'll never forget the board meeting. It is the summer of 2021, and a Texas Tech researcher and his team were at our board meeting, and he gets up and presents all of his findings, and then towards the end he says, “I've been conducting research for 30 years, and this is the very first research study in which we can't find fault.” My board members just smiled with happiness because you can't say that about everything—to know that you have a program that is affecting children in such a powerful way, it made all of us smile, because we know that kids are winning.

**BARRETT:** Requesting that research—which the district has done for the second year of implementation as well—provides an important piece of accountability.

**MURI:** If we don't have fidelity of implementation, then why are we doing this and then, who loses, the kids lose. This is too important to us to do poorly.

**BARRETT:** Notably, the research covered a school year disrupted by a pandemic.

**MURI:** So Covid-19 affected all of our kids, pre-K through 12th grade, and 62 percent of our kids live in poverty, and our most fragile children were the most significantly affected. We have been pretty intentional about placing our Opportunity Culture models in our schools that serve our most fragile children, and so, because of that, those students that were negatively affected by Covid and the pandemic have access to more Opportunity Culture teams, and therefore, access to better learning opportunities, and so certainly those students have been helped. We're now exploring how to embed the tutoring concept in a model in Opportunity Culture design, because certainly, kids that are a part of a healthy tutoring experience can be significantly accelerated through the learning process.

**BARRETT:** Muri and his previous districts turned to Opportunity Culture implementation when it was still a newer, less-researched initiative. Why did he find it to be a powerful concept?

**MURI:** I would have to put two pieces as most powerful. One is what it does for teachers. I think about myself having had this opportunity when I was a teacher—I might have ended up in a different spot. I taught for eight years and desperately needed to spread my wings, and this wasn't an option for me, and we have many teachers like that today. They do a great job with kids, but they need more, they have the ability to do more, and so, Opportunity Culture provides that scenario in which our very best teachers have the opportunity to lead and teach at the same time. So, your two passions get to come together in the same job—that's a huge win for teachers. And the other piece that I put equally as high is the student side. So, our kids, more kids today have access to our very best, our most effective teachers. And so, more kids are winning today because they have access to these amazing human beings. And so, teachers are winning, and kids are winning, and when that happens, you know, that's the formula for success.

**BARRETT:** In other Opportunity Culture interviews, principals have said they might never have become a principal had the MCL role existed when they were teaching—but Muri was the first superintendent we've heard say that.

**MURI:** I think about that you know, where would I be, because I did not want to leave the classroom, but I needed—I was jittery, and I was looking for something different, but I didn't want to leave the classroom. And so, how do you find a leadership opportunity? Oh, the next step then is to become an assistant principal, well really? And today, that's not the only option. In fact, in our district, our MCLs make more money than our assistant principals, and that's, that's by design, because I want someone to become an assistant principal or principal because they want that job, not to make more money. And so, people today in our system that desire to be leaders like that have that opportunity, but you're going to take a pay cut if you are an MCL. And so that has allowed us to keep truly our most effective teachers in the classroom and leading their peers, because they are making a significant amount of money. And then in this state, when you can add other opportunities on top of it such as the teacher incentive allotment, you know, teachers making six figures is a reality today in our organization, and that is only because of Opportunity Culture and the teacher incentive allotment. When you put those two together, that's a huge financial win for our teachers.

**BARRETT:** And remember those unfilled 356 teacher vacancies in 2019, Muri's first year? In August 2022, Muri announced the district's best recruiting year in over a decade, with the hiring of more than 400 educators, attributing that in part to Opportunity Culture implementation.

**MURI:** We have MCLs and Opportunity Culture folks that are coming from other districts because of this opportunity, and, then our own people, certainly it retains them as teachers, you know, they may have been looking at another opportunity. We've also seen some people that were in other opportunities, like assistant principals that have now become MCLs. This is what they desired all along but left because more money or opportunity to lead, etc. And then, from a pipeline development, it helps our young aspiring teachers see the opportunity. I mean, they see not only the rewards that you get by serving children but also financially, you won't be poor and destitute your whole life, there are financial rewards in this profession as well. So, it's a win at every level.

**BARRETT:** In the oil country of the Permian Basin, it feels especially appropriate to talk about the homegrown teacher pipeline that Muri cites as a critical piece of the Opportunity Culture model. That pipeline is created through paid, yearlong teacher residencies on MCL teams.

**MURI:** Statistically, in the United States, 60 percent of teachers teach within 25 miles of the high school from which they graduated. And so, what that says to us locally is our future teachers are our students today—they are sitting in our classrooms, and we have to generate a healthy pipeline and then develop those students today into teachers tomorrow. So, our teacher residents that are in college right now have an opportunity to learn from our very best teachers, so MCLs are shepherding and guiding and molding and shaping those teachers. So, that’s been a nice addition for us to think about the residency piece and embedding that in our Opportunity Culture designs.

**BARRETT:** And the innovative thinking behind Opportunity Culture designs can go beyond teachers and principals, Muri says.

**MURI:** I think on the innovation side, again, thinking differently about the role of the teacher helps other parts of the organization think differently about opportunities for others. So, we’ve talked about what does an Opportunity Culture leader look like? Oh, well, if we took this teaching model and applied it to leadership, how does that allow us to think differently about leadership roles in the organization? What if you took the Opportunity Culture concept and applied it to our operations team—what might that look like? So, it has helped us think differently about very traditional roles in public education. And so, that innovation side has been a big win for us as well.

**BARRETT:** As Opportunity Culture models become embedded in over half of the district’s schools, Muri says staying faithful to the Opportunity Culture model must remain a focus.

**MURI:** First, at the district level, we have to hold our schools accountable for the fidelity to the model. That is critical; I think the research this year is going to highlight some things that we need to pay more attention to so that we can become more focused. Because when we lose that fidelity, we’ve lost the model, and then we lose its purpose and intent, and that can’t happen. Our kids cannot afford for us to be weak in the implementation of this; we have to be spot on. Again, that’s why we are doing it, is to improve outcomes for kids and, also, to give opportunities for our amazing teachers to have that work. So, district-level supports should continue to evolve based upon the needs of our schools. There’s a principal layer of accountability—principals can come and go, but if Opportunity Culture is embedded in the school, the school should own and enculturate that new principal. I also think, again, at the district level, we have a responsibility there, too—through the interview process or the orientation process—to make certain that a new principal walking into an Opportunity Culture school fully understands the power and potential of that model, because if the leader doesn’t get it or embrace it, it’s gone.

**BARRETT:** In part, Muri says, that means having a district-level role dedicated to Opportunity Culture implementation.

**MURI:** You need somebody at the district level who wakes up every day thinking about it. And whatever position that is, whatever role that is in a district is up to the district, but somebody has to get up every day and think about Opportunity Culture to ensure that it gets the attention at the district level that it needs, and to ensure that schools are giving it the attention that it needs and deserves and that every level of the organization is being held accountable for fidelity of implementation.

**BARRETT:** And this matters, he says, to protect Opportunity Culture roles and structures even when top leadership changes.

**MURI:** Because there will be a point in which I will no longer be the superintendent here, but I see the value of Opportunity Culture, and it has to be embedded, and so, the owner of it cannot be me. A variety of people within the organization have to believe in it. Our board of trustees is already seeing, we talk about Opportunity Culture a lot, every trustee knows what an MCL is, they don’t know a lot of acronyms, but they know MCL. They’ve met them, they’ve talked to them, they’ve seen Opportunity Culture in action, and so, this is a board that would insist that that body of work continue. It’s the same board that asked me, “Why don’t we have that in every school?” because they see the value, they know what’s happening.

**BARRETT:** And a superintendent who comes into an Opportunity Culture district needs to understand the concept and provide full-throated support, Muri says.

**MURI:** It's a change, and it is not a subtle change, so the superintendent needs to know and understand the value of this opportunity. We are concerned now about attracting and retaining and developing, and so this body of work does all of that in one package, and so it's a huge win for the profession, for teachers in general. And the last piece is the financial component of this—I'm not buying a multimillion-dollar program; our schools are not having to find \$200,000 to fund this new opportunity. This is a revenue-neutral, creative way to think about how to improve outcomes for kids and build and edify your teachers, and it doesn't cost you a dime.

**BARRETT:** These are all messages, Muri says, that feel especially needed in today's climate.

**MURI:** There's a lot of noise in our country today about the teaching profession, really about public education in general, and I was with a group of our teachers yesterday in fact, and they were listening to some noise on social media, and you could see the effect that it had on them, and I know that that translated into the classroom. And so, whenever we can do something to build the profession and especially, to create an opportunity for the individual teacher, then that is an opportunity that we need to take advantage of, and Opportunity Culture gives us that mechanism to reward our finest, our greatest, our most effective educators. It gives them a chance to spread their wings as leaders. It takes the profession to a new level—you know, I'm a teacher and a leader; I have the ability to influence student lives, but also influence the lives of my colleagues, those around me. That's a great scenario for especially our teachers today that are a bit beaten up by what's happening in our country. And so, anything that we can do to elevate the profession and to demonstrate that a powerful teacher in the life of a child, and, now, in the life of other teachers, makes an impact on education for a lifetime.

**BARRETT:** Many thanks to Dr. Muri for speaking with us. To learn more, visit [OpportunityCulture.org](https://OpportunityCulture.org)