



News Release

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N.C. Districts—Including 5 Largest—Lead Nation in New Opportunity Culture Certification

CHAPEL HILL, N.C.— Fifteen North Carolina school systems, including the state’s five largest districts—Wake, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Guilford, Winston-Salem-Forsyth, and Cumberland—are leading the first wave of schools nationally to receive [Certified Opportunity Culture School™](#) status.

The schools earning this designation have implemented innovative models that extend the reach of excellent teachers and the small teams they lead to more students, for more pay, within regular school budgets. Certified schools have taken steps toward meeting standards correlated with student learning growth.

[Third-party studies](#), including one focused on Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), have shown that Opportunity Culture® models boost student learning an extra half-year annually, on average. Recent data support these findings.

At 147 certified schools, CMS has the most schools of any district in the country earning certification for 2023–24. The nation’s 16th-largest district, CMS was the first to implement these models in 2013.

“Opportunity Culture models have served a critical role in retaining teachers and expanding the reach of our highest-performing educators,” CMS Superintendent Crystal Hill said. “Over a decade ago, in partnership with Public Impact, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools had the privilege of pioneering one of the nation’s first advanced teaching role initiatives. CMS remains committed to being a beacon for other districts implementing Opportunity Culture models by sharing resources, hosting site visits and continuing our culture of collaboration.

“In our current educational climate, the Opportunity Culture model allows schools to recruit, develop and retain exceptional teachers. This investment in our teachers ultimately increases the academic performance of our students. Charlotte- Mecklenburg Schools will continue to invest in our schools, teachers and students through our advanced teaching roles programming.”

Nancy Brightwell, CMS chief of recruitment, retention and talent development, said the model’s Multi-Classroom Leader™ teaching teams address several crucial issues in education.

“In a world where teachers have many career options outside of education, we must make this an appealing, rewarding and supportive profession in every way. Becoming a career teacher must offer opportunities for continued growth and advancement—intellectually, emotionally and financially,” Brightwell said. “Opportunity Culture teaching teams make that possible, with job-embedded professional learning and support at every level and well-paid career paths that keep teachers where they want to be—with kids, in the classroom. Certification will help schools reach the highest levels of quality implementation as we extend these career options to every school.”

North Carolina leads the nation in Opportunity Culture implementation. Its 15 Opportunity Culture districts that have certified schools include other pioneers, such as the Edgecombe and Vance districts.

Superintendents Valerie Bridges of Edgecombe County Public Schools (now retired) and Anthony Jackson of Vance County Schools both sought “game-changing” solutions to their districts’ needs, and both were named state superintendent of the year after implementing these models. Jackson has since introduced them to Chatham County Schools, which he now leads. Wilson County Schools, using the model in all its Title I schools, was recently highlighted as an outlier nationally in [reading results](#).

“The Opportunity Culture model has the potential to impact student learning in profound ways,” Wake County Superintendent Robert Taylor said. “New expanded teacher leadership roles, such as the Multi-Classroom Leader role supporting a small grade-level or subject-area team with lesson planning, data analysis and more, are critical to assessing and advancing student achievement. These collaborative teaching teams help each classroom teacher continually improve their instructional practices to shape student learning. I am excited for the opportunities this model provides for our teachers and our students.”

North Carolina has the most schools among the 14 states that have used these models so far. That is partly because the state-funded “advanced teaching roles” program has supported districts in adopting them for the past eight years, with bipartisan support from the Republican-led state legislature, a Republican and a Democratic governor and business leaders represented by the nonprofit BEST NC.

North Carolina philanthropy also played critical roles, starting in CMS.

“My family has always believed in the capacity of educators and children of this district, state and nation,” said Katie Belk Morris, who was chair of The Belk Foundation when it supported early Opportunity Culture expansion in CMS schools.

Preliminary analysis of state data for the 2023–24 year shows that North Carolina Title I schools that have been using Opportunity Culture models for four or more years were 43% more likely to make high schoolwide growth (exceeding state growth expectations) than Title I schools not using the models. These same schools were also 33% less likely than other Title I schools to make low growth. Even in early years of implementation, the models made an immediate difference, also increasing odds of high growth and decreasing odds of low growth.

The fourth-largest district, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, recently [celebrated](#) learning growth results in schools with strong Opportunity Culture implementation, crediting it with driving student success.

“The Opportunity Culture concept is a key lever for change in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools,” Superintendent Tricia McManus said. “It is a strategy that empowers teachers to take ownership of student learning through adult learning, collaboration and a strong focus on instructional excellence for all. Thirty schools in WS/FCS utilize the Multi-Classroom Leader model and are finding great success in this approach to just-in-time professional learning and coaching amongst colleagues, and I would like all schools to be able to implement it over time. This team approach provides on-site support to those who make the magic happen for students every day, while also serving as a career ladder opportunity to keep our best teachers in schools. Teacher empowerment and support are the recipe for student success, and that is what this staffing model is all about.”

Guilford County Schools (GCS) Superintendent Whitney Oakley was chief academic officer overseeing the district’s Opportunity Culture work, which began in 2018, before becoming superintendent in 2022.

“Guilford County Schools is proud to be a pioneering district in the Opportunity Culture initiative, dedicated to bringing advanced teaching roles to our schools and serving the students who have faced the greatest instructional inequities,” Oakley said. “Since implementing this model in the 2018–2019 school year, our schools using Opportunity Culture roles have consistently demonstrated impressive growth in student achievement. Each year, GCS attracts exceptional educators to join our Opportunity Culture cohort, ensuring

sustainable improvement across our schools. We believe that the Opportunity Culture model is innovative, and we are excited to continue expanding its reach and enhancing the success of our students.”

Cumberland County Schools Superintendent Marvin Connelly, Jr., who is the 2024 A. Craig Phillips North Carolina Superintendent of the Year, introduced Opportunity Culture models to the district in 2021.

“We are proud to see our schools receive provisional Opportunity Culture certification. This achievement highlights our commitment to models that support both students and educators,” Connelly said. “The Opportunity Culture model has allowed us to extend the reach of our most effective teachers, and we look forward to seeing its continued impact as we expand it to more schools in Cumberland County.”

Many districts nationally have focused their first phase of implementation on Title I schools that have struggled the most to generate learning growth, attributable in part to multigenerational poverty. With more data showing student results, some districts commit to reaching all students in all schools over several years. Approximately one-third of students from low-income families nationally attend non-Title I schools.

These models also help districts retain effective teachers and pay many educators more through serving on teaching teams—giving educators support, collaboration and career opportunities. The latest annual, anonymous survey of educators in all schools using Opportunity Culture models shows nearly unanimous support for their school’s implementation, with 99% of educators in the Multi-Classroom Leader role, and 91% of educators in all Opportunity Culture roles, agreeing that they want it to continue in their school.

With Opportunity Culture certification and validation, schools can attract applicants looking for support and career paths, and reassure parents, their community, state and funders about the strength of their instruction. Certification levels convey strength of implementation in key areas, including selectivity of Opportunity Culture roles, student access to instruction led by Opportunity Culture teams, incorporation of small-group, high-dosage tutoring into staffing plans and financial sustainability of staffing plans.

Along with the five largest, these North Carolina districts also have certified schools for the inaugural 2023–24 designation: Chatham County Schools, Columbus County Schools, Edgecombe County Schools, Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Public Schools, Moore County Schools, Nash County Schools, Rockingham County Schools, Rowan-Salisbury Schools, Vance County Schools and Wilson County Schools.

Twenty-eight districts total in Arkansas, California, Louisiana, Maryland, New Mexico, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia now have certified schools.

“We are here to change our nation, but North Carolina is our home. Congratulations to the state’s districts, both large and small, that are implementing collaborative staffing models and getting schools certified,” said Public Impact Co-President Emily Ayscue Hassel. “Kudos to the legislators, governors and philanthropists who funded the transition to these roles that boost teaching excellence, student learning and pay. It’s time for North Carolina’s leaders to go big now: Let’s reach every school, student and educator. We crafted these innovations with research and teacher input starting 15 years ago, we use data every year to spread what works, and now we’re reinvesting to drive the price tag way down.”

Through the Opportunity Culture portal, districts can also now take advantage of the [Self-Driven Design™](#) process, a low-cost way for schools and systems to create their own Opportunity Culture plans. The cost of implementation, whether paid for by state or philanthropical programs or the district directly, comes in the planning and transition time for these models, but not in higher educator pay, which must be funded by regular budget reallocations to receive certification.

“Leaders in states across the country can seize this moment to drive up learning, teacher pay and economic growth—all at once,” Public Impact Co-President Bryan C. Hassel said. “As researcher Chad Aldeman [wrote](#) recently, the team-based approach can address the multiple challenges of educator shortages, low morale,

declining student enrollment, re-engaging students and getting them back on track academically, and more—even though, as he wrote, that might sound crazy. I call this crazy good.”

How Districts Use Opportunity Culture Models

Each school forms a design and implementation team of teachers and administrators that determines how to use Opportunity Culture roles to reach more students with excellent teaching. The design teams reallocate school budgets to permanently fund pay supplements for those in Opportunity Culture roles, in contrast to temporary grant-funded programs. In addition to these supplements, the Opportunity Culture initiative continues to support higher pay for all teachers, where budgets allow.

The [Multi-Classroom Leader](#) (MCL™) role is the cornerstone role, for a teacher with a track record of high-growth student learning who leads a small teaching team for a substantial pay supplement, averaging 23 percent of average teacher pay.

Their team may include those in Team Reach Teacher™ roles, for teachers who—critically for schools with [teacher shortages](#)—directly teach more students, typically without raising instructional group sizes, for more pay. This avoids filling a portion of teacher vacancies with long-term substitutes. The team gets support and [MCL-guided tutoring](#) from advanced paraprofessionals in the Reach Associate™ role.

Schools in the first round of certification all received the “provisional” level for their 2023–24 year and can seek a higher level for 2024–25 year; the highest, level 3, shows that a school’s design and implementation meet the highest Opportunity Culture standards associated with student learning growth and educator satisfaction.

Since 2013, more than 75 sites with over 600 schools in 14 states have used the models, reaching nearly 200,000 students in 2024–25. Since the initiative began, Opportunity Culture educators earned an estimated \$78.8 million in extra pay, not including the current school year. See the latest figures on the [Opportunity Culture dashboard](#).

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About Public Impact®

The Public Impact mission is to improve education dramatically for all students, especially low-income students, students of color, and other students whose needs historically have not been well met. We are a team of professionals from many backgrounds, including former teachers. We are researchers, thought leaders, tool-builders, and on-the-ground consultants who work with leading education reformers.

Learn more about the Opportunity Culture initiative on the [OpportunityCulture.org](#) website. To arrange an interview with Public Impact, contact Sharon Keschull Barrett at OpportunityCultureInfo@publicimpact.com.