Opportunity Culture® Audio

How Collaborative District Leadership Supports Opportunity Culture® Success

Timisha Barnes-Jones: *It's now a part of what we do, it's part of the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School way. It's just not for "those" schools, it's for all of our schools, and we are committed to finding ways to ensure that all of our schools can leverage Opportunity Culture.*

Sharon Kebschull Barrett: Welcome to Opportunity Culture Audio. I'm Sharon Kebschull Barrett.

When producer Beverley Tyndall and I visit Opportunity Culture districts and schools, we often notice the calm-but-excited vibes. That is, the schools feel calm and welcoming, but the educators can't hide their enthusiasm. They're excited to share how their collaborative Multi-Classroom Leader teams are making a difference for their colleagues and their students—and we definitely heard that when we recently visited the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School system in North Carolina.

Laketha Ebrahim-Blackwell: Opportunity Culture just lets us see when we work together, trust one another, build authentic relationships, we can move kids, we can move kids!

Barrett: That's Petree Elementary Multi-Classroom Leader, or MCL, Laketha Ebrahim-Blackwell. Petree is one of a network of 15 transformation schools under Area Superintendent Timisha Barnes-Jones. Dr. Barnes-Jones and Dr. Tina Lupton, the district's executive director of professional learning, both had Opportunity Culture experience in other districts. When they came to Winston-Salem, they used that experience to make adjustments to the district's Opportunity Culture implementation. Within a year, Petree and two other transformation schools came off the state's "low-performing" list—results the leaders attribute, in part, to Opportunity Culture models.

Here's Dr. Barnes-Jones.

Barnes-Jones: When you see those types of results, people pay attention to what are they using over there—what's happening at that school? Because they all want to know that strategy, and Opportunity Culture had a lot to do with us making those gains, because we're building capacity in our schools. We're ensuring that teachers have coaches, that teachers are getting ongoing feedback, I'm giving principals ongoing feedback on their leadership, and so, it's a cycle, and it was just wonderful.

Barrett: Lupton and Barnes-Jones have collaborated closely to ensure that Opportunity Culture support exists at all levels—bringing together multiple district offices such as human resources and finance, communicating with all area superintendents about Opportunity Culture implementation, and laying the foundation to spread Opportunity Culture models throughout the district.

Barnes-Jones: We want to see all of the pieces come together so that we have a really strong Opportunity Culture system, and that includes what is the professional learning that needs to happen for our multi-classroom leaders but also for those who may be coming up who can become a part of that pipeline. How do we collaborate with human resources so that we can be strategic about who are we looking for; how we are recruiting? And then, talking to our financial department, how do we train our principals on how to leverage their finances, how can we leverage Title I dollars? So it was really having all of those folks at the table to talk about this initiative, all of us coming together to have a common vision of ensuring that every student in Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools has an effective teacher, right, because we know they are the number one, you know, the number one factor on student achievement. And so, since we all have that vision, it's just, what are all the pieces that need to come together, and then we just keep revisiting it, revisiting it, revisiting it, and shifting and pivoting when we have to, to make it as strong as it can be.

Barrett: Constantly fine-tuning the work—and communicating any adjustments—is a recurring theme for Dr. Lupton.

Lupton: It's never perfect. There are times in which I have learned that I have missed communicating with someone, and it's just been kind-of through some of that work that we shored up our practices and got to a better process. Like this

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Lupton: It's never perfect. There are times in which I have learned that I have missed communicating with someone, and it's just been kind-of through some of that work that we shored up our practices and got to a better process. Like this year, one of the oopsies was working with the evaluation system, and we were changing the accountability for MCLs and how they were going to be evaluated. So I knew I needed to take a step back, reach back out to HR with our director that's over evaluations, and we sat down together and we looked at the instrument that we were proposing for our Multi-Classroom Leaders because we need a tool that was more aligned to their role, and I think it's just been through that open collaboration that we've gotten here, and although I might not be in the schools all of the time, I rely so heavily on their knowledge and expertise to guide this practice, and if it wasn't for my administrators and for the area superintendents and the other directors that I work with, it wouldn't be successful. It really has taken the whole district to make this work.

Barrett: Winston-Salem/Forsyth, like many Opportunity Culture districts, works to normalize regular coaching, in which everyone, at every level, has a coach.

Barnes-Jones: It's really very meta—I'm coaching principals on how they are coaching MCLs on how they're coaching teachers. And so, that's kind-of the work that we are doing is just strengthening our systems around observation and feedback, around student culture, around data-driven instruction; all of which is supported through Opportunity Culture.

This year I'm going to need to really coach principals around how to message Opportunity Culture—what coaching looks like—because that messaging is important. If you don't get that messaging right at the onset, you'll be playing catch-up the rest of the year.

There has to be a level of transparency, I think, if we're rolling out a coaching model, here are some of the action steps that you might get, this is what a coaching meeting is going to look like—share that with the entire staff so that there's no trepidation when we come into the classroom or when you say, 'hey, come to your coaching meeting.' They already know, you already shared, this is what a coaching conversation looks like. And I've even been coached in front of my staff. Having that kind of vulnerability and transparency really helped to take away some of the nervousness and the trepidation that some of the staff members had.

Barrett: The district supports MCLs in their coaching through monthly professional development sessions.

Lupton: They're a day long, and most of the time they are in a school, and we do walkthroughs together, and I gauge their understanding and try to come up with some sort of calibration in how they're responding to their teachers when they see instruction. So we go out together and we look at the instruction, and then we say, 'if this was a teacher that you're coaching, what would be your next steps, what's going to be your see it, name it, do it for how you are going to coach this teacher,' and we try to calibrate and come up to a consensus of an understanding for how we can work with our teachers, so that way also teachers aren't getting dumped on with so much wonderful advice but in different areas from different people.

Barrett: All that coaching stems from a focus on student data.

Barnes-Jones: So data-driven instruction is a high lever, and we know that it's a high-yield strategy, and so it's really critical for our principals to know exactly the data, exactly what point we need to work on with students, where the gaps are so we can close them. It's really critical for Multi-Classroom Leaders to understand every student's strengths, their

weaknesses, what content they know, what content they don't know so that we know exactly where to focus in on. And so, it's observation and feedback, data-driven instruction, and culture. Those are our levers right now that we're focusing on because we know that when you want to turn around a school, those are going to be your super-levers.

So, we are following the data continuum. My expectation is that daily there are formative assessments and that can be done via an exit ticket. Weekly: are we doing weekly check-ins? My expectation is that we are assessing students weekly so that we can then adjust next week's. And then, as a network of schools we are taking our common unit assessments, and we unpack those together as principals, and they unpack them with their Multi-Classroom Leaders, and then, of course, there are the summatives.

Barrett: As Opportunity Culture implementation proceeds, the district has fine-tuned the level of consistency among schools that still allows for flexibility.

Lupton: We became more specific with our parameters and the support that our advanced teaching roles needed. Like, with Multi-Classroom Leaders, you need a strong paraprofessional to be matched in those cases, and that's where we've seen the greater successes. So I think in looking at how schools have implemented it, and seeing which type has really had great successes and why it had successes in those schools, and having those conversations with those principals, helped us become more intentional with how we're doing it at the district level, and whether or not we are being too strict on parameters or if we need to be looser. So I think what the principals really appreciate about Opportunity Culture is that it can be flexibly designed to meet their needs. And I always try to work with principals to think outside the box, because many times we want to do math, ELA, and grade bands, and we've been having different conversations about, 'but if your data is showing that your EC students are having the most need, let's have an EC MCL,' and come in and really look at how we can increase access for our EC learners in the general core classes. So, having a different view of how these positions can be used, because they are not tied to a specific content area if that's not what the need of your school is.

Barrett: Lupton also ensures that the hiring process for those positions gets reviewed every year by a varied group of educators, to be sure it remains strong and meets schools' needs. The district screens applicants using a modified behavior event interview process to create an Opportunity Culture applicant pool each spring, from which principals may select new hires.

Lupton: I think that we have a pretty solid hiring process. We do a district pool; I have a team that comes together of the principals that are implementing, the area superintendents, some of the current MCLs, and we sit down and we look. Every year we review the job descriptions, we review the interview questions before we start the interview process—we all come to a consensus that these are the right questions, these are the right parameters that someone needs to qualify to be an MCL—and then, as we open up the pool, I pull all of the applicants, I get all of their data, put it in a spreadsheet, and I invite the whole team to come and review the candidates and say, 'Who are we interviewing?' And then, there's a team of us that will then sit down and do the interviews—I did about 150 interviews last year. So, March Madness is a whole different thing when it comes to hiring! So, we have a team come in, and we have a rubric and we have a set score, and you have to hit that set score to be qualified, and we stick to that, and I think that really adds credibility to our hiring process, because we have a pretty strong pool of MCLs out there, and I think the data is showing that. And then, after they go through our interview, if they meet that threshold, we tell the principals: 'this is the file that has all of your applicants, have at it.' Then, they do their hiring process at the school.

Barrett: Lupton follows the same process for paraprofessional reach associates and teachers who reach more students than usual, known in the district as expanded-impact teachers.

Lupton: We want to really remove all bias or perception of bias that could happen within interviews and that, you know, it's not someone getting a position because they're buddies with so-and-so; they're getting it because they're meant for

this role, and they're qualified for it.

Barrett: Extensive, consistent communication about the roles remains at the heart of their work to bring more great educators into Opportunity Culture schools—including some of the most traditionally hard-to-staff schools.

Barnes-Jones: We actually targeted some of our exceeds-growth teachers in our district to say, 'hey, our district is doing this, it's a ladder, it's an opportunity for you to get feedback yourself and to be a teacher leader.' We got a really great response from teachers who were teaching in other schools who were saying, 'hey, I would love to go and work in some of the transformation schools as a part of Opportunity Culture.'

Lupton: I think because there are more people at the table that are a part of the conversation—it's more consistent and it's better communicated because there's more people to communicate it. When it was a little bit more siloed, we weren't really singing the praises of Opportunity Culture as widely as we are now. And I think that, more times than not, we're really tying things back into these advanced teaching roles and showcasing the work that those positions are doing.

Barrett: Sometimes, new districts and schools hesitate to expand Opportunity Culture implementation before they have final results from a year. But, Barnes-Jones says, they can do much to assess progress well before that, and data shows the power of moving faster to reach more students with Opportunity Culture educators. Beyond learning growth data, they look at teacher satisfaction and retention, using Panorama and other surveys, rubrics for aspects of school culture, and discipline and attendance rates.

Barnes-Jones: Qualitatively, when you talk to teachers who are working with Multi-Classroom Leaders and they are saying, 'this is wonderful, I feel so supported,' when you have teachers who are saying they want to stay in some of your even most challenging schools because they are getting that level of support—gee, it's worth it, particularly now when teachers are in short supply, right? And so, looking at that qualitative data, looking at the data that we have that's available to us, students that are improving day-to-day—even before we get summative data, we can see formatively that students are growing. So, we look at that, we look at how culture has changed because we are leveraging this strategy. We look at how much more rigor is happening in the classrooms, and again, we are looking at how we are growing a pipeline, a pipeline of educators who want to stay in the game and continue to grow and grow and grow. So, those data points sometimes are even greater than what the summative data may say. There are other things that you need to look at, that show this is a powerful strategy.

Barrett: Expanding implementation throughout the district is a goal for both Lupton and Barnes-Jones.

Lupton: We as a district believe in Opportunity Culture, so we don't necessarily need to wait and look at the data to make the decision to know that we are going to continue to expand. Because if it's not working for a certain school, then it's something about the set-up within that school. Whether it be we need to have continued conversations with the principal, our MCL wasn't appropriately matched—there's something that's specific about the school and not about Opportunity Culture. So for us, it's not really about waiting for results, because we know it works.

Barnes-Jones: You definitely want to start with more than just one school, because when I was a part of launching Opportunity Culture in another district, it was so helpful to have other schools who were also doing Opportunity Culture. We became kind of a cohort of schools that could talk about some best practices, 'what's working with you, what's not working?' And so, figuring it out together and not being the lone ranger trying to figure it out. I would also say it's just talking to other districts. Now that Opportunity Culture has been implemented across the United States of America, there are lots of districts that you can talk to and figure out what worked, what didn't work, that kind-of could stop some of the hesitancy. It's something that you've never done before, but isn't that what education is all about, right? It's about trying something new, thinking outside the box, not just staying stagnant. You have to take that leap, and you're going to be surprised at how much impact it's going to make.

Lupton: What I want us to see is, as we continue to grow this and we're taking on schools that aren't in as much of a deficit—they've had struggles but they have also had histories of successes—and we're hoping that with having these advanced teaching roles positions within their schools, they can see that this benefits everyone, and even if you are a high-achieving teacher, there's great rooms for you to grow, because you could be an amazing MCL or an expanded-impact teacher. And you know, that's kind-of the heart of OC is to expand that across our district, and I think everybody wants OC because we all see the value in Opportunity Culture. So, it's just now the timing of when does each school come on to make the best impact? So I really see our area superintendents taking a larger role as we transition and really take the ownership internally with having those conversations and drafting their communication plans, their budgets, and looking at setting up—based on what the data says, where do you start your OC implementation? I mean obviously, I couldn't take on 40 schools within a year, but I think that we'll have good capacity. I think if we continue to do 10 schools a year, that's going to be a good balance while maintaining and continuing to grow the ones that are already in the program and continuing to bring ones on.

Barrett: With the lessons they've learned from their time in several Opportunity Culture districts, Barnes-Jones and Lupton have advice for districts considering their own implementation.

Lupton: Just do it. I mean, the longer we wait and try to make things work, we're putting our students at a disadvantage, because this can work in every and any school. At the end of the day, it comes down to having the right people in those roles, and as long as you have great hiring processes, you should have the right people in those roles. And then, having consistent communication between the schools, between the area superintendents that we're all on the same page. I think between communication and human resources, that's where you have to start. Everything else usually kind of falls in place as you are doing the work, but at the root of it, you have to have the belief that all students deserve great access, and you have to believe that you have great educators, because we all do. And, raising those great educators to have the place to flourish.

Barnes-Jones: Get crystal-clear on your vision. What is it that you want from Opportunity Culture and be really, really clear about the vision. Be really clear about the messaging and the communication, up front. Script it out, practice it, get feedback on it, and be really consistent with your messaging. Be crystal-clear around who all needs to be at the table, and make sure that when decisions are made, all of those folks are at the table. And most of all, don't be afraid to try something new, because that's where we see the results, right? So the secret sauce is just not having the fear to take the leap, not being afraid to tackle the hard things. Equity? Sometimes that can be a hard conversation, because you have to name the things that make people uncomfortable—even in your high-flying schools, you have to name that there may be an opportunity to look deeper into your data to see what's subgroups you might be missing. And I think Opportunity Culture helps to level the playing field for our students. It ensures that our students are getting high-quality, effective teaching every single day.

Barrett: Thank you to Barnes-Jones and Lupton for sharing their experiences with us. For more about Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, keep an eye on OpportunityCulture.org for vignettes and videos of their educators in action.