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Vacancies Plummet, Student Results Rocket in Carlsbad, New Mexico: Superintendent Gerry Washburn

October 29, 2025

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Sharon Kebschull Barrett: Welcome to Opportunity Culture Audio. I'm Sharon Kebschull Barrett. In southeastern New Mexico, Carlsbad Municipal Schools had a problem in 2019.

Gerry Washburn: When I got here, we had 103 vacancies. It was a third of the staff we had vacancies for. And really, that was a huge challenge.

Barrett: That's Superintendent Gerry Washburn. When he arrived, Washburn faced massive teacher vacancies and, in many schools, a demoralized staff. Then Washburn happened to be at a meeting in Texas, where the Ector County superintendent, Scott Muri, told him how he had led a reversal of his district's own severe staffing shortage and dismal student results. In Muri's entire first year on the job, the district failed to fill any of its 350 vacancies, and 16 of its schools had an F rating from the state.

Washburn: We were talking about all of the long-term substitutes we had, and he said, 'Well, I don't have any.' And I said, 'What do you mean you don't have any?' And he goes, 'That's not the way we do it.' And he talked a little bit about Opportunity Culture. So I asked him if we could come over and take a look at what it was. And he said, absolutely.

The teachers and Dr. Muri, when we toured, talked about their results, and they were pretty proud of them. I was skeptical about whether that was really going to be something we were going to see. I was skeptical about the whole thing, I'll be perfectly honest. I mean, it looked good, it felt good, it felt right, it met a lot of criteria for me about things I believe, but I wasn't sold. Because I've seen lots of programs, and you just go, you know, this is peer-embedded professional development, how can it do the things it does? Well, I tend to be skeptical because then I don't hope too hard that it's going to be perfect, and I think what really sold me more than anything else was engagement of the kids and the teachers.

Barrett: The engagement he saw was just what Carlsbad schools needed, especially at Cottonwood and Desert Willow elementary schools.

Washburn: When you walk in a building, any building, if you've been in the business for very long, you know what the culture is halfway down the hall. The way people look, the way they carry themselves, the way kids look. They were unhappy. They were frustrated. Kids didn't want to be there.

Barrett: But within a year of putting Opportunity Culture designs and Multi-Classroom Leader teams in place, visitors would see a starkly different place at Cottonwood and Desert Willow, as well as at PR Leyva middle school, the superintendent said.

Washburn: I cannot describe the culture shift in Desert Willow and Cottonwood. It is impossible for somebody that wasn't there to understand the magnitude of the shift, and in particular the magnitude of the shift at Cottonwood. And that principal was trying hard. It gave her the capacity to do the things she needed to do to move it to a culture of

learning. And a year later, kids are beaming, walking down the halls. Teachers are happy. They knew they were making a difference. And success is a huge thing. It really is. I mean, success is what gets you to where you can really, fully engage. You know, when I walk through Desert Willow, they're happy, their kids are happy, they're engaged. When I'm at PR Leyva, they're happy, their kids are engaged. When kids are happy about being at school and engaged, and when teachers are happy and engaged, your results are going to be fine. And that's what we're seeing. The teachers are dedicated to doing what's right. They pay very close attention to what their data is. They have the support to be able to modify their instruction based on where they're at. And they celebrate their successes all the time. And we talk about Cottonwood a lot, but Desert Willow is, I mean, their performance levels were, I mean, off the charts, and Opportunity Culture was the secret sauce that made that possible.

Barrett: As he said, it wasn't just a change in how schools feel—Carlsbad has the hard stats to back it up.

In the 2024–25 school year, Desert Willow Elementary posted the highest growth in the state in the literacy proficiency rate among medium-size schools, and the 31st-highest growth in the math proficiency rate.

PR Leyva Intermediate had the fourth-highest growth in the math proficiency rate among large schools, and the 17th-highest in literacy.

And Cottonwood Elementary had the 10th-highest growth in the math proficiency rate among medium-size schools and the 18th-highest in literacy.

Washburn: What we saw was an acceleration. And I think the buildings where we rolled it out were buildings where the leaders were committed to academic excellence. They were committed to getting there to start with. This just gave them the tools to get there much faster. And that acceleration in language arts proficiency at Desert Willow was unbelievable. And that gives me great hope that we can make that next step, because we have evidence that we're moving there. To me, the real hard nut for us to crack is middle school. And we are seeing great success at PR Leyva with that. But getting those middle school kids to where we don't have that middle school dip when they leave elementary school and where they continue to grow, that will do two things for us. That will significantly lower the number of kids that are going to even think about dropping out, and it will put far more of them on a pathway to being successful by any measure when they get to the high school. And so, we believe that Opportunity Culture is going to do those things for us. It's just going to take time and patience.

Barrett: And while the district intends to implement Opportunity Culture models in all of its traditional schools within a few years, meantime, the current implementation seems to create spillover effects in grades, subjects, or schools that don't yet have MCL teams.

Washburn: Desert Willow and Cottonwood, I mean, we started them out, it wasn't every grade level. But the adoption and implementation of things that were happening occurred very quickly, and teachers are pirates. If something's working, they're going to steal it. And if they're in a building and they see that that's working, they're going to try it in their room. And so the spillover is absolutely, I mean, there's no question of mine that occurs.

Barrett: The district has gone all-in on creating its own educator path and pipeline, understanding the limits of how many educators it can recruit who don't already have a connection to Carlsbad, and the limit to creating teacher residencies without a nearby partner university.

The Opportunity Culture Multi-Classroom Leader role is a key piece of the career path, and the district uses the Master Team Reach Teacher role, in which an educator teaches more students directly and supports one team teacher with

coaching and feedback. Teachers may choose to stay in that role, but it also gives them experience should they want to apply for a Multi-Classroom Leader, or MCL, role.

The district also sees the advanced paraprofessional Reach Associate role as another that an educator can stay in, or gain experience and coaching to become a future teacher. And the district has created its own teacher intern program, in which students working on a college degree can serve as an advanced instructional assistant for up to five years as an intern—sometimes joining a teaching team straight out of high school while they work on a degree in person or virtually. And finally, the district is working on a high school educator pathway program, to get high schoolers into classrooms even before graduation.

Washburn: I think that's one thing about Opportunity Culture, is it creates that systematic pathway to grow. And that's what people always worry about in teaching is, well, the only way I can grow is to go into administration. No. There are other ways. And that's one thing that Opportunity Culture has done for us, is, it's enhanced that pipeline.

Barrett: In the process of changing school culture and student results and adding these teams, the district has also dramatically reduced its vacancies.

Washburn: We have 24, but of those 24, 14 of them are special education, and then the rest of them are at the high school and are positions we're reevaluating. So we're actually in a pretty good place staffing-wise.

Barrett: The teaching teams provide a retort to the widespread negativity around becoming a teacher.

Washburn: Part of the story in education is why would anyone want to be a teacher? Opportunity Culture gives you an answer to that. You treat people like professionals, you give them the capacity to learn, you give them support, and you don't expect them to do it all at once. And they deliver amazing results. That is probably why it works, is because it establishes a profession of support and gives you the capacity to be in a culture of success. And you get to do the greatest job on earth. You get to make a difference in kids' lives, a real difference. I mean, why wouldn't you want to do it?

Barrett: So, what were some keys to their success so far? It began with a careful design and communication phase, making sure to keep educators, union leadership, and school board members involved and informed.

As many superintendents will note, redesigning schools for these teaching teams does require a chunk of dedicated time—anywhere from several months in a fast-track design phase to a full year.

Washburn: If you want something that's going to happen overnight, this isn't it. But if you want something that you can build a culture of excellence around that you can sustain over time, this is it. I mean, if you're under the gun to deliver results next week, this probably is not your baby. But if you have the capacity to have a board and a group that are committed to long-term excellence, this is a program that will do that for you.

Barrett: The design phase was followed by an intensive selection process for the new roles—a key to success, Washburn says.

Washburn: If you don't do that process, don't do it, period. I mean, you are going to fail. The whole point is identifying the people that have historically delivered good results and have the capacity to lead others. And there is only one way to do that: that's go through a vetting process that takes all the other pieces off the table and just says, this is what we're going to do.

Barrett: In Opportunity Culture design, schools learn about setting a high bar for team roles that pay more, especially the Multi-Classroom Leader role—and the need to keep that bar in place even if it means a district can't find enough qualified educators to fill all available positions right away.

Washburn: It is really easy to say, well, this is the best that we've got. If that's the best you've got, don't do it. Don't do it. Train somebody, spend some time, be patient. I mean, you can get there. We're pretty clear about what we've got to have from people if they're going to be in those positions.

Barrett: So what, then, would Superintendent Washburn tell other leaders to consider if they want to begin using these teaching teams?

Washburn: Sit down, talk to your people, and identify the grade levels where you have your strongest teachers so that you can tee the thing up for success, and understand that it's going to take time. It may happen faster than you believe—I've been stunned at the acceleration that we're seeing—but you've got to find the right people. It's a very different bus than a traditional educational bus. So you've got to get people that are willing to be on it, and you've got to sell your board on it, and your board's got to make a commitment. They've got to make a commitment to five years—I always talk about most of the things we do as having a three-year shelf life—it's either going to prove itself in three years or it's not. If it doesn't prove itself in three years, you probably need to figure out what you're going to do next. I mean, we're going into year three. We know where we are. And we can make that commitment moving forward. And I have told this to the secretary of ed, I have told it to every legislator that I've ever talked to: Opportunity Culture is the closest thing to a silver bullet that I've seen in my career. And we're always looking for a silver bullet.

Barrett: Thank you to Superintendent Washburn for taking the time to share his thoughts with us. Watch OpportunityCulture.org for more about the Carlsbad district and Opportunity Culture design in general, and follow Opportunity Culture on LinkedIn to keep up with the latest events and results.