



## OPPORTUNITY CULTURE® AUDIO

### A Rural “Force Multiplier”—Opportunity Culture® Design: Superintendent Anthony Jackson

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**Sharon Kebschull Barrett:** Welcome to Opportunity Culture Audio. When you think about what you could do to improve student results and make careers in education better, wouldn't you like some advice from a top superintendent? I'm Sharon Kebschull Barrett, senior VP at Public Impact, and Public Impact Co-President Bryan Hassel and I are delighted today to welcome Dr. Anthony Jackson, the 2020 North Carolina Superintendent of the Year and current superintendent in Chatham County Schools. Welcome, Dr. Jackson!

**Superintendent Anthony Jackson:** Good morning. Hi, everybody.

**Barrett:** So, Dr. Jackson, I first interviewed you back in 2019 when you were superintendent in Vance County, North Carolina, where you introduced Opportunity Culture teaching teams. And when you came to Vance County, which today has about 5,000 students, the district was struggling with high teacher turnover, an inability to compete against nearby districts with higher pay supplements, and historically low-performing schools. But back then, Dr. Jackson, you told me that Opportunity Culture models supported your belief that the district could be an incubator for innovation, and that using the models allowed the district to increase teacher pay, develop teacher leadership through career paths that kept great teachers in the classroom, and provide intensive support and development to teachers. So, tell us a bit about the results you saw there.

**Jackson:** Well, as you said, in Vance County, we did treat the entire district as an incubator for innovation. We used Opportunity Culture as one of those pathways to rethink how teaching roles were structured. What stands out for me and what stood out was that we were able to solve several challenges by implementing this particular innovation. And one was the issue of keeping your best teachers in front of children and allowing them to grow professionally and realize higher pay, more respect, and more collegiality and impact with their colleagues and with their students. So we built those leadership pathways, and I would say the greatest accomplishment there was that for the first time in my career, good, solid educators did not have to leave the classroom to ascend in their minds in the profession, that we were recognizing that there was an ascension in the ranks of teaching, and that we were able to celebrate that. We saw good academic outcomes.

We were able to also address one of the large issues there, and it was really how we dispatched those resources so that we were not constantly talking about class size as a variable for student success. In fact, that conversation absolutely went away. And we were now talking about the quality of instruction, the access that our students had to a high-quality teacher, an effective teacher, and most of all, the impact that high-quality teacher had on students. And we saw that in our results. Our end-of-grade results improved, our Opportunity Culture schools outperformed our schools that were not Opportunity Culture schools.

And so we saw good results there, and I felt really good about the risk that we took, because this was a risk. A lot of people thought that there would be dissension in the ranks. And in fact, it built a more collegial environment for our staff, our students, our schools.

And then the last thing I would say is I left that district shortly, but we had been three years into the implementation, and they have continued. And I still believe that they are very much committed to this model, and they are still seeing very good results around teacher efficacy, around teacher training, around student support, and, most importantly, regardless of availability of staff, they're using their staff to maximize the skill sets that they have, so that every single child, wherever they are, they get the opportunity to have instruction by a highly effective teacher every single day, which is one of the biggest differentiators for improving a school and for students achieving at high levels. So I loved the work that we did there. And as you know, I'm a disciple, so there's no real challenges there.

**Barrett:** We certainly noticed it in the trips that we've made there to do interviews and produce some videos and such from people in Opportunity Culture roles, certainly saw the joy that people felt with the support that those teams provided. And also that you had made it so that it just became how the district did things, so that it did survive a transition from one superintendent to another. So, well, now you've introduced Opportunity Culture design in Chatham County, which has about 8,800 students. So how did your experiences in Vance then affect your thinking when you came to Chatham?

**Jackson:** Well, I would have to say that my experiences in Vance really impacted and influenced a lot of the work that I'm doing here in Chatham. One thing I learned in Vance was that capacity is important and that you can, in fact, do far more if you invest in capacity—and that's the capacity of your staff—than you can if you invest in programs and materials and things like that.

So that was one of the things I really wanted to work on here. Chatham was a high-performing district, but we were struggling with the issue of capacity. When people left the district, initiatives would die. And so we had to institutionalize this work because we had a lot of resources, we had a lot of stuff. But the stuff was tied to people. And most of our people, they were leaving us because they wanted to grow. They wanted to get promoted into other areas. They thought the only thing they could do is become an assistant principal or a curriculum coach. And so we've had to change that entire mindset, rebuild our model, and then begin to talk about building the capacity of our best teachers so that they can provide the best service to our children so that they can get the best outcomes. And so that's where we landed here in Chatham, but that work was ignited by the work that I did in Vance County.

**Bryan Hassel:** You mentioned Chatham was a high-performing district when you arrived. It's also larger than Vance. I don't know if there are other differences between the two contexts that make the work look different.

**Jackson:** Well, there really are. It's larger, but also, there's a mindset difference. There are night-and-day differences between the two districts. One district was a district that really struggled to get resources into the hands of kids and into the hands of schools. And in Chatham, we are pretty much resource-rich. So you had to really kind of battle the mindset issue of when you're resource-rich, sometimes we believe that the product can change outcomes. And I had to really work with my team to have them understand that while the product was good, the product would never reach its full potential if we did not invest in the capacity. I stopped talking about intervening and started talking about impact. And I started saying, we can do a lot of intervention, but if we're not monitoring and really capturing what the impact is over time, we're just going from program to program to program. This becomes a mindset shift around how we use people, how we use resources, how we use time, how we invest in our people, and how we celebrate those who stay in the profession over long periods of time.

**Barrett:** So that's really interesting, that you had to confront those reactions from folks. So then tell us a little bit more about how you did that and the biggest challenges that you've seen in spreading Multi-Classroom Leader teams.

**Jackson:** The hard part is fidelity. Getting individuals to just stay true to the model and not try to have mission creep back to what's comfortable. We had that challenge in Vance County as well, but I see it every day that what we want to do, we say, oh, yeah, it's great. But then the first thing we try to do is match the new suit up with the old tie. And so I

really want it to be a new outfit. I want us to really take some risks and match some things up that we haven't matched before and do some things that we haven't done before. Use your colleague as a true expert teacher in that building.

The one thing that we've tried here that we weren't able to do successfully while I was there was go into that terrain we call high schools. And so we've been able to do that, and we've seen some great results at Chatham Central High School in terms of their initial work, in terms of what they've done and what they've been able to lay out.

But the other challenge that I wanted to make sure that others heard about was this challenge of choice. I wanted to make sure that as a superintendent, as a leader, we were not forcing this on any school building, and we were not forcing this on any leader. That becomes a challenge for the leader to be OK enough and vulnerable enough to back up and allow your people to make the decision that this is the best pathway for the building. This was not a volun-told opportunity for our organization. And we did that in Vance but here in Chatham, we did it even more so by really having schools go through a process of determining, one, if they felt it was right for them, but one, are they ready for this right now? Because it's a huge commitment. And what I don't want is the challenge of implementation getting locked in or running head-on with the challenges of change management, because those two, you've got to be ready to change before you're ready to really implement, because you've got to go all-in. What I've learned about this model is you can't do it halfway.

**Barrett:** I'm interested in talking a little bit more about the high school part of it, because we have so many more examples typically of elementary schools implementing than high schools. But I'm curious about, in both districts, you've talked so much about being free to take risks and that it's OK if you take a risk and you fail and not being afraid of failure. And how's that message gone over in Chatham, and did you find that just given the different needs of the districts, one higher-performing to start with, was there a different reaction to that message?

**Jackson:** I don't think so. I think part of that is the leader's disposition. And I believe that that was my responsibility, not only with just Opportunity Culture, but with school and district improvement as we approached that, that I needed to give people the space to absolutely fail forward, to learn, to question, to reflect, and to do things differently if it was called for. And so that became the leader's disposition. And I really deputized my principals to absolutely be vulnerable with their teams around what their fears are, what they need, how we can help them accomplish this. At the end of the day, I've learned as the leader, I'm focused on the outcome. But my support has to be on the inputs. And those are the people. And so if I'm going to support the people, I can go to the end of the road here and know that the outcomes are going to be what we expect.

But I can't take my biases into this, whether it's going to work or not work. I have to be open to the fact that it may look different in one school than it does in the other, because ultimately, if I'm focused on the outcomes, then I'm going to support what those inputs are going to be all the way along. And they may be different for each school. And we found that that's the case. In some cases, and as we ponder or probe the high school, you'll hear maybe some of that, how that looked totally different as we began to implement that than it did for us when we were doing the elementary implementations and even the middle school implementations.

**Hassel:** Well, let's dive into the high school. It's a time in our country when we're really asking high schools to do so much. They're training academically, of course, and they're also increasingly thinking about the careers that are out there and preparing students for those and connecting to the world of work, even more so. And so it's a challenging time. And what did you see in the high school as you started to move forward with these models?

**Jackson:** The high school was a very different approach for us. We implemented in a modestly small high school, our smallest high school, and it was simply one of those where they were really trying to maximize the use of their staff. And so in North Carolina, you get certain accommodations when you implement this model in terms of flexibilities around use of staff. And so this high school, which was a very good high school, they knew their data very, very well. But what

they actually needed to do was utilize their people better. Because in a high school—I was a high school principal—so sometimes high schools can be the land of the isolated. I know my content, and that’s all I know. But maybe I lack the skill set for integration, which when you get to trying to prepare kids for the workforce and for other programs or other things down the road, that’s the part that’s missing most. We teach them isolated, discrete subjects, but we have to learn integration.

But this thing helped us accomplish several things in that high school. One was staffing. Sometimes we would have places where we would be without a math teacher for half a year because we couldn’t find one. Well, we’ve got an excellent math teacher right there who could help us, but because we had built this box, that had ultimately become our coffin. We built this box that said, this person can only teach three blocks. And what it did was it freed us up to really be conscious about use of time. It freed us up to be conscious about use of resources. It freed us up to be conscious around how we built our master schedules. And were we building master schedules to meet the needs of our staff, or were we building master schedules to meet the need, the academic needs for our kids?

And ultimately, again, I go back to what I said at the very outset, were we going to get the outcomes we were expecting, staying with the old model? We had a rockstar principal who decided that I need to give this a chance, and she got her staff on board. We saw, they have the highest jump in high school performance in our district. They went from a C to a B on their school performance grade. They exceeded growth this year, and they have been teetering for several years.

We’re in the process now of having a conversation with all of our staff because of tightening of resources that we may have to reduce staff in some places in the future. This principal made it clear yesterday in a principal’s meeting, you can cut anything except my Multi-Classroom Leader, and we’re not touching Opportunity Culture. So we’re going to have to have that negotiation. She was very clear about that with us as we talked through that. So it said that there’s a place for it, has to be so very strategic in terms of how we implement. We didn’t implement like we did at the elementary, where we were trying to do grade-level implementation. We were doing departmental work, subject work, but with the understanding that there were opportunities to integrate and prepare for long-term impact. We saw the greatest gains in our Math 1 scores this year at that school than we have in the last five years. And they’re in year one of implementation. Now, we can’t tie it all to Opportunity Culture, but that was one of the big shifts that they made in their approach to providing instruction for kids to make sure every single student had access to the high-quality math teacher, those Math 1 kids. And so if it’s not the magic pill, it’s part of the ingredients to moving us towards success. But we’re really optimistic about the work that’s happening at that particular school.

**Barrett:** I love to hear that. And I know it’s useful for folks who can see this, envision it much more easily for elementary schools to hear that about secondary and what you’ve done. And as you were saying that you’re still in the early stages here, but the schools that did implement last year, the schools did both exceed expected learning growth. So tell us a little more about what role you see the superintendent playing in getting quick results. We certainly talk a lot about the importance of celebrating early wins. Yeah, what’s your role there?

**Jackson:** So, and you all, you won’t be surprised to hear this—my job is to clear the runway. Just remove the noise. That means aligning resources, protecting the design, and making sure that expectations are clear for outcomes. The good news is that Opportunity Culture, along with a few other things that we’re doing district-wide, we tied back to our strategic plan. This was not random. This was not haphazard. So one of the things that I made very clear to them was that we don’t do random acts in Chatham County. Everything that we’re going to do for kids has to be very intentional, has to be strategic, and, in some cases, almost surgical. And so I wanted that to be made clear.

And so my job for our principals who take on this risk—clear the runway, give them a clean opportunity to move forward and a great chance of being successful if they implement the model with fidelity. So I’m very unapologetic about if you’re going to do this, you know, we’re going to remove some of the barriers that have hindered you from

implementing some things previously, i.e., any of these internal rules that we've made that are not policy that may be negotiable. Let's talk about it and be OK with maybe giving some flexibility. I'm OK with flexibility if at the end of the day I get outcomes. That's just how I am. And so that's been part of my role.

I also stay close to learning, to the learning process. Every single day I say to our team, we have two things we're responsible for, teaching and learning. All the other stuff, it's ancillary, teaching and learning. I listen to the principals. I listen to the principals and the teachers and those who are in there. I'm not in those classrooms every day. So when I visit schools, I'm going to ask, how's it going? How's implementation? What can I do to help? Where are we strong? How's the training that's being provided? Are you clear about what you want? And then most importantly, I'm very clear at every single meeting I have with our principals and our teachers. I provide what we call our goals and our guardrails. Those are our outcome metrics that I expect at the end of the year. And so this is one pathway to get there. And I want you to be able to tell me that this is helping you accomplish and acquire those things to ensure that we're going to get there.

The other part is I use my team, my senior team, to remove the barriers quickly. When they hit a wall, I want them to be able to pivot very quickly and not get caught up, because I think that slows implementation down. When people hit a wall, they tend to want to stay there and wallow. For me, my belief every single day is if you keep hitting the wall and nothing changes, don't blame the wall. Don't blame the wall. I want you to really, you've got to do something different. And we're OK with intentionally pivoting if it means we're going to do what's right for kids. And so I just know that when leadership does what it's supposed to do to support them on the ground, these things, they not only happen, but they can happen faster.

**Barrett:** Well, all right, speaking of speed, by the end of this year, all of your traditional schools will have gone through the design process so that they can begin using Multi-Classroom Leader teams in the fall. So why has it been important to you to reach all schools quickly?

**Jackson:** It was important that it didn't feel like one, we were forcing it. But it was more important for me that we recognized that this was about teaching and learning. This was about achieving outcomes. And we've got a good base of performance that we can show people. If you're true to this, do it. I believe that what I learned in Vance as well as in Chatham is, if you do it right, that initial group, if you do it right, you'll have to slow the others down. You have to slow them down because when they saw what happened at Chatham Central High School, I don't have a problem finding the next cohort of schools that are ready to go.

Now, once they get in and realize the commitment, then we have to have a different conversation about how do you keep your folk engaged and on target to make sure that you're meeting those milestones throughout, to make sure that implementation is flawless or implementation is done well. That's important. But for me, I scale because I think our theme as a district, our strategic plan is One Chatham. One Chatham. And that means that I'm very uncomfortable if I'm offering something in one end of our county and it's not available in another end of the county. I become uncomfortable because I know at this point, if it's good, I now have created an equity issue. And so this allows for when you scale at a very predictable pace, then I think everybody understands that that's important. And if it's good for one, it's good for all. And that if you're not ready now, the expectation is you're getting ready. And so we begin to move in that place.

But we have two signature programs in our district already—AVID, dual language. And I'm hoping the third is going to be advanced teaching roles. And so once you do that, then it's understood that there's coherence, there's alignment, and this aligns perfectly with our strategic expectation that regardless of where you go to school in Chatham County, you're going to have access to the actual best. And so it works for us. And so there has to be urgency about getting something that we know works to all of our schools. But we have to do it in a way that's predictable. We have to do it in a way that's practical. And we have to do it in a way that's aligned with our values and our resources that are available to us.

**Hassel:** Dr. Jackson, Opportunity Culture, we've introduced a new certification system where schools can gain status as certified Opportunity Culture schools by meeting a set of standards. And these standards have been developed based on now over a decade of research about what correlates with high-growth student learning. This is something that your county's schools have embraced. And I wondered if you could talk about how that process supports strong implementation.

**Jackson:** I think right now, celebrating and allowing those in the model to grow and to receive recognition for the growth and for their levels of implementation, I think that's important. I think for the long-term viability of the model, it's important. But I think it also puts the onus of ownership, the onus of quality, the onus of excellence for the model in the hands of those who are delivering it. I mean, you look at things like National Board—teachers who own that, they own the process. You look at AVID, we're, you know, we, and in Chatham, we're excellent finishers, because in AVID, we're an AVID demonstration site. So I'm hoping we'll be an Opportunity Culture demonstration site sometime down the road because we do it so well. That's important.

And I think we forget that that's also part of the professional growth and the professional respect that I think we are wanting to give teachers in this model that says they're experts in this. They know what they're doing. We can trust them to help us deliver and achieve results. And I think the more we do that, the more you're going to see people gravitate towards that. Everybody loves a good winner. They want to be associated with a winner. And if we give them winning opportunities as educators, guess what? They're going to be celebrating education. They're going to be celebrating what we can do. We spend so much time talking about what's not possible.

Opportunity Culture is the exact, I've always said this to you all, it's the perfect name. It is the perfect name because I think it really does speak to what's possible if we would just invest in those people who are standing in front of kids, if we would respect those people who are standing in front of kids, if we would elevate those people who are standing in front of kids, and if we would celebrate the outcomes of those people who have benefited from those people that we have celebrated and elevated. It's a cycle. It says that they are definitely those people who should be where they are. And it celebrates that districts have made the right decisions about an instructional initiative that is more than just a fad. It says that it's going to stand the test of time and that it's going to be around. And you never lose out when you benchmark what you do against just really, really high and rigorous standards. You will never lose that battle.

**Barrett:** I also really love to hear what you were saying about the respect piece of it. Because certainly I've heard that in interviews with, especially with Multi-Classroom Leader, the team leaders talking about how that combination of the higher pay and the advancement without having to leave the classroom really does make them feel a level of respect that they just had not gotten before. And of course, we know that teachers should be getting that level of respect, and especially the ones who are getting those great results. So I love that that's part of your focus. All right, so you know that we love to hear what advice superintendents have for each other. So what would you tell other superintendents who might be thinking about strategic staffing design? And specifically, what would you tell other superintendents who are in more rural districts?

**Jackson:** Well, I would say don't underestimate what's possible. That's the first thing. I think a lot of people see Opportunity Culture and they think, my god, that's something we need a lot of money for. We're not a big district. I'm going to need more staff. Don't excuse yourself before you have done your homework.

The second thing I would say is strategic staffing is actually a force multiplier in the rural context. It's a force multiplier. In Vance County, I promise you, we were struggling to find teachers, and this model removed that conversation. I used to dread the 10<sup>th</sup> day of school and the board meeting that followed it, because I knew I was going to hear from parents who were saying, my child doesn't have a teacher this year. And with the implementation, we saw it as a force

multiplier. We were able to use, we had good teachers, we just needed to figure out a way to spread them over as many kids as possible in the most efficient way.

And then here's what I know. Start with your strongest teachers. You know, start with your strongest teachers, and design the roles to really respect their expertise, honor that work, honor the expertise of the teachers that you have. And I don't care where you are, you have amazing teachers. And as long as the decisions are data-driven, you, in fact, can, in fact, implement this model and you can do it well.

So I would say to my superintendent friends, you know, it's not a program. Opportunity Culture for us, I've always said it's not a program. It really is a redesign of teaching and learning. It's a different way of delivering what we've always done. And so if you're just looking at window-dressing and things like that, don't do it.

**Barrett:** We also, as you know, love hearing that, it's not a program, that when it just becomes part of what you do, the difference that we see that can make. So, I know we're going to have to let you go in a minute, but what didn't I ask that I should have asked? Is there anything else that you would love to tell people before we wrap up?

**Jackson:** Yeah, I do want to amplify and go back to that question around respect. And one of the things I remember distinctly when we were trying to gain support for this, that there was this conversation about other teachers, how they would feel about their colleagues being in these roles. In fact, I think that's part of the respect role, because I think the respect from their colleagues is elevated so high that they begin to feel more valued, because they know they're having the impact in those classrooms and their colleagues get to see it real-time. And I think there's a vulnerability with your colleagues that's not there when everybody goes into their rooms and closes the door. And so I'm excited about that. That part of it really does speak to me. And it has been, again, one of those things that has been, helped me clarify why this is good for school districts.

And for me to try it in two districts tells you that I'm, again, tells you I'm a disciple, because I think it works. And if I know, if I've seen results, I'm going to stick with it.

And the other thing I would say around the advice I would give to superintendents is to protect the time. Protect the time for this. And make sure that your administrators, your principals, they understand that these are not administrative roles to extend your hand into doing more tasks. This is your opportunity really to demonstrate to everyone—and I've made it this simple—I tell principals, it's your opportunity to demonstrate to your full community how important good, not only instruction, but good instruction is to you and your school every single day. This is your opportunity as a leader to protect that role, to say, you know, this is important enough that we're not going to saddle you with this—this is important enough that I'm not going to bother you with this, this is important enough that we're going to make sure that what you do is a premier and primary function of your everyday work and that it's a priority. Protect the time. And that would be it.

**Barrett:** I love that. And you know that we believe that's such a crucial aspect for success as well. And on the respect piece, I'm guessing that you would say that part of why you haven't seen any backlash there is that the other Opportunity Culture principle of accountability, that the Multi-Classroom Leaders are getting paid more, do have to be more vulnerable, as you said, but are also held accountable for those results.

**Jackson:** Yeah, and I've just never led with the money part. I don't know why, it's been there, and I know that's a part of the decision-making, but that's never been the thing that I've used to say, come do this because you're going to make—it's always been, come do this because you're an excellent teacher. Do you realize the impact you're having on kids? And by the way, I want to respect that. Oh, and by the way, you're going to get paid more for that. That's how Jackson has framed it, and it's worked. I don't know what the others have to do to get people. And I've never had a space where I've had people who said—I've never had, in fact, I've never had anybody say, this was a mistake. I shouldn't have done this.

**Barrett:** That's perfectly wonderful to hear.

**Jackson:** I'm just not, I've not had that experience. I can't speak for colleagues, but again, it's simply because we lead with, we're having this conversation with you because one, you're an excellent teacher. And I mean, I see their shoulders go back and they start looking at you—some are surprised. You're an excellent teacher. Have you looked at your data? And your colleagues know you're an excellent teacher.

**Hassel:** Yeah, it's inspiring to listen to you. And it's a good reminder of, even though ultimately this work happens in the classrooms, it happens in schools, the superintendent's role is so important for setting the kind of tone that you're talking about and for all the other roles that you suggested, superintendents really help get this going in a place and really help it keep going. So appreciate your leadership.

**Jackson:** Absolutely. Thank you.

**Barrett:** Dr. Jackson, based on our previous discussions, I expected to be inspired again today. And of course, you didn't disappoint. So it's been a pleasure as always, and we appreciate your inspiring our listeners as well. So thank you so much for joining us.

**Jackson:** Thank you guys.

**Barrett:** And thanks for listening. And if you want to learn more about what staffing redesign can do for your schools, head over to [opportunityculture.org](https://opportunityculture.org) for all the details, including the latest on the strong impact of Opportunity Culture teams on student achievement and educator satisfaction. And have a great day.