



OPPORTUNITY CULTURE® AUDIO

Superintendents Speak: “Teachers Are Screaming for This Level of Support”

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Sharon Kebschull Barrett: Welcome to Opportunity Culture Audio. We hear a lot in education about problems of scale. A pilot program seems to work, but scale it up and the results fall away. How about hearing about a district where scaling up still met success? I'm Sharon Kebschull Barrett, senior VP at Public Impact, and Public Impact Co-President Bryan Hassel and I are delighted to welcome Dr. Crystal Hill today. She's the superintendent of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. Welcome, Dr. Hill.

Superintendent Crystal Hill: Thank you. Delighted to be here today.

Barrett: We're so glad to have you here. So, all right, as superintendent of CMS, you lead the 16th-largest school system in the country, with 185 schools and about 141,000 students. So, there's nothing daunting about your job, right?

Hill: Not at all.

Barrett: Not at all. So in general, what are your big priorities this year as the leader of such a big system?

Hill: Thank you again for having me today. You know, last year we had an incredible year of success in terms of academic achievement and in just lots of areas. So our focus this year is just to continue doing that great work. We also are in year two of our five-year strategic plan. And so we're really excited about that. Our community has been very clear on what they want for the students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. So we're focused on early literacy, focused on foundational reading for elementary and middle school, as well as foundational math. And then our fourth goal, I'm really excited about making sure that every student graduates from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools enrolled, enlisted, or employed. And the other big thing that's upon us is AI. So I'm really proud of the work that we've done in AI. Again, really taking a look at what our community wants, the vision and values, and we are really leading the nation in that area as well, making sure that we're being safe and responsible with our use of AI. And we're doing all of that work through four pillars of excellence—academic excellence, because it's our core business, people excellence, operational excellence, and engagement excellence.

Barrett: And it sounds like several of those will loop in with what we're talking about with your Opportunity Culture work, and you know, probably, that CMS has a special place in our hearts since it was a pioneering Opportunity Culture district. It piloted this staffing redesign all the way back in 2013, and the superintendent at the time quickly committed to scaling up when he saw the early results in some of the most challenged and high-need schools in the districts. And we've seen that through many twists and turns since, including the pandemic, CMS continued to expand their Opportunity Culture work to more schools and reaching nearly 180 of those 185 schools that you have this year. And CMS has been a model for so many other districts. We hear so often from educators who visited CMS schools to see Multi-Classroom Leader teams in action, how inspired they were to go back and replicate your success. So, many of those structures were already in place when you became superintendent, but when you arrived, what did you see as the biggest benefits of those MCL teams?

Hill: So I never in a million years thought I would be superintendent in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. In fact, I was one of those visiting districts, in a neighboring county when I was chief academic officer, that came over to learn all of the wonderful things that Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools was doing. But it has just been such an honor to step in for a strategy that has long lived.

But you know, the strategy has changed. When we first started this journey in around 2013, we actually started with two separate pilots. We were taking a look at how things would work, and then they actually merged. And the way the journey has changed has been absolutely incredible. When we first started, it was really about making sure that we had the very best teachers who were coached and trained in front of students that needed them the most. And as we fast-forward today, we've had the need for expansion, one, because of the destabilization in schools, especially with the pandemic, but even more importantly, the onset of us seeing so many teachers who are not coming from a teacher education background.

So this strategy has long been foundational, and it continues to make changes, and we continue to innovate with the strategy. It's just, it's not going away, and I would say it's one of the foundational tools that has been a part of the remarkable success here in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

Hassel: That surge in teachers from non-traditional backgrounds, that's something that a lot of districts are challenged by. And I wonder if you can say a bit more about that and how it connects to these Multi-Classroom Leader teams?

Hill: Sure, absolutely. So, when I first started in this role in 2023, we had about 51 percent of our teachers that were coming to us who were coming from a non-traditional background. Now it's 2026, we are up to 60 percent. So the need to have this model in every one of our schools—it's not just about the schools that maybe have that economic gap that's there, that we need to make sure that we're filling that gap for students. This is not only for students, but it's also for the adults.

When you have so many teachers that are eager, they're excited about being here, but they just don't have those foundational skills, the need to have that job-embedded structure is so incredibly important. And teachers also enjoy learning from other teachers, right? It just makes sense if you have a teacher that's been in the business, they're doing the work, there's that job-embedded coaching. It's just been a very successful model. And the other thing that we're noticing is, in terms of our EVAAS scores in growth, those teachers that are being coached by an MCL, their EVAAS scores are higher than those who are not being coached by an MCL.

Barrett: Have you seen different benefits depending on the school, whether that be by school level, socioeconomic status, or something else? Do you notice differences?

Hill: Not necessarily differences. What I would say is that the structure is flexible enough that it could meet the needs of whatever situation that we're in. We are so varied across our district, but one thing remains the same. We still are having an influx of—you know, 60 percent of our teachers, it's very difficult to find teachers. So we've had to run two strategies kind of at once. So when I first entered, I talked about that 51 percent, but the other thing is we had a gaping hole of teacher vacancies. So we've had to really focus on what strategies do we have in place to make sure that we're increasing retention, we're slowing down our turnover rate, which we've been able to do. In fact, right now, I think across all of our elementary schools, we have, like, three kindergarten vacancies. I mean, it's amazing that I even know that. But the number of vacancies that we have has gone really down. So now the intentional focus is on making sure that we have that job-embedded coaching for our teachers. And then in other areas where students might need to grow one, two, three years, we're just much more focused on making sure that those teachers are expanding their reach. So the strategy is flexible enough that it fits whatever situation the school's in. But at the bottom line, we all know that the most important factor for student success is to have a strong teacher. And there is not another model that ensures the success of having a strong teacher for every single student that comes in our district.

Barrett: I'm guessing that Bryan likes hearing that answer as much as I do because we know that we get this question from other districts looking at this, about their concern that where we have these five Opportunity Culture principles that we expect participating schools and districts to follow, that that's maybe too constraining, and they can sometimes take a little bit to learn that there's actually a lot of flexibility to meet the needs of each school within those five principles. So, have you seen specific—or what have you seen as specific or biggest challenges for CMS in spreading those teams while staying faithful to those five principles about pay supplements that are within school budgets and reaching more teachers with excellent teachers, giving planning time scheduled within the school day, all of those.

Hill: Sure, so I think I would say that there have been three challenges that we're continuing to overcome. The number one would be sustainable funding—so coming up with a solid funding model. You know, we have used trades for ADM has been one of the things that we've used. Title I—early on, this model was only in Title I schools, and we very quickly learned that this needed to expand beyond Title I. So we've had to take a look at our district funding. We've also had the opportunity to take advantage of some state-level funding and some federal grants. But really thinking big-picture, if all of these things go away, it's a priority. So how do you build this into your financial model that will last year over year? So I would say that's number one.

Number two, you talked a little bit about the structure and the flexibility. So one of the things that we struggled with when I became superintendent initially was we enjoyed in our district what we called freedom and flexibility. And that model was basically if a principal was being successful, you kind of let them run whatever model, whatever they were doing—if it's not broke, don't fix it kind of thing. What we've quickly realized is that that model is not sustainable. When the principal leaves, then the school falls apart. So making sure that you have foundational structures that are nonnegotiable across the entire district. I think of it like building a house, right? You have to have a strong foundation. You've got to have your structures, your sheet, like all of those things. But the flexibility comes in when you want to think about your paint color or your flooring or the type of countertop that you want. But making sure that from school to school, that strong foundational structure is there, and then allowing schools to have the freedom and flexibility when it comes to that.

And then the third thing I already talked about a little bit, and it's the continuous need to make sure that we're developing and training not just our teachers, but also our teacher-leaders. So you have teachers that are getting phenomenal results in their classroom. They're demonstrating leadership and leading a small team. But when they start to move into more of the teacher-leader pathway roles, we really need to make sure that we're investing in those folks as well, that we're coaching them and training them to better support the adults that they're also leading.

Barrett: Yeah, again, I love to hear that answer, because I think that hits on one of the other things that we talk about a lot, that idea of how do you make this sustainable through leadership transitions. And a strong principal can make such a difference in it taking off in a school, but then, yeah, and how can you make sure that you've got that foundation set up correctly.

Hill: Yes, we refer to it often as what is our standard operating procedure. We have to have a standard operating procedure. In education, we don't like to talk about standard operating procedures. We like to talk a lot about the art and, you know—but that is not sustainable in the world in which we live right now.

Hassel: In addition to the Opportunity Culture teacher-leader pathways, what are another one or two of these foundational operating procedures that you think are really important?

Hill: Sure, well, we have really dug deep into a method of continuous improvement. So we have a method in which we set wildly important goals, and we monitor them on a regular cadence, and then we are progress-monitoring along the way, figuring out what we're learning, and then making adjustments. So we have cycles of continuous improvement for every one of our annual plan targets, and we monitor them at a different cadence based on how closely they're aligned

to our district goals. So those goals that I mentioned at the top of our podcast, those are monitored at the school board level at every single board meeting. Then we have a cadence where we're monitoring some other goals every other week with our cabinet. We call that Obeya. And then we also have a PERT level where we're monitoring some below-the-line key metrics, but may not be as high-impact, or as they may not be as directly tied to those major goals. In other words, if everything's a focus, nothing's a focus. So, much of a less-is-more, but making sure that we're monitoring progress along the way.

Hassel: Well, last year, '24–25, you had amazing results for students. It was a sight to behold—two-thirds of your schools made schoolwide high growth. And just to put that in context, that's compared to 28 percent of North Carolina schools across the state and 21 percent of Title I schools. So two-thirds of yours made high growth. And among your schools implementing Opportunity Culture schoolwide, in at least their fourth year of implementation, it was even more making high growth. And so I wanted to dive into those results a little bit. You've already given us some sense of this, but how did the district achieve that such high level of growth? What part did MCL teams and these staffing structures play in that amazing success?

Hill: Absolutely. Well, we have a theory of change here in our district, and it starts with the principal being the change agent. So we talked a little bit about the importance of an extremely strong school leader. And then within that theory of change, one of the things that we have focused on is continuous improvement and continuous development. So with the Opportunity Culture model, knowing that we have to have strong teacher-leaders and job-embedded professional development, we've layered that with our district specialists, getting really tight on what our strategy is and making sure that those specialists are the ones that are pouring into our teacher-leaders—our teacher-leader pathway, Opportunity Culture teacher-leaders, master teachers—and then ensuring that we have that high-quality professional development for each of our teachers. Of course, that's paired with high-quality instructional materials and curriculum, and of course, not forsaking family and community engagement. So all of those things, tightly aligned, got us the results that we got last year. And so this year, what we say is we're not doing a whole lot of different, but we have a lot of learnings from last year. We stopped doing the things that were not as impactful within each of those bricks, as we like to call them, but then really zeroing in on the things that were wildly successful. And again, my favorite saying is things don't just happen, people make them happen. So you have to invest heavily in your people. You can have all of the strategy, but all of that will go away if you are not investing in the people along with the structures that will ultimately have results for kids.

Barrett: So if we can, then let's dig into that a little bit more because, as we know, coming off that year of high growth, it can be challenging to maintain growth for another year or so, are there specific steps you could tell us about that the district is taking to keep that growth up—you know, implementation of HQIM, PL changes?

Hill: So one of the things that has been historical here in our district, and it's like this in many large districts, is from an organizational standpoint, we have school performance—so principal supervisors—and then we also have teaching and learning in two separate camps. A lot of times those are supervised by a deputy, which is the case in our district. So one of the bold moves that we're making that will go into effect next year, but we're in the process of making it happen this year, is we are combining those two houses together, because there is a lot of back and forth between school performance and teaching and learning. And so those things really have to be tightly aligned. And the other thing that we've heard from our principals and our teachers is they said, we enjoy all of the support that we receive. We have all of these different initiatives. But if you think about a house and these arrows coming in lots of different ways, it can be maddening. So for example, you have someone coming in to support beginning teachers. You have someone else coming to support multilingual learners. You have someone else coming to support English language arts, math, science. And we said, wait a minute, that doesn't make any sense. If you know good teaching, if you know good instruction, if you know curriculum, if you know all of those things, we really should be providing a different service delivery model that's streamlined and aligned. And so what we've said is less is more. If we're specialists, if we're master teachers, if

we're MCLs, if we're all of those things, we have to know all the things to be able to deliver. We cannot break our students into multiple pieces, just like we can't break our teachers into multiple pieces. It has to be aligned. So, I think alignment has been probably the strongest thing. And then along with that, progress monitoring along the way. Is it working? If it's not working, what are the small tweaks that we need to make to make sure that the strategy is working? And I'm really excited. We just had our midyear review, and all arrows are going up. It looks like we're going to have another amazing year. So, just so proud of our team. They're phenomenal.

Barrett: That is really exciting. So you mentioned that about the progress-monitoring, and that in some ways ties into the certification process that we've been putting into place at Public Impact, and using many of the lessons that Public Impact has learned from helping CMS and then more than 80 other districts with implementation, we've worked to lower the cost of making that transition to Opportunity Culture staffing. And part of that then has been introducing this certification system to recognize schools and to help them ensure that they have the strongest plans possible to get the results that they desire. So we've seen that CMS has embraced certification. You all have more certified schools now than any other district. How do you think that's helping your schools?

Hill: As a district, as a superintendent, we have so many things that we have to juggle. And I think it's incredibly important that we're able to partner with tested, proven partners that deliver on results. And when you have a tested, proven partner that has delivered on results year after year, why wouldn't you adopt that model? It just makes more sense to adopt that model and use that within your existing framework than to try to do something different. So that certification model we have learned is critically important, especially when we're looking at the effectiveness of the individuals that are in the role. Are they actually getting the results? What is the feedback? What's the evidence that the structures, the people that are in the roles are doing what they need to do as part of that certification process? So I think it's just another opportunity to affirm what we're doing and then also an opportunity to let us know that if what we're doing is not in alignment with the model, what are the things that we need to change? And of course, all of that is research- and evidence-based.

Barrett: So, we know that your opinions carry a lot of weight with superintendents of other districts, large and small. What would you tell them if they're thinking about doing strategic staffing design or redesign?

Hill: I would say if you're not thinking about strategic staffing design, there is not a high probability of success now or in the future, because public education is changing. That train has already left the station. And so if we do not start thinking differently now and preparing now for what is to come, our students are going to suffer. So as I mentioned earlier, 60 percent is just mind-blowing, that people are just not entering the profession. And perhaps that will change. But even if not, you have to build structures by which those folks that are getting the results have an incentive to stay and continue to impact students.

You know, when I was coming up, there really was not an incentive in terms of a career, you know, to stay in teaching. And so the thing that I love about this model is it's not only impacting our students, but it is really elevating the profession of education. What we're saying is you can be a teacher-leader and have high impact, staying in the teaching field, making sure that you are making a difference with that job-embedded. Do we still need our administrators? 100 percent, absolutely. They have to run all the other things. But this model really makes sure that you have that consistent support, that job-embedded coaching, making a difference for every single student through this model.

And quite simply, I would say it this way: my goal is for every student in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools to have the most amazing teacher. Why? Because my two beautiful girls deserve that. We all know what it's like when you have an amazing teacher, and we all know what it's like when you, for some reason, don't have the best teacher. So making sure that each teacher is not on an island on their own, but they have that strong structure so every teacher can rise to the occasion. because our students deserve it. So why not? What else are you going to do? would be my question.

Barrett: So we obviously want to respect your time and let you get back to the students and teachers you're focused on. But is there—and if we could, we would talk to you for hours because we know you have so much more to share—is there anything that we didn't touch on that you really wish, gosh, I wish, I should have, I wish I had said this or wish I had a chance to at least share this other thing.

Hill: Yes, thank you for asking. So the other thing that I think that I would say to my colleagues is you don't have to boil the ocean. Start small. Start small with one, two, three, four schools. Get it really strong; get it really tight. You will see success, and then scale after you have the system in place. You can replicate it much quicker.

The other thing that I would say is that your teachers will thank you, because they are screaming for this level of support. Our most recent teacher working conditions surveys last year—we do an internal, every other year we have a state—specifically in the areas of professional development, coaching, support, those were our strongest areas, and I believe it's because of this model. So if you want to retain amazing teachers, then this is something that you need to do, and start small and then scale quickly.

Barrett: That's wonderful to hear about those results that you've had. And yeah, we always get a little nervous, I think, about people wanting to just pilot just a little bit, because we don't want schools, we don't want districts to get stuck there.

Hill: Yes.

Barrett: But so we know it's that balance of start small, start with a few schools, but then quickly go up.

Hill: Quickly go up, yes. Learn and then quickly. And when I say start small, I don't mean, to your point, stay small. You have to really focus on what's working, what's not. And then as you're starting small, have a goal of how you're going to scale. We quickly said, if this is good for these schools, it has to be good for all. So go big or go home—179, it's working.

Barrett: Well, Dr. Hill, it's been a pleasure to have you here today and to share your thoughts with other superintendents and district leaders around the country striving to show similar fabulous results. So thank you so much for joining us. We really appreciate it and we hope you have a wonderful weekend.

Hill: Thank you so much. Our first weekend without snow or ice in two weeks—so we're looking forward to it.

Barrett: I'm sure that's true. And listeners, thanks for your time as well. And if you want to learn more about what staffing redesign can do for your schools, head over to opportunityculture.org for all the details, including design, resources for instructional and leadership excellence, and much more. And have a great day.