



OPPORTUNITY CULTURE® AUDIO

[“A Lever to Ignite Reading Achievement”](#): Deputy Superintendent Michael Cormack

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Note: Dr. Cormack was interviewed just after finishing his service to Jackson Public Schools as deputy superintendent, before beginning his role as CEO of KIPP Atlanta.

Sharon Kebschull Barrett: Welcome to Opportunity Culture Audio. You’ve heard all about the Mississippi miracle in literacy, with the state moving from the very bottom in 2013 to a top 10 state for fourth-graders learning to read. It wasn’t really a miracle so much as the product of much work, and today’s guest had a big part to play in that. And now he’s combined a literacy focus with Opportunity Culture teams. I’m Sharon Kebschull Barrett, senior VP at Public Impact, and Public Impact Co-President Bryan Hassel and I are delighted to welcome Dr. Michael Cormack, who’s just closed out his time as deputy superintendent in the Jackson, Mississippi, schools and is about to start his new job as CEO of KIPP Atlanta Schools. Dr. Cormack, welcome.

Michael Cormack: Thanks so much, Sharon. It’s a pleasure to be on with you and Bryan.

Barrett: So, Dr. Cormack, you and Bryan have known each other for some time, dating back to your leadership of the Barksdale Reading Institute in Mississippi, which sparked that statewide focus on the science of reading. Tell us what drew you initially to working in Mississippi, first as principal of Quitman County Elementary School, which the Barksdale Institute hired you to lead, and then as Barksdale’s CEO.

Cormack: Yeah, well, actually, it goes back even a little bit before that, with Teach for America. And so in 2003, after finishing undergrad at Boston College, I relocated to the rural Mississippi Delta teaching in Indianola, Mississippi, fourth grade. And that, I think, is what first ignited the spark of teaching and education, that placement by happenstance to the rural Mississippi Delta, and what then kind-of grew out of that experience was my principal experience with the Barksdale Reading Institute, where we partnered with the organization to radically improve outcomes in several of the lowest-performing elementary schools in the state at that time.

Barrett: So then after your time at Barksdale, you became deputy superintendent in Jackson. And you’ve been really focused on student results there. The district’s state accountability rating went from an F to a C under your leadership and focused on literacy as well, including an initiative that you kicked off there aiming to boost the percentage of third-graders who passed the state assessment on the first try from 55 to 75%. And now Jackson is using MCL teams in five elementary schools, which will grow to all 22 elementary schools next year in pre-K through second grade with a focus on literacy. So, what did you first see in Jackson that made you consider using Opportunity Culture teaching teams?

Cormack: So, as you were mentioning, in my experience in Quitman County, as principal, we utilized Opportunity Culture and partnered with Public Impact on work to look at the turnaround leader competencies, but then also to build some initial pilots focused on the Opportunity Culture. And so, it was something that was immediately familiar. And so, when Public Impact and Leading Educators reached out about the opportunity to partner to introduce that work in Jackson, it was a no-brainer—really thinking about that as a lever to ignite our reading achievement, specifically in the lower grades, because the third-grade reading achievement issue doesn’t begin in third grade. As you all know, it begins much,

much sooner. And so we really wanted to start with our focus in pre-kindergarten through second grade to shore up our foundational skills program and to leverage teaching teams as a vehicle to do that in these five pilot elementary schools. I think what's really exciting is that we get an opportunity to take some of our strongest early educators and give them a platform for elevating their practice while also helping to support their colleagues. And so our Multi-Classroom Leaders are doing really dynamic work with colleagues to make certain that everyone understands the science of reading and has the practical tools within the curriculum to implement those practices effectively.

Barrett: And you mentioned Leading Educators. We've worked in other districts to support other districts' efforts in using high-quality instructional materials—HQIM—and in Jackson, as you say, we're partnered with Leading Educators, which is providing literacy curriculum, coaching, and development for your teachers. So why did the combination of teaching teams and HQIM seem like a good fit?

Cormack: We know that high-quality instructional materials is a really important component of delivery on our promise to equity for our scholars and ensuring that at one JPS elementary school that the reading experience is consistent and not radically different to our, for our highly mobile scholars. So it's ensuring that they have access to high-quality tools across the city.

But it also, I think, the teaching teams, it really gives us an opportunity to put a stake in the ground around teacher intellectual preparation for lessons. And so, one of the things that we've tried to stamp in Jackson is the use of the Multi-Classroom Leader as a facilitator of the professional learning community for their grade level—opportunities for them to review the script, to review the letter sounds that scholars are being introduced to and the practices, to ensure a consistent level of quality across classrooms and to be able to take those who have really a foot in the classroom still, but then the opportunity to support their colleagues, I think it's a very dynamic component of this model.

Bryan Hassel: You had begun implementing these foundational reading endeavors before this initiative that you're currently working on. How's it been altered by this new setup with both Leading Educators and the Multi-Classroom Leaders supporting your teachers?

Cormack: Yeah, I think one of the accelerants really has been the dynamic professional learning. And so we had coaches, but to be able to, with the intensity of focus around early literacy, for each of the classroom teachers to be exposed to ways to actually go through and model practice—it's really elevated some of our use of the instructional protocols. So, for instance, one of the things that we insist across the board district-wide is role play and the opportunity for teachers to actually rehearse the phonemic patterns beforehand, to practice their routines, to get feedback. And I think what it's done is it's cemented that as another dynamic part of our professional learning culture.

Barrett: How have you just generally found teachers accepting or liking the teaching team setup?

Cormack: They really enjoy it. So some of our early wins around this are just the opportunity to have the Multi-Classroom Leaders supporting their colleagues and to actually get feedback on lesson plans in a much more routine way. And so essentially what we're doing is we're expanding the leadership team, the school-based leadership team, and the capacity of teacher-leaders to help to support their colleagues. And I think it's well received because at least our approach is to utilize the partial-release Multi-Classroom Leader, meaning that only those that have a foot in the classroom, that actually have a group of students, are doing this role. And one of the real benefits, I think, to that approach is that they have skin in the game, and their colleagues, that it's not just something hypothetical. It's not *when* I was in the classroom, but it's, actually *did* that this morning, and you can do it. And here's how I did it.

Hassel: That's compelling to hear about the skin in the game. We've also seen in the research that Multi-Classroom Leader educators continue to get great results with their own students that they're teaching directly, sometimes as much as 13 extra months of learning per year. So it's great to have those teachers still directly reaching the kids.

Barrett: And you used the word routine in talking about feedback, which caught my attention because I actually don't know that I've heard people say it that way before. People will talk about that, you know, we get job-embedded feedback or things like that in coaching. Is there something about the fact that it is more routine that makes it more comfortable for teachers?

Cormack: Yeah, absolutely. One of our instructional priorities in Jackson is to build a district-wide culture of observation and feedback. And so, where I see the routine component come through is the fact that because it happens all of the time, and that it is the cyclical process, that it actually helps to accelerate us getting better faster. And so, it's not simply that feedback happens or that feedback exists as a part of an evaluative process, but that it is happening on a daily cadence and that we're able to make these quick course-corrections to instruction that actually then play out in improved outcomes for our students.

Barrett: So tell us a little bit more about what it was like just initially to bring this in, challenges that you all faced or potentially are still facing, but then how did you address them?

Cormack: Yeah, so, you know, I think the main challenge on the horizon is that we have piloted with five schools. And those were schools where I knew the leadership. I wanted to make certain that we would have a very strong initial pilot, that there would be lessons learned, but that we had principals that were 110% on board, that they understood the model. In fact, one of the pilot principals was a former Quitman County elementary school educator who had been on my team and so really does believe in this concept of the Opportunity Culture and expanded reach, and that was an embedded component. Now we face the challenge of scaling that work up to 22 schools. Anytime you take a small initiative and you grow it to scale, there are those that were initially bought in, and we've actually had a longer on-ramp to ensure that this next group of principals understands the model, is able to ask questions, able to kick the tires, metaphorically, to see how it's playing out in the schools. And I would say anytime you're trying to scale up, that is not necessarily, I don't foresee it as a main issue or a stumbling block, but it certainly is a little different than handpicked leaders to do year one.

Barrett: Were there other challenges initially? And it sounds like you had chosen your starting schools carefully, but were there any particular issues there for—?

Cormack: Yeah, so one of the initial challenges, and of course, this is anytime you engage in strategic staffing, we also work with humans. And so we hired some fantastic Multi-Classroom Leaders. And then several of them, two of them actually had some health-related issues and were called out on FMLA. And so that was not something that we initially envisioned and had to do some mid-course corrections and pivots. We've also had a particular school community where they had a number of staffing challenges early on. And so they were trying to deal with a complement of fewer teachers than was actually needed, where they had several vacancies. And so that really created some issues for the Multi-Classroom Leader to get out and support colleagues, because everyone was pitching in to fill some holes around staffing. And so that, I think, has made us really hypervigilant about the process of staffing up and ensuring that we get the strongest possible outcomes. It's not something that we anticipated out the gate.

Hassel: Right. Very hard to deal with in the first year because over time, you have the chance to build up a bench of teachers who have learned with a Multi-Classroom Leader, and then they're ready to step into leadership. But year one, you're putting all your chips on that first group of Multi-Classroom Leaders.

Cormack: That's right.

Barrett: So, we talked before about that in Jackson, you're focused on the foundational grades for literacy. But what would you envision if the district used, eventually, were to use those partial-release teams in middle school or high school?

Cormack: Yeah, I mean, and so I think that the potential is extraordinary for expanding impact. You know, initially, we also considered a secondary pilot and really thinking about, like, how could we leverage expertise, particularly around some of the difficult to fill math courses. And so how could you use expanded opportunities and expanded reach to take your most outstanding calculus teacher and ensure that they could be available for instruction across the city? How might we leverage technology to, really to increase those capacities and whatnot, especially around small high schools. So you've got a small comprehensive high school with one algebra 1 teacher. How can they have the opportunity to work in professional learning communities with others across the district so that they really do have a learning community to support them, not just around pedagogy, but also around their particular content area? So I think they're exciting opportunities to continue to unfold.

Barrett: So you are just midway through the first year of using these teams in action in those first five schools. Tell us what sort of effects you've seen so far.

Cormack: Yeah, so recently, so we just celebrated Read Across America Week, and I was out in schools reading some Dr. Seuss—one of my favorites, *The Lorax*. And what was interesting, so I was out at Johnson Elementary School in the classroom reading to the first-graders of the Multi-Classroom Leader. And what was really exciting, just building off of Bryan and what he shared around, you know, these effect sizes that we see, reading *The Lorax* with the little ones—you'll know in the text when they cut down a truffula tree, they produce a Thneed, T-H-N-E-E-D. And we were taking a look to interrogate the illustration and there was a factory for Thneeds.

And in that moment, the Multi-Classroom Leader teacher paused to deconstruct the word. And, you know, 'the TH, what's that, kids?' 'It's a digraph!' they said in unison. And then, 'the need, ooh, I hear a long what?' 'A long E,' right? 'That long E says its name.' 'And then S, what do you notice about the S at the end? What is that telling us?' 'It's plural, so it's more than one!' I mean, so you just got an opportunity in real time to see the instruction really coming together. And this was a first-grade classroom, but they were chomping at the bit to share all that they've learned. And so we see those kinds of anecdotes all over the district, where kids are really deeply internalizing their learning and having an opportunity to show what they know.

Barrett: That must have been really fun to hear—yeah, I can imagine how proud you felt.

Cormack: Exactly. I mean, to see something like this take off, and of course, this was in the classroom of the Multi-Classroom Leader, but to see that she's actually spending a little less of her time there to be able to support colleagues, but that the kids deeply internalize the concept. And so, she could have both success in her classroom and then across the grade.

Barrett: So what about, you can tell me if this is, any sort of—if this is an effect you've seen or not so far. I know some of your principals have been focused on carefully using vacancy trades to address the issue of having long-term subs. Is that correct? And tell me your thoughts on that.

Cormack: Yeah, so one of the ways that we support our Multi-Classroom Leaders are through the vacancy trading system. And so that is when, in order to fund the work and the stipend of the Multi-Classroom Leader, we utilize a vacancy at a particular grade level, potentially increasing class size, but to a manageable extent in the other classrooms. and then utilizing that salary to support the stipend for our Multi-Classroom Leader and then the Reach Associate, which is a highly trained paraprofessional, like putting them in the space to be able to do that. And our teachers are excited about the opportunity to obviously work in the teacher teams, but for principals, I think it's been a great dynamic in terms of allowing them to drive design for the Multi-Classroom Leader and the Opportunity Culture of what it needs to look like at their school. But then also, it's really put them in the driver's seat and forced them to think around their

budget in a very different way. And so it's been very powerful in kind-of building up that leadership skill to be able to leverage resources effectively to drive outcomes.

Barrett: Yeah, Bryan, I know we've seen this a lot, how it changes that principal's job to look so closely at the budget.

Hassel: You change their budget, and they also change their leadership, because they're leading a team of leaders instead of having to lead every single teacher, especially if you can reach across the entire school with the models over time. So that's very compelling.

Cormack: And our teachers love being able to engage in the design process as well, and to have their voices leveraged and their expertise and experience as a part of the process, even if ultimately they don't become the Multi-Classroom Leader. Just having a seat at the table to help to structure their teacher teams has really, I think, transformed their leadership capacity as well.

Barrett: So you mentioned that RA role, the paraprofessional who has an advanced paraprofessional role and gets lots of training can handle a class of kids by themselves, which is, of course, unusual to be teaching in that way. Tell me a little bit more about your feelings about that role and if it's helping to build a teacher pipeline for Jackson at all.

Cormack: Yeah, so the exciting thing is, you know, of course, we've had paraprofessionals in the past, and we all know, good principals know who their best paraprofessionals are and the fact that they can hold it down when the teacher is not present. And so I think what we've done with this model is that we give it a name and then we also pay them their due because many of the paraprofessionals that become Reach Associates have been doing this kind of work before. But then, now, we've actually created and formalized a structure to pay them more to support their colleagues and framed it around the kind of the shared ethos of, like, a school culture of like, 'hey, here's your contribution, your additional contribution to the sense of team.' And so I think that that's quite powerful.

Barrett: I was talking this morning with a principal in Madison Parish close by y'all in Louisiana, and they're telling me how those RA roles are so coveted that people really want them, whether they stay in them or use it as a steppingstone to go on in their in their teaching career.

All right, so now you are headed to KIPP Atlanta. And we know several charter networks over the years have used Opportunity Culture models. Tell us what you would see as specific challenges or benefits to using them in a charter setting.

Cormack: Yeah, I think the benefit, I mean, I'll lean into benefit because I think any time that we recognize teacher leadership capacity and provide a space and vehicle for our teachers who are having a profound impact, that is supported by data to reach more scholars, that's a win.

I think specifically a benefit within the charter sector is the opportunity that great charters kind-of leverage their budget to think creatively around staffing already. And so this is an accelerant to that ability to be able to create teacher leadership pathways, to incorporate this into already existing opportunities like a fellowship or a residency program, and really thinking about, like, are there ways that we can support an elongation to that kind of the teacher residency cycle to ensure that once we have a teacher in a classroom, that they are prepared day one when they are the teacher of record. And so I've really seen some potentially transformative models thinking about the use of residency and a Reach Associate-like role to create more opportunities, more at-bats before taking the reins of the classroom.

And I think it's just a great way to, again, kind of elevate the profession of teaching in this consideration of, like, in order to really be ready, are there ways that I can ensure that I've got multiple at-bats before becoming the teacher of record? I think it's a great win.

Hassel: Multiple at-bats and the chance to do those under the leadership of a great teacher who can help you learn on the job—and teaching’s probably the only profession where we expect people to, day one, take the whole job. And it’s a great way, what you’re talking about, to make it so when that happens, they’ve been around the block, to change metaphors.

Cormack: That’s right.

Barrett: So, Dr. Cormack, we always love to ask people, what advice would you give to folks who are considering using Opportunity Culture teaching teams in their own districts, maybe especially in combination with HQIM, you can tell me if you have a different slant on it because of that or not, but what would you tell folks?

Cormack: Yeah, so I think the institution of teaching teams, the Opportunity Culture is definitely something to consider. I think when you can sit down with your budget, there is a way to make this work and make it sustainable as a part of just basically elevating the profession and elevating the ability to have a more profound impact. I think the combination of Opportunity Culture with the implementation of high-quality instructional materials is huge. It’s one way that we can create the depth of use of our curricular tools and not simply kind-of like surface-level opportunities to engage with them, or to really learn their components more deeply. It gives a structure to be able to lift that curriculum implementation challenge.

Barrett: Well, so we wish you the best then in Atlanta. And we thank you so much for taking the time out from your moving to join us here today.

Cormack: It’s been a pleasure, and I’m excited for the work ahead here in Atlanta.

Barrett: Thank you.

Hassel: Thanks so much.

Barrett: And thanks for listening. And if you want to learn more about staffing redesign, the science of reading, or HQIM, head to opportunityculture.org for details, including the latest on the strong impact of Opportunity Culture teams on student achievement and educator satisfaction. Have a great day.