



OPPORTUNITY CULTURE® AUDIO

In Mississippi, Responding to a Teacher Retention Crisis

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Sharon Kebschull Barrett: For education advocates in Mississippi, it feels like it's well past time to take bold action to support and retain teachers. In recent months, both Mississippi First and Teach Plus Mississippi have issued reports advocating for bold legislative action that would fund staffing redesign pilots, and they highlighted Opportunity Culture® design.

I'm Sharon Kebschull Barrett, and this week I talked to leaders of both groups—Mississippi First, a nonprofit focused on transformative policy solutions to ensure educational excellence for every Mississippi child, and Teach Plus Mississippi, which empowers excellent teachers to lead on key policy issues.

In their reports, [*The Weight They Carry: Life as a Teacher in Mississippi*](#) from Mississippi First, and [*Reimagining School Staffing: Recommendations from Teach Plus MS Policy Fellows*](#), the organizations lay out a stark picture of teacher burnout leading not to a generic "teacher shortage" but to a specific teacher retention crisis.

Mississippi First based its report on comprehensive teacher surveys—which pointed to issues that came as no surprise to its leaders.

Born and raised in the Mississippi Delta, Mississippi First executive director Angela Bass has seen it all firsthand.

Angela Bass: When COVID happened, I think that, you know, we got more insight into some of the challenges that teachers were dealing with. And I also think that some of the issues have been exacerbated. But I think the issues were there. They've always been there. We've always needed to really professionalize the teaching profession, really focus on teacher pay, really focus on the support that teachers need, the training that teachers need to be successful.

Barrett: Sanford Johnson, a native Mississippian who taught social studies in the Delta, recalls a time about a decade ago when he watched a teacher from South Mississippi show a group of state legislators how she explained math problems—and a senator commented that he wished he had learned math that way. It stuck Johnson how much teachers needed more opportunities to get involved in policymaking.

Sanford Johnson: I don't think there are enough opportunities in Mississippi for legislators to actually connect with teachers. Teachers bring a unique level of expertise because nobody knows better how policies are going to be implemented at the classroom level.

Barrett: Now, as the executive director of Teach Plus Mississippi, Johnson leads an annual cohort of teachers selected to be Teach Plus policy fellows, who work to influence policy both statewide and with a focus on the communities with the greatest need, such as those in the Delta.

One of those fellows is Sharon Buckhanan of Jackson Public Schools, who now uses her 29 years in preschool education to teach 11th- and 12th-graders about early childhood education and to serve as the preschool lab director.

Sharon Buckhanan: I was like, mm, what better way for me to learn about policies? The teaching profession in Mississippi right now is very stagnant. There's a lot of teacher burnout. They can't keep teachers because of the pay. And the paperwork is overwhelming, and a lot of my colleagues are leaving the profession, going to do other things because of all of that.

Barrett: And, like Johnson, Buckhanan wishes policymakers could witness more of teachers' day-to-day efforts—not only does she work to provide her students with strong academics, for example, but also to meet many other needs, such as hunger, a lack of personal hygiene items, and behavior issues, that all contribute to teachers' burnout.

Grace Braezeale, the director of research and K–12 policy at Mississippi First who wrote Mississippi First's report, said the lack of support she felt as a teacher—placed in the Delta by Teach For America—seems even more intense now.

Grave Braezeale: The general sentiment in Mississippi right now is that the workload is not sustainable for teachers. Compensation is low, especially as inflation has been increasing these past few years. Student behavior has gotten worse over the past few years since the pandemic.

Barrett: Along with the lack of support, Johnson said, teachers desperately want ways to advance.

Johnson: We heard from so many teachers saying, “I love being in the classroom, I love working with kids. I would love to be able to provide mentorship, provide professional development. I would love to be developed myself, but I don't want to be a principal. I don't want to be an assistant principal. I want to still work with kids.” And they were looking for opportunities to be able to climb a career ladder, to be promoted, and to have these new opportunities, to take on new leadership opportunities, get compensated for taking on those new opportunities, while at the same time being close and proximate to kids.

Bass: What we wanted to come across in the findings is the urgency. People are really shining a light on the successes that we've had in the growth of our students; you know, if we want to continue these great gains, we really need to invest in the people who made them—the teachers. Teachers can make additional choices now. I think that there's so many other opportunities for educated people to take advantage of. You know, the teaching profession has more competition now than ever for our talented people.

Braezeale: So, at Mississippi First, the teacher pipeline is one of our primary issue areas. I think that the non-compensation factors have kind of fallen into the background in Mississippi. It's always been teacher pay, teacher pay, teacher pay, which is super-important, and that was the top factor that people cited as their reasons for leaving the profession. But I think that there hasn't been a lot of emphasis on those other reasons—workload, student behavior, and school and district leadership. And I think those are in many ways just as important as compensation. I also think they can be harder to target from the policy side. Hopefully, with the report that we released, we're trying to change the conversation around that.

Barrett: The Mississippi First report organized recommendations around four areas— compensation, workload, student behavior, and school leadership, with recommendations for the state legislature, the state department of education, and local school districts.

Braezeale: Our goal was to be very targeted. There's obviously no single solution to each of those things. And so, we were thinking about how different policy levers and local strategies could work together to really get at improving those challenges.

Barrett: In its compensation recommendations, the Mississippi First report called on the legislature to establish a multiyear pilot program that would support districts in implementing staffing design, and it highlighted Opportunity Culture design and its use nationally.

Braezeale first heard about Opportunity Culture design while in college and thought it a common-sense concept.

Braezeale: I like that it provides a supportive network, especially for teachers who are new to the classroom and who would otherwise not have a lot of guidance or support. And then on the other side, I think that having the opportunity to have career growth is really compelling for teachers who have been in the classroom for a while and who are thinking about leaving to go into administration or going into a higher paying role. One of the central ideas behind our teacher pipeline work at Mississippi First is that a strong teacher workforce ultimately means strong student achievement and the best opportunity for students to succeed. And that's the thesis behind our entire teacher pipeline work. Ultimately, of course, we're focused on student achievement, and I think that strategic staffing and Opportunity Culture is a great way to promote that stability in the classroom and promote teacher retention and teacher quality.

Barrett: A bill to fund a pilot program did not progress after making it out of legislative committee this winter, but the leaders and policy fellows of Mississippi First and Teach Plus continue to advocate for a pilot program, Angela Bass said.

Bass: So, in this legislative session, there's been great interest. And whenever I talk to policy makers, decision makers, this isn't a contentious issue, you know. We are seeing that some of our messaging is working with decision-makers. We work on multiple issues in the organization, and I think that it's one of my favorite ones, one, because it was designed straight from teacher voice, and also, there's just the other experiences that we're hearing about from other states and the research. You know, we love when the research backs up our solution and is very aligned to what our context needs. And we love to see that it can work in our context.

Barrett: At Teach Plus, the policy fellows also coalesced around strategic staffing design, and Sharon Buckhanan said Opportunity Culture teaching teams appealed to her from the start, especially for the targeted support they provide for new teachers—support that comes from an excellent educator who also understands what the teacher is teaching.

Buckhanan: They don't have enough mentors. You need to get people mentors that know what they're doing, that if I'm teaching early childhood, then I need someone that knows something about early childhood to mentor me.

Barrett: Sanford Johnson had seen Opportunity Culture teams in action during a site visit to Edgecombe County, North Carolina, and was struck by meeting teachers who were originally skeptical about the new teaching team roles. Those include the role of Multi-Classroom Leader® or MCL™, for an educator who leads a small team and has a record of high-growth student learning, alongside the advanced paraprofessional Reach Associate™ role, and other team roles that allow teachers to extend their reach to more students—with all these roles receiving higher pay, sustainably funded through reallocations of regular school budgets.

Johnson: There were two things that really stood out. One, I remember a teacher saying that it's constant feedback, constant support, constant training. So, it's not where "your MCL is going to be here this week, and it may be two or three more weeks, and you might catch up with them for a little bit of time." There's devoted time to meet with your mentor and get the help, get the professional development. It's constant development. Another thing that really stood

out to me was how MCLs were actually selected. I think there were some issues that some of our teachers had at first around how are we selecting the leaders? Because I think some people have been in schools before where there have been some challenges where it's not based on, like, you know, what you produce in the classroom and how you perform, but do you know this person? Do you know that person? It's sort of like a buddy-buddy system. But the fact that, like, this is based on what you do in the classroom, how your students perform—it gives teachers a peace of mind knowing that if I really work hard and if I really, like, do what I need to do for kids, this is an opportunity that I can actually attain. So, I think hearing those two things really sold me on it.

Barrett: Similarly, Buckhanan and the other fellows visited schools in Jackson, Mississippi, that were just beginning to use Opportunity Culture teaching teams, and were impressed by how the leaders led team planning and guided the team on instruction, often modeling the teaching of the curriculum. And the fellows especially noted the team leaders' relationships with their teachers, and how the collaboration reduced burnout.

Buckhanan: The teachers, I mean, they had nothing but good things to say. They loved it. They loved how it worked. They loved seeing the students improve and the data that was being collected from it of how the design was working. I think it's a highly effective model and it's been great here.

Barrett: Angela Bass agreed that hearing from educators already in schools using Opportunity Culture designs has been especially persuasive—showing that the concept works not just on paper or in a conference presentation, but in a variety of classrooms.

Bass: I've talked to principals that have done it. I've talked to some teachers, and they, you know, the things that we learned about it sitting in a conference seat were the exact experiences that they were talking about. And that just goes a long way because sometimes in policy land, you know, you think it's a great idea. It's implemented—and people really let you know that it's not what you intended it to be. But when we talk to folks, there's nothing but positive experiences that they're having. And so, we're really motivated by the stories that we're hearing from the field.

Barrett: For policymakers, she said, the sustainability aspect appeals—funding higher pay through regular budget reallocations.

Bass: One appeal of strategic staffing that has really resonated with policymakers is that it doesn't necessarily call for a larger investment. It's using what we have smarter. I recognize that Mississippi, you know, we're one of the poorer states. We don't have the funding that other big states have. So, we have to make do with, you know, what we do have. And so, this model allows for that.

Barrett: So, what do these education advocates hope would change if Mississippi districts could make a state-supported shift to new staffing designs?

For Buckhanan, it's not just that teachers get paid more, much though that matters—it's that teachers get the support they need.

Buckhanan: What I hope would change is that we will have more highly effective teachers that are in the classrooms and we'll be able to keep them, because it's one thing to get them, but keeping them is the issue. You know, I even hear some of my colleagues say, "for all the money in the world, I'm not going to do that" because they think about their mental capacity. So, teacher roles would be more sustainable. Students would get more consistent, targeted support just all around, and stronger career pathways for teachers.

Johnson: I would love to see models in every corner of the state of Mississippi. Let's get more districts, not just Jackson, but rural communities in this part of the state, that part of the state, maybe southwest Mississippi, north Mississippi, the Delta, and get to the point where we can just accept that schools are going to operate this way because this is the best way to operate schools. Like, five years from now, I would love to be able to say that you can't throw a rock in Mississippi without hitting a district that is doing Opportunity Culture. So that's where I hope we'll be in a couple of years.

Barrett: And if those hopes come to pass, they predict at least some of the effects on students, teachers, and parents.

Bass: I think it could really lead to a new way of, you know, thinking about the profession. Long-term, big picture, it's a new way to do teaching. It's a better way to do teaching. I've always thought it was a terrible idea to take a first-year teacher and just let them be. You know, it's really expensive if they have to do a co-teaching model, you know, so I think that it really shifts the way that we think about, like, teacher readiness to go into classrooms, but also teacher support long-term and, like, the collaboration that teaching should really have at its core throughout the process. So I hope that it really changes the way that we think about teaching and professionalizes the profession.

Braezeale: I think that ultimately this could change the narrative around the teaching profession. A lot of other professional careers do have this type of career ladder and career progression, and teaching does lack that. Teachers who have been in the classroom know that it takes a lot of skill and expertise to be an educator, but I think that the broader narrative tells a different story. I think that a lot of people may not see teachers as the professionals that they are. And so, I think creating that professionalization of the teaching career would change the narrative around it and hopefully lead to more recruitment into the profession and just more respect for teachers in general.

Bass: I remember growing up here, and I grew up in a very rural, small town, and teachers were the only professionals that I knew. I wanted to be a teacher. I really loved my teachers. They looked happy and they—it looked like a great job to have. I would go home and play teacher with my friends and my dolls. And, you know, as I grew up, people started talking about, "oh, teachers, hey, you don't want to do that." And I think that, with better compensation and with just better morale in the building, it could really help folks to think about, you know, teachers as a really great profession for folks to go into.

Braezeale: When I was a teacher, there was a ton of turnover, and I taught in two different schools and there was a lot of turnover in both of those schools, even midyear, and then between the school years as well. And at one point when I was in my third year of teaching, I was one of the veteran teachers in the school—obviously, like didn't have a ton of experience, but was one of the most experienced teachers in the school. And I think that when students see that turnover, and when they don't have a lot of stability among the school staff, then I think that impacts how seriously they take school and how they view the importance of education. And so I think that if we were able to increase the stability of a school's teacher workforce and increase teacher retention across the school and across the school district, then that would send a message to students about how important education is and how important school is and just provide a supportive staff and teacher workforce for them to have access to and be supported by.

Johnson: There's something about a parent being able to say when I drop my kid off, I know that they're being prepared for the future, and giving parents that peace of mind, giving communities that peace of mind, that really goes a long way. I come from a family where my dad was one of 14 kids and all 14 graduated from college. And that sort of speaks to the transformational power of an education for a family to be able to do that in Mississippi in the 20th century—like, that was a huge deal. So, like, I have seen firsthand what education can do, and I think, when I think about, like, all the statistics that my state has typically been on the wrong side of, I know that education is going to be an important factor

in moving to the best side of those statistics. Anything that we can do to improve the quality of education, not just for my kids, but for all kids in Mississippi is something that I'm really going to embrace and really going to fight for. And I believe this is one of the things that we can do in Mississippi that's going to improve education.

Barrett: Thanks to these four leaders for taking the time to speak with me. To learn more, see OpportunityCulture.org and the links to the reports and these organizations in our show notes.