



OPPORTUNITY CULTURE® Audio

Choosing to Use Opportunity Culture® Design, on Fast Timeline

September 29, 2025

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Sharon Kebschull Barrett: Welcome to Opportunity Culture Audio and the first of our “Superintendents Speak” occasional series. I’m Sharon Kebschull Barrett, and I’ll be sharing what I’ve heard in interviews with superintendents in districts using Opportunity Culture school staffing design. You’ll hear about why they choose this design and aspects of it specific to their district’s needs, be they rural, urban, suburban, large, or small.

Today we have the superintendents from North Carolina’s Person and Greene counties—two districts that participated together in a spring design workshop. The workshops were created to fast-track their Opportunity Culture planning phase, so that they could begin implementing Multi-Classroom Leader teams in the fall. Because they had such a short planning and hiring timeline, both districts began with just one school, but intend to quickly scale up, creating MCL teams in all of their schools over three years. You can learn more about these teams at opportunityculture.org.

Greene County Superintendent Rodney McNeill had been on the job for just two months when we spoke in September 2025, after serving in other roles including principal and HR director. He loves leading his rural district in eastern North Carolina of about 2600 students, which is aiming to move schools out of their state designation as low-performing.

Rodney McNeill: I feel a special connection to rural communities. I feel like we’re often forgotten about, it seems, and like we have more to prove. And, you know, we have a chip on our shoulder, but we feel like we can do just as much as anyone else when given the opportunities. And so, I just—I love it. I love it.

Barrett: So, tell me about what interested you back before you became superintendent about Opportunity Culture design.

McNeill: So, we did some exploration and talked to some other districts, and we saw that schools with similar demographics to students like ours were having these amazing results. And so, you know, we visited a couple of schools, and we saw what the design model looked like and spent time in some classrooms and really saw people who were making incredible change and were passionate about what they were doing and getting the results and thought, you know, how amazing that would be, to have that same kind of opportunity and that same kind of experience. And then thinking, into the future, you know, what if two, three years down the road, we were modeling our schools, and we were having these same types of results, and, you know, people were visiting Greene County schools and we were showing off our classrooms to future teachers and school systems because we’ve moved our schools out of low performing. And we were giving our teachers the opportunity to earn more money and be compensated well while staying in the classroom. And so, when the opportunity presented itself to partner and to apply for a chance to become an Opportunity Culture school system, we jumped at it, and we were awarded the grant.

Barrett: Both Greene and Person school districts received funding from the state of North Carolina under its advanced teaching roles grant to design their Opportunity Culture plans.

McNeill: We want a lot more intentionality in our classrooms. I want teachers to have more tools in their toolboxes. I want them to teach kids with confidence. I want them to know what good, sound instruction looks like and what it feels

like. I want our administrators walking into classrooms with the tools to know how to help teachers improve instruction. And I want that consistently, that common language and common framework, that common practice that runs throughout our district, throughout every single school and every single classroom. That's the goal, and that's the hope, that I want Opportunity Culture to help us play a role in creating within our school system.

Barrett: Person County Superintendent Rodney Peterson had similar goals related to teacher capacity and student success. His district, in central North Carolina on the Virginia border, serves about 4300 students.

Rodney Peterson: I think the biggest thing for us is building capacity inside of schools. We feel like our teachers are our most reliable asset inside of our schools, and so we were looking for an opportunity to develop and to grow our teaming culture.

Barrett: And how about how it related to student achievement in the district or where you felt students are or need to be?

Peterson: I think every school district has a problem having certified staff in every classroom. That's not new. For us to build academic achievement, we wanted to make sure we put our best teachers working with all of our teachers so that we can build capacity. North Carolina universities do not graduate enough teachers. And so a lot of our metro areas already have partnerships with the university, so a lot of the new teachers go to the metro areas. We're lucky in that we do have a partnership with UNC-Chapel Hill where we were able to have McKay Thorpe Fellows come back to our district and teach. But the supplements in our metro counties are a lot higher than ours, and if you look at our retention rates for our staff, we're over 10 percent. We've got to have consistency inside of our schools, not only in our principal chairs and our AP chairs, but in our teaching classrooms. I think this provides an opportunity for that, because every teacher is looking for advancement. You know, as the pay scale not moving at the pace that we all would want it, this allows our high-flyer teachers to have an opportunity to grow themselves professionally. And at the end of the day, that's what we want. We want our teachers to grow. Every day is an opportunity to get better. And if we're not getting better, then we're not growing. And so I think this aligns very well with our philosophy of retention and making sure that our students meet the expectation that they need at the end of the school year as defined by the state.

Barrett: Likewise, McNeill said, Greene County needed a better way to keep and recruit teachers.

McNeill: We have lost some dynamic veteran teachers to neighboring school systems, because they were able to offer stipends and supplements that we just simply couldn't match. And, you know, we always want people to grow and progress within their careers, but it's also a huge loss, because we're a small system with fewer than 200 teachers, and so when you lose a high-quality English II teacher, that may be all of our English II results in that school, in our district, you know, with one teacher leaving. And so that's, that's tough. And we've had that happen. And so we feel those results immediately. And that's really hard to replace, you know, in a district like ours. I also hope that we're able to build up some of the potential that we have in our staff, because they work so hard, and they deserve to have the support and the professional development and the investment in their careers. And being able to provide that for them is something that I'm truly proud of.

Barrett: All teachers—new, midcareer, and veteran—need support, Superintendent Peterson said.

Peterson: I think at every level we all need that sounding board, if you will, and this provides that—just the idea that you're a part of a team, the idea that you're working to build that capacity, that you're working to increase student achievement. It has more of an intrinsic feel.

Barrett: Going through the fast-track design workshop process was challenging because of its speed, but useful, the districts' leaders agreed. Joey Warren leads Opportunity Culture implementation in Person County alongside the superintendent.

Joey Warren: It is definitely accelerated, and you feel that. But, you know, sometimes I think that we can just drag things out a little bit too long, and we want to, of course, make the best decisions and take the time to make those decisions, but I think that with the structure that was put in place, the support materials that we got, the prompts of, you know, 'OK, you've made this decision. Now you need to think about this. Now you need to think about this'—although we all felt that it was moving quickly, we were able to accomplish those benchmarks and make the decisions that we needed to make and make them confidently. So the accelerated model worked well for us.

McNeill: If I had to describe it in one word, I would say intense, but it was very worthwhile. That was just tremendous, the amount of work that we were able to accomplish in a short period of time.

Barrett: And I'm guessing, I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I'm guessing that especially now with the news you've gotten from the state, it would feel good to know that you put that work in and you didn't let another year go by of studying it on design.

McNeill: Absolutely. Absolutely. And so we're preparing to go through the design process with two other schools in our district this year. And so having a school that has gone through the design process, helping out two more schools go through that process this year will make it even more effective.

Barrett: Being able to do the design workshop with another district also kept costs down, he said.

McNeill: It reduced the cost of the professional development and the design process significantly being able to partner with another school system. I don't know if we would have been able to do the process as efficiently as we were had we not been able to partner with another school system.

Barrett: So what, in these very early days of implementation, would these district leaders tell other superintendents who are considering the design workshop or Opportunity Culture design in general?

Peterson: I think what my message would be is make sure it's in alignment with your district improvement plan. Make sure that your community understands what it is that you're trying to do. More importantly, make sure your board understands what it is that you want to do. It's really early, so, you know, I'm not one that just endorses something today. But what I have seen so far, if you wanted to build collaboration inside of your district, especially on your district team, then if nothing else, that has been one of the staples that I've really enjoyed about this Opportunity Culture. It has brought HR together, it has brought business together, it has brought administrative services together, support services together, academics together, and now all five of them are working together, understanding what value each one of those departments bring to improving student achievement in the district.

Barrett: Joey Warren highlighted how doing this helps students while providing a teacher career path, noting what it will do at Person County's South Elementary, the first school using Opportunity Culture® teaching teams.

Warren: The Opportunity Culture model offers a unique opportunity for teachers to have the opportunity to step into those roles, but without taking them away from that direct impact with students. The necessity for us to improve our student learning outcomes has really been the biggest driving force behind this model, and you know, actually our vision statement for Opportunity Culture, there's three statements in there, and the first one is we want to expand our students' opportunity to experience excellent instruction, you know. And so our district as a whole, we've made some really good gains in certain areas. I will say that South Elementary has been an example of that, you know, they've exited

low-performing status. But they still have the level that they could get to of, you know, consistently exceeding growth expectations. And I would say that's kind of where, in a way, that's where we are as a district. We've made some really good gains in a lot of areas, but as far as student achievement goes, we're kind of flatlined. And it's imperative that we are all understanding that continuous improvement has to be our focus. And we have to make sure that our students are getting the absolute best that we can give them.

Barrett: Jada Mumford, who works alongside Superintendent McNeill to lead Opportunity Culture implementation in Greene County, said seeing another school using these teaching teams will convince anyone of the need to use them.

Jada Mumford: Once you go and see a school that's implementing, you will make the decision. We went to see a school in Charlotte. It's a long distance from here, but we decided to go, and it was phenomenal. It's a different level of instruction. It's a different level of how the students engage and the teachers engage together. That experience, seeing it, you see the difference and you want to make sure that your school is going to look like that, if not better. I just can't even say enough great things about what we saw.

Barrett: Gave you chills, huh?

Mumford: It did, it did. And I always go back to reference it—when you're walking around and you're looking in classrooms, like you want, you would want your child in that classroom. Just the level of instruction and expectation of every teacher in that school.

Barrett: Thank you to these leaders in Greene and Person counties for taking the time to talk with me about their experiences so far. To learn more about design workshops, site visits, or the Opportunity Culture initiative, visit opportunityculture.org, and follow Opportunity Culture on LinkedIn to keep up with the latest news.