



OPPORTUNITY CULTURE® AUDIO

When Districts Share Staff, Students and Teachers Win

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Sharon Kebschull Barrett: Welcome to Opportunity Culture® Audio. I'm Sharon Kebschull Barrett. For rural communities, teacher recruitment and retention present special challenges, especially when they compete with nearby school districts that are larger and better funded. For the 2024–25 school year, Rockingham County, a rural North Carolina district on the Virginia border, needed a high school math teacher with a record of high-growth student learning to lead and coach a small teaching team. But the school couldn't find someone to meet its selection criteria for its new Opportunity Culture Multi-Classroom Leader® role. Meanwhile, Edgecombe County Public Schools had been using Multi-Classroom Leader teams since 2017, and North Edgecombe High School had a former math teacher leading a five-person ninth-grade teaching team. What if that leader took on two more team teachers—who just happened to be nearly three hours and six districts away? That's what Moriah Dollarhite, director of human resources for Rockingham County Schools, is here to tell us about. Moriah, welcome!

Moriah Dollarhite: Thank you.

Barrett: So, before we get into the Rockingham experience, tell me a little bit about how you got here. What's your background in education?

Dollarhite: So I started my career in education as a classroom teacher at a high school, where I quickly developed a passion for supporting both students and fellow educators. Pretty quickly in my career, I moved into administration and ultimately the principalship. And I was a principal for over 20 years. My passion as an educator has always been with a focus on instructional frameworks and teacher development. So that really shaped my belief in the power of strong instructional leadership. And in my current role, I have the opportunity to support district-wide initiatives around beginning teacher support and advanced teaching roles, which puts me in a position to think creatively about how we recruit, how we develop and retain excellent educators. Especially in a rural setting, that's very, very important.

Barrett: So when did you first learn about Opportunity Culture staffing models, and what did you first think of them?

Dollarhite: I was first introduced to Opportunity Culture staffing when I took my current position, which was two years ago. I worked in partnership with Public Impact, and initially I was very intrigued, but also a bit cautious because it has challenges and some longstanding assumptions about school staffing and leadership. But the more I learned, the more it made sense, especially for a district like ours. It offered a way to extend the reach of our strongest educators and rethink how we provide leadership and support to our teachers.

Barrett: All right, so we're going to get into those challenges in a moment. But tell me, when Rockingham first started on Opportunity Culture design, which schools did it start with, and why did it choose those?

Dollarhite: So we initially started with a small group of four schools, because we wanted to be intentional and strategic. And we focused on sites where there was both a clear need of support for our students and beginning teachers. That

allowed us to build momentum and learn from early implementation and ensure we were supporting schools well before scaling further. But we really wanted to focus on our schools that had the larger amount of beginning teachers.

Barrett: So one of those schools was Reidsville High School. So when did it become clear that, at Reidsville, that finding a good Multi-Classroom Leader hire wasn't going to work out and that this remotely located Multi-Classroom Leader role might be a good fit?

Dollarhite: So at the high school level, we had a clear vision for the role. But despite efforts, we were unable to find a candidate who met that full scope of what we needed. We were looking for someone with both strong math instruction and the ability to lead and coach adults. And instead of lowering that bar, we paused and said, what's another way to get students and teachers what they need? So that's when we began working with Public Impact to explore a cross-district solution, which led to a semester planning with Edgecombe County to share a highly effective teacher leader to support our students and teachers at Reidsville High School.

Barrett: And so we'll explain a little bit about that Multi-Classroom Leader role. In that role, there's a person who's selected for a record of high-growth student learning who also shows the competencies to lead adults as well. Those people lead a small teaching team. They're intensively providing support through, in coaching and feedback cycles, through leading data analysis, through leading planning meetings, focusing on the curriculum, the high-quality instructional materials that a district is using, to make sure that teachers are really delivering the best instruction possible. That's the general concept. And then we threw in this twist of having that person be a good ways away—and so, and not in, obviously in the same district. So that means that there are so many details that you all had to work through. Which—I know we could talk for hours about all those details—but which of those would you highlight as either especially challenging or successful?

Dollarhite: There were definitely some logistical and structural challenges, things like aligning schedules, defining roles and responsibilities, establishing how we were going to communicate with each other, and working through human resources and compensation details across the districts. But one of our biggest successes was the level of collaboration and commitment between our two districts. I think that we both had the same goal in mind, so we really stayed focused on that and finding ways to improve outcomes for our students. And that was the basis for our decision-making. We had clear communication and strong planning, and that's what made implementation possible, was really getting together to have that framework where we support each other off the bat.

Barrett: And you were doing this, we should note, midyear—that the Multi-Classroom Leader team wasn't going to come together until second semester.

Dollarhite: Correct. So a lot of our foundation was in October, November, and then we began implementation at the semester change, which was mid-January.

Barrett: So how did you all figure out things like who, how the person is paid, how the person is assessed to make sure that they're doing a good job—the person leading the team? How did you figure out which district was responsible for what?

Dollarhite: We relied highly on Public Impact. They had that framework in place, where they had not implemented it before, but had thought about it. So by using their guidance to help lay out that framework, it was easy to look at how much we were going to contribute financially for the number of teachers and then just talking through what exactly we expected from the support of this remote MCL.

Barrett: All right, so let's get into the details a little bit then. How did that remote leadership look in practice? What was a typical day or a week like for the Rockingham teachers who were on this team? And tell us a little bit about the backgrounds, maybe, of the teachers who were on that team.

Dollarhite: So we had two teachers on the team. One was a beginning teacher in their first year, and one was a veteran teacher but had not taught high school. So this was her first year teaching high school. And in practice, the remote leader was really engaged with the team. This included regular virtual coaching sessions, co-planning, reviewing student work, and using data to guide instruction. The instructional support that we needed was structured, consistent, and focused on improving instruction. So we really needed our remote MCL to look at the data and help them to find resources for small groups so that we could support students in reaching those goals for passing our statewide assessment. Technology made it possible, but the key was the clarity of the leader's role and the accountability for results.

Barrett: So tell me a little bit more about how much they saw each other. How did they find common planning time or time for data analysis, and how much time did they actually spend during a week on those things?

Dollarhite: So the remote MCL, she was a full-release in Edgecombe. So that allowed her to have some flexibility in her schedule. And our two teachers had the same planning time. So once a week, she was meeting with them for their PLC to go over lesson planning and then look at their student data. So they would bring all of that to the table so that they could identify what exactly they needed to go back and reteach. And then the remote MCL helped them to be able to pull in some of the instructional materials they would need for reteaching.

Barrett: And she was also leading a team in Edgecombe at the time. We'll explain that for our listeners that full-release means that she didn't also have a class of record, of her own. So it does make the schedule a little more flexible, right?

Dollarhite: Yes, if she'd had her own classes, I think it would have been much more difficult to find that common planning time. But the, the principal was also, she was a part of those planning sessions, and I came in as much as I could in those planning sessions. So we were really trying to just keep that instructional framework as our focus.

Barrett: And then to clarify, also, for our listeners, this person in Edgecombe County, the team leader, had a team there, but did those teams—did that team interact at all with the teachers in Rockingham, or were they really kept pretty separately?

Dollarhite: No, we did not interact. No, we kept them separate.

Barrett: OK. And you mentioned that technology made a lot of this possible. Tell me a little bit more about how that was happening. Was she just, was the team leader just coming in on tech, on a, like a Zoom feed or something, and watching teachers, the teachers teach?

Dollarhite: We used to love Zoom. We learned a lot post-COVID on how much Zoom could make our lives easier for trying to do these meetings without having to be in the same location. But if we had continued with remote, there was an option to be able to set up for her to do classroom observations remotely and provide feedback that way. We had initially thought that we would try that within the first semester, but we did not have that focus. Our focus was more for that instructional planning. So that kind of became what our true focus was with her for that first semester. If we continued, I think it would have been great to have had that set up for her to be able to observe classrooms, give feedback, and then have those conversations with the teachers. But just implementing for one semester, we didn't grow into that.

Barrett: And then usually we have it so that in every, in an Opportunity Culture system, everybody gets a coach. That's part of the theory, that everybody needs a coach and everybody gets a coach. So who was responsible then for, if anyone was, for coaching that team leader and making sure that she was OK?

Dollarhite: So she had weekly check-ins with the school principal that were just conversations with her and the principal. So the principal could kind of discuss with her expectations and then any concerns that the remote MCL had that she

could bring back and discuss with the principal. So there was two meetings for her a week, one with the teachers and then one with the principal.

Barrett: And you said, especially given this was so new, the principal was in those planning meetings that she had with the team as well.

Dollarhite: Yes.

Barrett: Yeah. So then they could really be in sync about what the expectations were.

Dollarhite: Exactly. And then I think that, the teachers, the two teachers were very willing, especially the BT1, as a first-year teacher, you're looking for resources and guidance from anyone. And then our veteran teacher was extremely open-minded and excited about the help and support from the first day. So that just made a really great partnership.

Barrett: That's great to hear. Yeah, that was one of the things I was curious about, was whether it took a lot of convincing within the district, either for district leadership or for the affected teachers to try this solution. From the district level, did it take much convincing?

Dollarhite: Well, there was a lot of questions at first, which is understandable. It was something that was definitely a nontraditional approach. But I think what helped was being transparent about the challenges we were facing and staying focused on the why. We weren't trying something new just to innovate. We were trying to ensure that our teachers and students had access to that high-quality support. And once people understood that, they began to see that there was going to be some great results in it, and that encouraged the buy-in.

Barrett: And I want to go back a little bit to the, we said at the beginning that the principal couldn't find the person initially that she needed to run this team. Tell me a little bit about what that means in terms of the selection criteria that you all had set up and why it was important to the district not to just hire someone who didn't yet meet those criteria.

Dollarhite: So for us, our criteria is they have to have strong EVAAS growth. And they have to have leadership in the accomplished and above ratings for their content area and also leadership in their practice. So where our principal could find individuals that maybe had that strong EVAAS growth, she didn't feel like that they were going to match well with her school or actually be able to hold those difficult conversations and help guide and lead her teachers. So we did not want to hire someone that we thought would be detrimental to the position. We wanted to make sure that the right person was hired that married those two that brought together that really strong instructional focus, but then also could communicate and encourage others and help to be that coach. And so we were able to find that person this year. So it all worked out, but it was more important for us to hit pause and look at other avenues. And this proved to be a great one for us for that semester to kind of bridge that. But now we have a great person that's in-person that's doing all the things that we wanted with a person on staff.

So, Mariah, tell us what everyone will want to know, because of course, what everybody is concerned about is what happened, what results did the school see from this after only a semester of the team working together?

Dollarhite: So within the first month, we saw encouraging signs through our check-ins. Teachers had more consistent access to that coaching and support, which led to stronger instructional alignment in their classrooms. And we started to see the data improve in their common assessments that they were giving students. And then that targeted small-group instruction that provided that support. So there was an increased collaboration in the team, and I think the teachers reported feeling more confident in their planning delivery, because now they had those resources in place, and they knew that they had been vetted by our remote MCL. We also started seeing positive movement in student engagement in that formative assessment data. And at the end of the year, I know it was just one semester, but we saw a 10 percent

gain in our proficiency results in those classrooms that she was supporting. So for us, we did see a lot of positives in one semester of implementation.

Barrett: That must have been so exciting and encouraging for the teachers on the team to almost instantly see some results. That really speaks to the level or the power of that level of support. And interesting that they felt that, even with someone who wasn't there in person, who wasn't part of their district, it wasn't even—because the remotely located model can be just for someone down the street in the district, right? Somebody in another school. But this, where they were so far away, that's really interesting. Is there anything that you think was special about what that team leader did to make such an impact so quickly?

Dollarhite: I think one of the things that really made a difference for us is at the very beginning, before we started any of the planning, we took our two teachers and the principal to Edgecombe County, and we spent a day with them working with this team leader. So you went ahead and established that relationship, and they were able to share with her their needs and what are some things that they really wanted to take away from this process, and then she was able to go ahead and start giving that guidance and structuring for them what their plan in time was gonna look like. So I do feel like that in-person component was very important to start this whole process.

Barrett: All right, so we've talked about how this—you all ended up doing this for only a semester, because then in the, over the next months, you were able to find someone else within the district who could take on this role. So tell us a little bit more about what it's been like this year now for those teachers to have a team leader who's right there in the building. How has that changed things?

Dollarhite: Well, I think for this year with a dedicated MCL in place, the foundation was already there for them to really start that common planning and having those data conversations. and the expectations were there. We'd already established that culture of collaboration. So we're seeing a continued growth in both teacher effectiveness and student outcomes as a result of that. And the individual that we brought on board, she is so strong in her math content that they are very respectful of her and her ideas. She's able to pull out and really explain, they did not get this concept and we have to go back and solidify this concept before we can build upon it into those new skills. So our data this year is looking, it's looking really great. So we're hoping that it holds at the end of the year for May when we do our EOCs at the end of the school year. But our overall check-ins, we've seen a huge result in those from the previous year to now. So we're really, really excited to see what this year holds.

Barrett: And is that having an effect on how the district—what's the feeling about Opportunity Culture models in the district as they're starting to spread and people are seeing things like this? Yeah.

Dollarhite: So we're expanding into four more schools next year. And I think at first when we went to the initial four, there was a lot of hesitation in whether or not this time component and commitment was gonna have results that made it worth the while. But seeing some of the results and hearing the feedback from the teachers that have this support, that has encouraged these schools that are coming on that they wanted to do this because they saw value in it. I think the more that you have individuals working with a small team and they can provide those resources and support, it's just, it's a huge benefit for everyone.

Barrett: So give me your thoughts then, and I know we're speculating here, but if you had not been able to find someone else internally to take on the role this year, what do you think, and you mentioned a little bit of this before, what do you think would have changed this year if you had kept working with the remotely located leader, changed in how that, how that relationship works, change in technology, as you mentioned before. Yeah, what would be needed?

Dollarhite: We had had a conversation with the other district that we would bring the remote MCL here in person, and then that we would also send our teachers there throughout the year if this continued. So I really feel like that would

have been a key component, for her to be here and not only see our teachers, but our students. It's really important to kind of see that makeup and the personalities of the classrooms. So having her come here to give feedback and co-teach would have been very important. Not like someone that's on staff that can come in there every week, but it would have increased the value of her position to our teachers. And then them going there and working with her teachers and their students, just those resources that can be shared across the districts would have been something to build upon. And then, like I said before, we were working on having ways for their lessons to be recorded and shared with her so she could give that real-time feedback and help with coaching and modeling. Zooms as well, we could have set up some of those for her to be able to work with students that they felt like could benefit from a small group and handle that Zoom-type of situation for walking through and building on our math concepts. So I think a lot of things would have come into play if we had continued it for another year. But luckily for us, we were able to find an in-person individual that could come on board.

Barrett: You've mentioned small groups a couple of times. And I know I get a lot of questions when I've talked to folks about how small groups work in high school. People, of course, envision that easily in elementary school, but less so in secondary. Tell me a little bit more about what that was like on that Multi-Classroom Leader team. What did small groups, how would they work?

Dollarhite: So for our team this year, our MCL works by looking at their individual student data from their weekly common assessments. And then we have 90-minute blocks. So within that 90-minute block, they make sure they provide some time for small-group instruction. And this is usually while the other students are doing independent work. So our MCL this year will build time in her schedule where she pushes into those classrooms and she works with four or five students while the teacher's working with four or five students and the rest are doing independent work. And so that just allows for them to really focus on key needs for those students to make sure they get those concepts that are gonna build those foundational skills.

Barrett: And that small-group tutoring and teaching time, of course, we think is so incredibly important. Is that new for Rockingham, or is that, had that happened in high schools all along?

Dollarhite: I think it's new for high schools. Elementary schools do small-group instruction very well. And then middle schools where they're coming along, but high schools, it is a different thought of how to implement small groups. But our MCL actually had a background from middle school. So this was something that she had been doing in her years of practice. So she was able to share what that would look like and how to support that in our high school settings. And then having another adult is always important in the room. So having another staff member to pull those groups. She has the ability and flexibility to take them out of that classroom, back to her classroom to work on that one-on-one time. So I think by her having ownership and also being involved, that just gives more merit to what she's trying to provide for them to have results.

Barrett: And have you heard many reactions from other folks in the high school or in the district about doing that at the high school level?

Dollarhite: Well, everyone that Ms. Calkins works with at the high school level loves her. So they, when we've done our rounds to do, like, our conversations with how Opportunity Culture is going—how do you feel about having MCLs in your classroom?—they all just want more time with her. They want more time to have her in their classrooms. So I think they definitely see the value and appreciate that additional support and guidance.

Barrett: I don't know if this is a question you can answer, but do you see a, how do the students respond? Do you see a change in students when they get that small-group time or is that weird to them because they're not used to it in high school?

Dollarhite: You're always going to see a change in students during small group because it's such a—once you have that smaller four to five, they have more confidence to ask questions. They're not as concerned about having a question that they might not know. They're willing to take more risk. So anytime you can make that setting smaller for them to have that confidence-builder or to have leveled instruction that's made for them and tiered to support their needs, you're just going to see overall growth and their confidence for themselves in their academic work.

Barrett: Are all kids getting tutoring time, getting that small-group time, or is it specifically for kids who are struggling?

Dollarhite: So at the high school level, you have what's called, at this high school, it's Raider time. So built into the day, it's time for students to work on their individual needs. It's also like ACT prep. So that's utilized as a—as well as within the classroom. So all students have Raider time, and it's designed to specifically meet what they're working on. But within the classroom, they are trying to touch every student for what they specifically need from their common assessment data and from their check-ins throughout the school year.

Barrett: That's great that it's not just for kids who are struggling, then, that it really is meeting the needs of all students.

Dollarhite: Because you want to grow them all. So you have to focus on each and every one and how you can grow them.

Barrett: So I've talked with several folks lately who've been really intrigued by Rockingham's story. People in areas that are facing similar concerns about finding the people they need to lead teams. I talked to some folks last week in Mississippi who really want to see this spread there. And they were saying that was one of the concerns that they were hearing from districts is what if we truly don't have anyone? And so I was saying, well, hold on, I'll have a podcast for you soon about this. So what would your advice be to other districts that are facing similar needs?

Dollarhite: I would encourage districts to be willing to rethink traditional structures and not let geography limit access to great teaching and leadership. Start with a clear understanding of what your need is. You really need to know what you're looking for and then be open to partnerships and invest in time and strong planning at the beginning. So really laying out what your plan is going to look like. Also, don't underestimate the importance of communication and buy-in. I think it was really important for us the way that we took our teachers to Edgecombe, where they could meet and have ownership and buy-in before we ever started planning and looking at instructional components. They had to believe in this process. And ultimately, it's about ensuring that every student has access to excellent instruction. And sometimes that requires thinking differently about how we're going to get there.

Barrett: We are so pleased that you all did think differently about it and were a pioneering district along with Edgecombe County in taking this on. And I think your advice is spot-on. Certainly we know so much that communication is just crucial, as I know from not just in the remote setting, but in all, dealing with everything Opportunity Culture-wise that changes how staffing works. So, Moriah, do you have anything else that you would like to share? Anything else that we didn't talk about that you think people should know?

Dollarhite: No, I appreciate you giving me this time to speak with you and just share some of our results and ideas.

Barrett: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to share all of this. We know lots of people will learn so much from it. And thanks to you all for listening. To learn more about Opportunity Culture staffing design and the latest results for student learning and teacher careers, go to opportunityculture.org. Have a great day.