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Becoming a Student Growth State Leader: Lessons from Winchester

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Barrett: Welcome to Opportunity Culture Audio. I'm Sharon Keschull Barrett.

In October, when producer Beverley Tyndall and I visited Winchester Public Schools in Virginia, educators were feeling excited about news they'd just gotten from the state: For the previous year, their seventh-grade math students were number 1 in the state for learning growth; fourth-grade math was in the top 10, and eighth-grade math was in the top 12. All three of these grades had 100 percent of their students reached by Multi-Classroom Leader teaching teams—that is, a team of teachers, advanced paraprofessionals, and a team leader in the Multi-Classroom Leader role who is accountable for the learning results of all the students that the team teaches.

And across the district, 15 teams are now reaching 100 percent of students in a subject or grade—and of those, 9 teams saw their students make high growth, and four more made expected growth. In the middle school, for example, both math and ELA teams saw high growth.

So, in our interviews with the superintendent, a principal, and teaching team leaders and members, I kept asking: How did you do it? They had a lot to say, but one element was consistent: extensive small-group instruction informed by student data.

Additionally, said Principal Lisa Pluska of Virginia Avenue Charlotte DeHart Elementary, it was crucial to have as many subject or grade-level Multi-Classroom Leader teams as possible, to reach all students with instruction guided by a proven team leader.

Pluska: My first year here we were very low in growth for our students. In the City of Winchester, we have the highest free-and-reduced lunch percentages, and we also have very high trauma in this area, and so, you're almost like fighting fires every day because they're so young, they don't know how to self-regulate. And so, if you are doing that all of the time you can never get into the instruction piece. And so, we were trying to figure that out as to making sure that they were ready for instruction, and we had to get all hands on deck to make sure we were ready to do that. So, we went from being one of the lowest performing schools in the division to the second year, when we did a team lead in every grade level, to one of the highest in the division.

Barrett: A focus on fluid, sometimes cross-grade small groups was also key, Pluska said.

So, we had been doing some small groups throughout, it's just I don't think we were getting the best bang for our buck in our small groups because we didn't always want to re-tier as often as we needed to. They were not as fluid as they needed to be—so when you are looking at data all the time you can quickly shift groups for that. So, when you have the fluid groups you get the kids exactly what they need when they need it and as we all know through research, the biggest issue for discipline is usually because they're not engaged in the classroom or they're not getting what they need in the classroom. Our discipline data went down dramatically last year as well, and I attribute a lot of that to the instruction that was happening in the classroom.

Barrett: Laura Hodgin leads the fourth-grade Multi-Classroom Leader, or MCL, team at Pluska’s school.

Hodgin: Small groups last year were critical in helping our growth. We have small groups for reading interventions and reading enrichment because it’s critical for all students to be able to grow, and so every adult that I have available during a chunk of time, which is about thirty minutes, is with a small group of students meeting them at their level and helping them to be able to achieve particular goals.

It’s flexible, it’s fluid. We have gifted Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 running most days, and that requires screening and data collection and sorting and talking to different grade levels and being able to get all the different people to come into place to be able to run this dance; it’s like a well-choreographed dance.

Barrett: When the team structure began, Hodgin said, expectations shifted, with teachers sharing all their students’ data to be sure all students’ needs were met and helping students and parents to understand the data.

Hodgin: The teachers needed to realize that the students will rise to the expectation that we have, and the students will grow when they believe that they can do it, when they know what their data is, and it can be any data. It can be behavior, it can be academics, it can be attendance, but if you start by having the conversation and you’re open and truthful and create the relationship and you don’t shy away from the tough conversations either, you know, ‘this is how you’re doing, how can I help you to get to the next level?’ And so, we set goals, the students, we look at how we do on everything and say, ‘this is where you are, where would you like to be? What are some specific things that we can do to get you there?’ It’s bite-sized goals and we just stay very focused on it.

Barrett: The extensive use of small groups, Hodgin said, led them to see more “grit” in students.

Hodgin: Students in their small group, they know, without it being said, they’re being met at a level that they understand and they’re able to reflect and understand the curriculum and grow with it and as you don’t hear as much, ‘oh, I can’t do it’. Last year I would have students that would start to cry, like, ‘Oh, this is just too difficult in math, it’s just too difficult,’ and I’m going, no, it’s through your tears you’re going to get it, just keep going. And then, they get through it and they’re like, ‘Oh, I do have it.’ And then the tears stop, so it’s through our tears, it’s through our hard work, we learn about ourselves and we develop grit and grow.

Barrett: Emily Houser, the seventh- and eighth-grade English team leader at Daniel Morgan Middle School, also saw her team’s results improve.

Houser: Last year was a really successful year for us; we increased our overall English pass rate by at least 13% and we had even further increases in our gap group—so like traditionally underserved students, our ESL population, which we have a large ESL population at this school. English had always been like a really tough area for this school and so that was a really great success.

Barrett: It helped, Houser said, to adopt a new curriculum that will be in line with expectations for the recently passed Virginia Literacy Act, and to use the grade-level team structure to improve how they did interventions.

Houser: We regrouped kids across the whole grade level for that time, so it didn’t matter who your home teacher was. If you needed decoding support, you went and got decoding support; if you needed more challenging project-based stuff you got that during that time and that was also kind of like data Tetris when I was trying to put all of the groups together, but I think that was also a big push towards you know, getting kids what they needed.

Barrett: Seeing the success of small-group instruction in English and math influenced its use in science classes, said Eric Cornish, the fifth- and sixth-grade science team leader at Daniel Morgan Intermediate School.

Cornish: I think the days of teaching twenty-five kids all at the same lesson, all at the same pace are gone and it's just one of the things that we teach a lesson, kind of see what kids got from it, and then take them and it's like okay, you guys got it, you're going to work on this, you guys need a little extra support, you're going to come over here with me, and we'll focus on that. It is a learning curve though. It doesn't come as naturally to some teachers, it's definitely something that we've worked on and practiced, I've modeled, I've had them observe other content teachers to see how they can structure it. But for our school it's a serious focus and then it's, I mean, it's the way it has to be.

Barrett: If he were to talk to a new team leader about crucial leadership elements, Cornish said, he would have a lot say from what he's learned since taking this role.

Cornish: Oh man, it's kind of like if I could go back and talk to myself three years ago; one, is that the data that you do receive from any assessment, formal and informal, it doesn't lie—you have to start there. So, you focus on the data and then you just have to work with teachers to build capacity for one, how to structure their classroom for small groups and that can be the physical space and also just having organization for who's in what group, why they are in that group, and what you will do with them in that group, and then, I mean, from there just don't give up, just keep banging the drum of the importance of small group instruction.

Barrett: Keep banging that drum, he said, because it's tempting for teachers to return to mostly whole-group instruction.

Cornish: I think there's an efficiency piece to a whole group instruction that it feels, oh, I can get this all done quickly and then we can move on to the next lesson tomorrow, and there's not accountability within it and then in that time you're only really teaching to the ten percent of the kids that are getting it. So, the efficiency piece is very compelling and very attractive I think and so it's one of those things where you just kind of have to keep the focus on the importance of it, working with smaller groups of kids and meet them where they're at.

Barrett: Brandi Shirley, who holds the Multi-Classroom Leader role for first grade at John Kerr Elementary, agrees with Cornish about small-group versus whole-group.

Shirley: Small group is definitely much better than whole group. You can keep your eyes on the kids a lot closer, you definitely create more of an intimate relationship with the kids. The biggest thing is creating relationships with students and it's a lot easier in a small group; you can get a lot more out of a student in a small group than whole group because it builds their confidence, and they want to perform for you. And so, it definitely is much better than large group settings. I do believe that if you were to ask the teachers, they would say I would do small group all day because they see the growth and the worth of a small group.

Barrett: Multi-Classroom Leader teams usually get support from a Reach Associate paraprofessional. This advanced role provides teams with a paraprofessional who can focus, with strong MCL guidance, on leading small groups to further students' success. Shirley said she and her team love their support from Reach Associate Debra James.

Shirley: They know they can't do this on their own. We have so many needs in the building and in our grade that without her we wouldn't be able to reach the kids that we do. I think that they work very well with her and the way that we prepare her is we give her the training for VALLSS assessment so when she's giving those assessments she's realizing where the kids are falling and she's getting her own perspective of okay, 'here's where we stand, here's where we need to go.' Then, after she had her VALLSS training she was trained in the SPIRE resource, so she knows how to deliver the lessons and to push the kids as they need to be pushed. We work very closely side by side as you can see our desks are right next to each other so we're always bouncing ideas off of one another. She'll come in and speak to me about what she's seeing happening in small groups so that I'm aware of things I might need to help the teachers with, or she might

say, 'Hey, I saw this, is this something I can do in my small group?' So, she's always wanting to grow herself and build upon what she knows, her tools in her toolbox.

Barrett: Finding the funding for paraprofessional support—both from the Reach Associate role and any other available teaching assistants—should always be a principal's priority, Lisa Pluska said.

Pluska: I did deplete my remediation funds and my Title I funds to keep my Opportunity Culture people in place, as well as, some of my TA's that were here my regular TA's, not Opportunity Culture TA's. I feel very strongly that they make a huge difference in small groups, and the more small-group instruction that we have, especially when you have high-need children, the better off you're going to be and the more results you're going to get, because I feel like the people are more important than programs, more important than conferences. I would love to go on some conferences and love to send of my people on them but, if I have to choose between the two, I'm going to always err to the side of the people to keep those small groups going.

Barrett: In all of these interviews, the educators have seen so many positive results that it could be easy to forget the effort they've put in to successfully implement Opportunity Culture roles and teams. But Principal Pluska won't be forgetting any time soon.

Pluska: It was a huge turnaround, we worked very hard, but it was a huge turnaround for staff, for the teachers—the staff were not necessarily enthusiastic to begin with; they weren't real sure that they needed somebody there all of the time helping them and doing things but they have grown to love this program, and I had very little staff turnover last year and that's after we worked really hard all year. I was afraid that we had burnout, but I had very low turnover, so I attribute a lot of that to Opportunity Culture as well.

Barrett: Hearing that from Pluska, and reflecting on why they had such low turnover, brought out some emotions in MCL Laura Hodgkin.

Hodgin: When you feel like you are part of the team, that's wrong, when you 'know' that you're part of a team and you're valued, oh my gosh, and I don't cry. When you know that you're part of a team and you know you are making a difference, and you know everybody is pitching in and doing their fair share or even more than their fair share then why would you leave?

Barrett: Thank you to Lisa Pluska, Laura Hodgkin, Emily Houser, and Eric Cornish for their time. For more on small-group instruction, listen to the companion piece with math Team Reach Teacher Brian Tavenner, available on OpportunityCulture.org, Apple podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts.