



OPPORTUNITY CULTURE® Audio

[For Big Results, Go Big with Teaching Teams](#)

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

When it comes to redesigning their educator staffing, should school districts 'go big or go home'? Well...we don't actually want any school district to go home. We're glad when a district starts, even in a small way, with Opportunity Culture teaching teams, which extend the reach of excellent teaching to more students, for sustainable higher pay—but the reality is, it's so much better to go big!

At Public Impact, we focus on helping schools reach *all* students with these Multi-Classroom Leader teams, because our dozen years of data show us how important that is for learning growth.

Consider just one stat: Title I schools that have been using these teams for at least four years, and that have the teams schoolwide in core subjects, are 83 percent more likely to have high learning growth schoolwide than schools without the teams. *83 percent*. And schools still in the early years of these teams also get better results when they go big.

Remember that a typical student in a typical school makes one year of learning growth annually. So—students who start behind, stay behind. But if they make more growth than that, consistently, then they can close those gaps and leap ahead. That means districts and schools need to quickly scale up to reach all students with Multi-Classroom Leader teams. On those teams, teachers and paraprofessionals in innovative roles get guidance and support from a team leader who has a record of high-growth learning.

But don't take it from me—what have superintendents, district leaders, and principals told me over the past decade about why they think it's important to go big and reach all students?

Let's start with Principal April Shackelford in Wilson County, North Carolina, who talked to me in 2022, her school's second year of Opportunity Culture implementation.

April Shackelford: We had such a great student outcome and teacher impact in the three grade levels where we had Opportunity Culture last year, so in year two we went schoolwide. I would like to say we tripled our Opportunity Culture effect, because it was outstanding. In our state, you know, in order to exceed growth, you have to be 2.0--our growth was 9.57, in one year, in 10 months, following a pandemic! Our school letter grade went from a 71 prior to the pandemic to an 83. We are just measures away from being in an 'A' school.

Barrett: Similarly, Principal Julie Shields in Hertford County, North Carolina, began with Multi-Classroom Leader teams in just first and third grades, where teachers showed the most interest. But by the second year, she wanted to reach 100 percent of students with these MCL teams. Her staff was ready, she said, because they had been watching the results in first and third.

Julie Shields: Staff could tell that their teaching improved, their students knew more than just them—they were heavily involved with the MCL that was supporting their classroom. So, it's a win-win situation, so I think everybody saw that.

Barrett: First-grade Multi-Classroom Leader Holly Mathias loved the effect schoolwide implementation was having. It led to collaboration between grades, which previously did not happen often, she said.

Holly Mathias: No, not much, no. So we are very thankful for Opportunity Culture to give us a chance to grow together and learn more from each other. I honestly feel like it's the key piece for reaching more students, for having more children on grade level, meeting the standards, because it gives teachers a chance to really sit down and say, 'OK, well I found this strategy to work really well, what do you think? Have you ever tried this strategy in your room? OK, what strategies do you use that I could try with students just to be sure that they are mastering the skills in the objective?' When you walk in the building you can feel it—I couldn't imagine teaching anywhere else because this is where everyone's loved and supported, and we grow together as a team.

Barrett: When I interviewed Susan Hendricks, she was principal of Ross Elementary School in Ector County in Texas, and a strong believer in going schoolwide.

Hendricks: Right now, I have five MCLs. So we're schoolwide this year; last year we were not. Last year we were second through fifth, this year we're kinder through fifth.

Barrett: Hendricks said one key to going schoolwide smoothly was constant communication and celebration.

Hendricks: Everything we do, I tie to Opportunity Culture. Growth, it's all about growth, so, when we came into this, 'growth, and together we're better' was at the forefront of everything that we did, and it was just communicated constantly, and we just did a lot of celebrations—'look at the growth, look at the team—team, team, team, growth, growth, growth.' I had just done a staff meeting, and we were looking at data, and I said, 'This data is the result of y'all coming together as a team, from the time you get here until the time that you leave. This is Opportunity Culture.' And it's just those types of communications and tying in everything that you do to that.

Barrett: That means, she said, communicating in every forum, with every possible type of communication.

Hendricks: You gotta make it your culture. And the only way you do that is by highlighting it every chance you get—writing, meetings, in just talking with teachers, 'what is your coach doing for you, look at that, wow, that's amazing, you have value to give to your team.' I think it has helped them see that they have true value, because they're growing. Going schoolwide was easy for us, because we just talked so much about it all the time—Opportunity Culture®, like I said, has just become who we are. And so, it was a really easy adjustment, and we had new teachers down—'wouldn't you want an embedded all-day coach, wouldn't that be awesome?' 'Yes, yes, yes!' And they loved it, and it's just been great and wonderful.

Barrett: At Petree Elementary School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Multi-Classroom Leader Lakethia Ebrahim-Blackwell was excited when Principal Alicia Bailey wanted to expand their use of teaching teams after the first year.

Ebrahim-Blackwell: I do think that Ms. Bailey taking it on in multiple grades, game changer, game changer; because we did start out with first, third, and myself, and the tribe started there, and then, she came to us the next year and said, 'Ladies we're going to onboard some more,' and we're like, 'Let's go!' Like, more MCLs!

Barrett: That's just the sort of attitude that Executive Director of Professional Learning Tina Lupton would want to hear—enthusiasm for bringing these teams to all schools, and within all school grades, to make this a routine part of how the district operates.

Lupton: And we're hoping that with having these advanced teaching roles positions within their schools they can see that this benefits everyone. Within the district we've had a message that everyone needs a coach, whether it be our principals, our teachers, us as admin leaders; we all need coaches. We all need mentors and time in which we are collaborating with others and a chance to expand on our knowledge. So, I think that as we continue that messaging that we all deserve a coach, we all have room for growth, and even if you are a high-achieving teacher, there's great rooms for you to grow because you could be an amazing MCL or expanded impact teacher. And taking those teachers that have great data and great relationships with their students, you know, that's kind of the heart of OC is to expand that across

our district and I think that in other conversations we have had we are laying that foundation for this to be able to be a whole district approach. Everybody wants OC, because we all see the value.

I think that as we looked at the results from the school, some folks were like, 'Well, was it enough of a result?' I'm like, 'Absolutely!' We have schools that don't have teachers that are not meeting growth anymore, you know, we have schools where they're exceeding—every teacher in that school is either meeting or exceeding growth. That right there is a success and we can make that happen for all of our schools. And the fact that it happened in multiple of our OC schools, I think, was really telling of the work that great leadership can do within a school while expanding the reach of great instructors.

Barrett: Education leaders who have experienced Opportunity Culture implementation understand when others hesitate to go big with it, but they urge them to just do it.

The Winston-Salem/Forsyth County chief of schools, Timisha Barnes-Jones, has seen Multi-Classroom Leader teams in action in two districts, and she believes in prioritizing them.

Barnes-Jones: It's really just about having a vision for excellence in every single school. And then, deciding on what are the strategies that will ensure excellence in every single school. So, the secret sauce per se, is just not having the fear to take the leap to do something that may be a little bit different and it may be a little bit out of the box. Not being afraid to tackle the hard things. Opportunity Culture helps to level the playing field for our students. It ensures that our students are getting high quality effective teaching every single day.

Barrett: In Winchester, Virginia, Superintendent Jason van Heukelum, who used Opportunity Culture® teams in a previous district, decided to go across his district with the model, not, say, just targeting a Title I school as some district leaders want to do.

van Heukelum: We are fortunate that we are a smaller school division, we're a one high school town, we only have seven schools. We took an opportunity to just go all in and garnered the support of our principals and we decided to give it a three-year run and say collectively, 'let's try this.' Of course, I had previous experience with the model and so, I was already a believer and an evangelist, if you will, for the work and fortunately, you know, we jumped all in as a school division; allowed us to also maximize our learning opportunities across the division, create community among the team leaders so that they could come together on a monthly basis and learn from each other across schools and that affinity group is really important, right, they can not only learn from each other but share challenges and successes and see what others are doing and learn from them but also recognize that some challenges are universal, and that's good for their soul, quite frankly, to understand that you're not the only one dealing with a particular challenge. We've grown together and you know, so I think that's been really important for how we've done that. It also drove, instead of having isolated schools' kind of cherry pick it here and there based on a champion at the school level. It provided an opportunity and forced us to have a champion at the division level.

Barrett: At Winchester's Virginia Avenue Elementary, Principal Lisa Pluska saw early on the value of schoolwide implementation for principals. Going schoolwide, she said, means principals can focus on the bigger picture better, she said, when they know that team leaders are concentrating on instruction and supporting all teachers.

Pluska: We had to get all hands on deck. 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. 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 as soon as they realized that if that person were not there these are things that they would have to be doing. They have grown to love this program, and they had very little staff turnover last year and that's after we worked really hard all year. I was afraid that we would have burnout but I had very low turnover, so I attribute a lot of that to Opportunity Culture as well.

Barrett: In fact, Pluska said, going schoolwide quickly can actually make things easier, not harder as many leaders fear.

Pluska: It was almost easier, I think, because then it is in every grade level and it's not, 'well, this grade level has it and this grade level doesn't, so of course, you can get that done but we can't because we don't have the extra persons.'

Barrett: In Midland ISD in Texas, Principal Debra Alba was eager to have her school chosen to implement the teams.

Alba: The year 2021–22 post pandemic, we were afforded the opportunity to be part of the model. We started out our first year with three lead teachers and I believe two RAs at the time. And so, the first year with Opportunity Culture in place, we reached an A status according to state accountability and so, we knew right away that the impact that it was having on our students and just on our team was a positive one, and that's what was kind of the missing link. And so, we've been able to sustain that and grow our team each year up to this year we have the largest team that we've had and we're reaching about 75 percent of our students and so, we're seeing great things and look forward to even more success with the team that we have in place today. Our goal is to be 100 percent, every student impacted through a classroom leader. There's no better professional learning that we could possibly put into place besides utilizing our best teachers and putting them in these roles, and so, that is definitely something we prioritize every year. This is where most of our energy and our efforts are going to go to, because it works. Our students see it, our data shows it, our families see it as well.

Barrett: That was probably music to the ears of Principal Alba's superintendent, Stephanie Howard. Eighteen of Midland's 22 schools using Opportunity Culture teaching teams made learning gains in 2024–25, Howard said. Superintendent Howard believes it's important to focus on reaching as many students *within* each campus as well as *across* a district.

Howard: I'm not a small-implementation person. I'm like, if we're going to do it, let's go full-scale. I'm a believer that if something is good, why would you start small, right? And I've found over the years that when there is anything new, it doesn't matter what it is, people are hesitant, they want to just dip their toes in and not really utilize the model the way that it can. And I think when you do that, you're not going to get the same results and then you may decide, 'oh, that didn't work.' Well, it didn't work because it wasn't implemented effectively. The principals, supervisors, have to come in and present their plans for their campuses, and if those are not big enough, if they are not extending the reach enough, if they're not thinking about utilizing it on a full scale at a campus, we can push back and ask them to go back and rethink that. So at a campus that may have three or four or five MCLs, should they have six, seven, eight, depending on the size of the campus? Our two high schools are large—they are 2600 students apiece—and so, I could see there being, you know, 15, 20 MCLs on a campus like that. And I also think there's an opportunity to look at MCLs beyond the core content areas, both beyond the tested areas which sometimes is where people will tend to focus first.

Barrett: So, if you're working in a district that hasn't yet redesigned your educator roles, these district leaders say: What are you waiting for? Don't make your students wait another year for better learning growth, or make your teachers wait for strong support and sustainable higher pay. Every year you wait means growth that's gone forever. And if your district is just dipping a toe into the redesign waters, they're telling you it's time to cannonball in!

Thank you to all the educators who've shared their thoughts with us in the past decade about going big. To learn more about their staffing strategies and results, go to OpportunityCulture.org, and follow Opportunity Culture® on LinkedIn.