



OPPORTUNITY CULTURE® Audio

"Ideas I didn't think of:" Becoming the First Oklahoma District Using Opportunity Culture® Design

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Jolyn Choate: *Honestly, it's a no-brainer. When you put a very effective teacher in front of more students, obviously you have more students that are going to be able to achieve and grow.*

Sharon Kebschull Barrett: Welcome to Opportunity Culture Audio. I'm Sharon Kebschull Barrett. Over more than a dozen years now, school district leaders in more than 100 sites in 18 states have chosen to put Opportunity Culture staffing design into action in their schools. In states such as North Carolina, where dozens of systems are using Opportunity Culture design, superintendents may hear about it from their peers or see it happening in the district next door and decide their teachers and students need this, too. But what makes superintendents go for it when it's brand new to their state?

That's what we're discussing today with Jolyn Choate. A graduate of Hulbert High School, Choate has been part of Hulbert Public Schools in Oklahoma most of her life and became its superintendent in 2020. Hulbert is part of the first cohort of Oklahoma schools receiving funded assistance to plan and implement Opportunity Culture staffing design that fits each of its three schools, along with professional learning for the educators taking on new roles beginning this fall. Superintendent Choate, welcome!

Jolyn Choate: Thank you, Sharon. It's nice to be here.

Barrett: So let's start with a few basics. Tell me how you would describe your district.

Choate: We are a rural community. Our class size is 2A, so I have 564 students, and that's pre-K three—I just started the three-year-old program in 2021—all the way through the 12th grade. So we are, we're not tiny, but we're not large by any way, shape, or form.

Barrett: So what issues then were you confronting in Hulbert that led you to Opportunity Culture design? And you can tell us a little bit if you like as well about how you heard about it in the first place.

Choate: So first of all, we heard about Opportunity Culture through OPSRC [Oklahoma Public School Resource Center]. I just happened to become a member of them last year and I think Opportunity Culture had partnered with them or there is a grant that they had received through or with Opportunity Culture so that it provided school districts of all sizes an opportunity to look at the way things are structured and to be able to facilitate what we're going to be able to do with some of my career teachers, because I love the idea of putting really great teachers in front of as many students as I possibly can. Those teachers are, they're most concerned about their classrooms, always, always, but helping them to understand there's a process and there's a reason and a valid one behind what we're doing so that as many students are as exposed to their teaching, not necessarily their teaching style, but in essence, the day-to-day habits, the time constraints, the classroom management—oh, that part is huge. And so being intentional about having those career teachers and those exceptional teachers in front of other teachers to model, just like I'm asking every teacher to model

for their student, and because we're so small, I wasn't sure how we could do that or make that happen, but Opportunity Culture provided some ideas or avenues that we could explore or try in order to make that happen.

Barrett: Were there things that you were specifically trying to target besides just getting your best teachers in front of as many kids as possible?

Choate: So we're always trying to target improving student performance, always. Achievement and growth are goals that we look at every single year. And I think that Opportunity Culture has provided a way for us to legitimately have stronger conversations about how to move those kids in the direction that we want them to move.

Barrett: And how much then, will that appeal to superintendents across Oklahoma? When you chat with others, what do you hear them talking about as their biggest issues?

Choate: So one of the things that I think is interesting about Opportunity Culture is that it promotes 'we can do all of this without there being a hit to your budget.' And I'll be honest with you, that was a draw for me. Again, we are small and everybody wears multiple hats already. And so finding a way for us to do this and it not hit our budget was absolutely a sell for me. That's going to be something that superintendents across the state are going to be interested in. One of the other things, I think, that is interesting is that because we're small, I don't have a curriculum leader. I don't, those are my building principals. Again, wearing multiple hats. Obviously, they do other things. But with Opportunity Culture, it provides a way for teachers to truly become building leaders or instructional leaders. And I'm about promoting that for my people. A true educator is a lifelong learner. And so just helping them understand that the more people that they're reaching, whether that is a student or a younger teacher or a teacher that maybe needs just a little bit of help, in their delivery or their classroom management, or an idea about a word wall—it just makes it easier. And this job is already hard enough as it is.

And so providing support and being able to help those that, in case they have had a bad year or if they haven't had and it's their first time, those kinds of supports are in place so that they don't leave education. I was looking for a way to help those teachers. I don't necessarily have a huge turnover. And when I went to school here, the majority of my teachers were from Hulbert or the surrounding area. And because we are small, typically that's what we have now. About 60% of my teachers live in district, which is great, because again, they're from here, they're pouring back into the community—but, again, the achievement and the growth, we needed to have some hard conversations about how we're doing things, what it is that we're missing and how can we circle back and pick up those things so that our students can grow and that they can achieve. So Opportunity Culture has provided numbers that show when you put—and honestly, it's a no-brainer—when you put a very effective teacher in front of more students, obviously you have more students that are going to be able to achieve and grow.

Barrett: So you said that you are excited, that one of the things that really excited you the most was the budget aspect of this. Tell me a little bit more about what you mean by that.

Choate: So Opportunity Culture provided ideas and examples of ways that we would be able to have an MCL and an RA and not hit our budget. So whether that's moving money around or looking at different Titles, and then also the Oklahoma Teacher Empowerment Program, we are looking at in terms of that this particular school year. So all of those things were very, very important to me, as I can only imagine would be to every superintendent, because this isn't something that is going to cost the district any more. It's something that you can do already with the budget that you have.

Barrett: And for listeners who aren't familiar yet with those terms, we'll explain that MCL, that's the Multi-Classroom Leader role, which is for a team leader of a small teaching team who has prior history of producing high student growth, student learning growth. And then the RA role is a Reach Associate role for an advanced paraprofessional who's providing especially assistance with small-group teaching and tutoring. And those roles get paid a significant supplement, but as you say, through the school budgets, through reallocations. All right, so were there specific particulars of Opportunity Culture design that appealed to you the most? And why were those appealing?

Choate: Obviously, the budget was the most appealing to me —student achievement and growth probably is, if I'm ranking them, that's a high second. And then third, having teachers become leaders. I would have loved this when I was in the classroom. I can tell you that right now. Obviously, that's why I'm in administration now. At the same time, I know that there are teachers that are out there that always want to provide a helping hand. And to me, that's what this type of teacher-leader is going to be. And that's going to be, 'let me share with you how I was successful, or this is what I did to help that behavior be a more positive behavior.' And so again, this, Opportunity Culture, allows that to happen without the teacher overstepping a boundary because now that is a position that they have or that they can own. And so I appreciate that too.

Barrett: Were there any pieces of it, when you went through at the district level, especially the design process, any pieces that felt more daunting than others?

Choate: You know what? No, I didn't, it was not daunting at all, to be honest with you. I will say the schedule is probably, would have to be the one that we struggled with, because again, we are small. But I would say when you get everybody's heads together and you know what the end goal is, and you work and you, I mean, you try this, it's a big, huge puzzle piece. And Sharon, I have good people. I'm telling you, I have good people. And in fact, I said, OK, we just got to figure it out. Whatever we have to do, we just have to figure it out. Now, sometimes you can't figure out everything, and you just have to do the very best that you can. But I'm super-excited about the schedule coming up this fall. I also appreciate the fact that we are intentional and we're purposeful because we know this is where the teacher is going to be at any given time during any given day. And so no, I didn't think anything was super-duper daunting. Maybe just a little stressful in the creation of some things, but that's how we all grow as human beings, is when we are confronted with something that we have to overcome or at least build a structure to start to get to the other side.

Barrett: We hear that a lot, that puzzle piece of the schedule, trying to make sure that you've planned the adequate planning time for everybody, because we make sure that you get that during the school day and more of it, as well as then the common planning time and collaboration team meeting time. It is a big puzzle, but yeah, when everybody gets it right, it's pretty exciting, and we see from survey results how much teachers appreciate that. All right, so, are there any other pieces of it that seem especially valuable so far, better use maybe of the Reach Associate roles to support instruction, increased small-group time—?

Choate: Increased small-group time? Absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt. This goes along with all of the multi-tiered systems of support that we are working towards. My teachers understand, by 2032, we are fully in place, we understand what occurs at tier 1. And they all understand too that tier 1 is our strongest tier, in that we're teaching all students. Tier 2, being able to provide that just as soon as we possibly can so that students don't stay in tier 2, but they can come right back to tier 1. And also understanding that those tiers are many times fluid. Just because a student is in tier 3 doesn't mean that they will always be in tier 3. We're working to get them back to tier 1. Tier 1 is the ultimate goal. And so most definitely having the RA and those special supports, to be honest with you, would be fantastic. I can see this occurring in a larger district just so fantastically. And if I had more people, then in my mind I'm thinking, well, if I have an RA that is spot-on and that can do the things that we're going to ask her to do this year, I'll be honest with you, I

feel like I have more than one paraprofessional that can do that. And so that's something that I'm looking forward to, to see exactly if that is going to work the way that Opportunity Culture says it's going to work. And if it does, then we may have more than one RA, which can do nothing but, again, help.

Barrett: All right, so, we talk a lot about the importance of school design teams, which are following the essential parameters of Opportunity Culture staffing design, but then they have flexibility to make their design fit their school's needs. And we talk a lot about the importance of extensively communicating their plans then and their design progress. So, with what you all have communicated so far, what are educators anticipating for how this might change, in this case, the elementary school this year?

Choate: I feel like teachers are on board. And again, everybody knows everybody. The people that we have in place as the MCL are people that are respected, and that's not to say that they know everything. Even they will tell you that they don't know everything and that sometimes it doesn't work for them. Or something that they've done in the past that did work, in this particular class, it did not, because as educators, we know no two classes one hour from the next are the same. And so I feel like everybody understands, everybody knows what's going to happen next year and that we'll be business as usual. It will just be, sometimes there will be two teachers in the classroom instead of one and a para. So we're excited about that. I think they're excited about it to see how it's going to work and how it's going to play out.

Barrett: So then, after this year, what happens? How does it expand? And then what are your big goals?

Choate: After this year, I'm hoping that we can have an MCL and an RA in the middle school. But ultimately, I think that after this year, what I'd like to see is student achievement and student growth increase. Ultimately, that is the goal.

Barrett: So it's early days for you, obviously, in this work, but what would you tell or what are you telling other superintendents in Oklahoma about it?

Choate: Just that it is a, it's a set of ideas that I didn't think of on my own, I don't know that I would have thought on my own, if not presented with all of the information that Opportunity Culture has brought to us and the success that the framework has brought to other school districts that they are in. So I'm excited to see where it takes us.

Barrett: So, Superintendent Choate, thanks so much for sharing your thoughts with us. We're looking forward, too, to seeing what happens in Hulbert over the next few years. And I want to let listeners know that there are still some cohort spots remaining to get the same funded design assistance that you all got, plus professional learning for the educators taking on these new roles. And information on how to apply is in our show notes and at OpportunityCulture.org. Thanks for listening and have a great day.