



Opportunity Culture: Lessons Learned

An Executive Brief for District Leaders in North Carolina

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This brief highlights lessons learned from eight North Carolina school districts that are designing and implementing Opportunity Culture school staffing models. Of North Carolina's initial 10 Advanced Teaching Roles pilot districts, six elected to use the Opportunity Culture model. Public Impact, which founded the Opportunity Culture initiative, provides technical assistance and professional learning as districts and schools establish Opportunity Culture roles.

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[Public Impact](#) is a North Carolina based education consulting organization aiming to contribute to dramatic improvements in the quality of education and related policy supports in the United States. Public Impact's mission is to dramatically improve learning outcomes for all students, with a focus on low-income students, students of color, and other students whose needs have historically not been well met.

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Opportunity Culture Overview

Districts choose to use Opportunity Culture designs with the intent of providing all students with equitable access to *excellent* teaching, year after year, and all educators outstanding career opportunities.

Opportunity Culture aims to address a variety of persistent challenges to achieving excellent student learning results. Challenges in schools today often include:

- teachers working alone without the support and collaboration that surveys indicate they want,
- excellent teachers not having roles that help all other teachers excel,
- students losing excellent teachers to district jobs and other careers that pay more, and
- principals feeling overwhelmed with too many teachers to guide and support.

Those challenges mean too few students experience excellent teaching consistently. This has led eight districts and 130 schools in North Carolina to establish Opportunity Culture staffing structures with more districts and schools being added each year. Nationally, there are more than three dozen Opportunity Culture sites in 10 states. Opportunity Culture school districts hope to transform the teaching profession for all educators by providing better preparation, collaboration, pay, career opportunities, and support.

Opportunity Culture design has important human capital implications for schools. By making teaching more attractive as a long-term profession for excellent teachers, schools are better positioned to attract and retain top talent — including teachers of color, which research shows would have outsized effects on students. The team-based structure of an Opportunity Culture helps schools make important instructional shifts, such as implementing higher-standards curricula and research-based teaching methods.

Opportunity Culture design also requires districts and schools to rethink current budgets. This exercise becomes particularly relevant during recessionary budget crunches now faced nationwide.

What Does an Opportunity Culture School Include?

In an Opportunity Culture school, teachers join small, collaborative teams led by excellent teachers called multi-classroom leaders, or MCLs. MCLs are teachers with a record of high-growth student learning and leadership competencies who teach part of the time while leading teams of two to eight teachers. They determine, in collaboration with the team, how students spend time and the methods and tools to be used. They are also accountable for the learning results of all students taught by their team. MCLs build their team members' strengths, content knowledge, and instructional practice, and organize their teams to best use each person's talents. Districts usually create two or three levels of Multi-Classroom Leadership, based on the size of the teaching team. In North Carolina, MCLs earn pay supplements ranging from \$6,000 to \$20,000, all sustainably funded through reallocations of school budgets rather than temporary grants.

Third-party research indicates that teachers who join MCL teams help students make far more learning growth than when working without an MCL, on average.¹

¹ Hansen, M., & Backes, B. (2018, January 25). New teaching model yields learning improvement for students in math [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2018/01/25/new-teaching-model-yields-learning-improvement-for-students-in-math/>

Multi-classroom leader teams include one or more additional Opportunity Culture roles to support the MCL's extended reach. Team reach teachers, called expanded-impact teachers in many North Carolina districts, directly teach more students than usual. This is typically in partnership with a paraprofessional to avoid raising instructional group sizes. In North Carolina, expanded-impact teachers earn pay supplements from \$4,000 to \$10,000. Paraprofessional reach associates provide release time to MCLs and expanded-impact teachers by managing groups of students as needed. (For example, while an expanded-impact teacher teaches half the class, the reach associate supervises the other half during skills practice or projects.) Full-year teacher residents can also fill the paraprofessional role, earning full pay with benefits while they prepare to become teachers the following year.

Opportunity Culture Design Principles

Teams of teachers and school leaders choose and tailor models to:

- » Reach more students with excellent teachers and their teams.
- » Pay teachers more for extending their reach.
- » Fund pay within regular budgets.
- » Provide protected in-school time and clarity about how to use it for planning, collaboration, and development.
- » Match authority and accountability to each person's responsibilities.

Opportunity Culture intends to create a career ladder for teachers that lets them advance without leaving the classroom. Teachers progress by achieving student learning growth, reaching more students in teams, and leading colleagues to help everyone excel collaboratively. Substantial increases in pay come through reallocations of existing budgets. School design teams typically use three strategies to pay for their Opportunity Culture designs: reallocate flexible spending (such as Title I and II), shift some non-classroom teaching specialists back into classrooms (except for ESL and SPED), and replace a teaching vacancy with a paraprofessional.

Method for Determining Lessons Learned

Each year, Public Impact gathers quantitative and qualitative data and correlates them as much as possible with student learning growth and teacher satisfaction. The data gathered includes learning growth (schoolwide plus team-level growth, where available), an annual, anonymous educator survey, and school and district ratings on two rubrics developed by Public Impact: a school implementation review and a district implementation review. To further understand trends and perspectives, Public Impact seeks frequent input from high-performing educators who are selected as Opportunity Culture Fellows. Public Impact provides the following lessons learned based on seven years of data.

Lessons Learned

Lesson 1: Follow the Opportunity Culture Principles Closely

The elements of the Opportunity Culture Principles are among the highest predictors of student learning growth. Before implementing an Opportunity Culture, each school must create a design team of teachers and administrators that determines how to use Opportunity Culture roles and structures to:

- **Reach more students with excellent teachers and their teams.**
Excellent teachers. Multiple factors in teacher recruitment and selection are correlated with student learning. Applicants for Opportunity Culture advanced roles should have achieved high-growth student learning in two of the three most recent years and score high on leadership competencies. Job offers should be made early (by March) before they take a job elsewhere.

Reach more students. As the district’s percentage of schools with MCLs increases, schoolwide student learning growth increases in a similar, linear pattern. When the percentage reached dips, so do the odds of schoolwide high growth.

- **Pay teachers more for extending their reach.** The average pay supplement for MCLs is just above 20 percent of average teacher base pay. There is a linear relationship between the size of pay supplements and both teacher satisfaction and schoolwide student growth.
- **Fund pay supplement within regular budgets.** Schools that pay supplements entirely within school-level budgets (rather than, for example, from district coaching budgets) are more likely to achieve high learning growth schoolwide. Public Impact hypothesizes that school-level funding makes the availability of these roles feel more permanent, motivating current and aspiring MCLs.
- **Provide protected in-school time and clarity about how to use it for planning, collaboration, and development.** This factor is correlated with satisfaction and student growth. Most schools start their Opportunity Culture implementation with well-designed schedules, but due to various pressures, principals do not always maintain them — which reduces student learning. Districts should monitor Opportunity Culture schedules and promptly redirect principals to protect planning and collaboration time.
- **Match authority and accountability to each person’s responsibilities.** Educators’ belief that MCLs have more power in their school also correlates with student growth. MCLs are accountable for the growth of all students taught by their teaching team, and districts must collect and report data that way to help MCLs assess and improve their effectiveness in supporting the team’s teachers. Districts that do so have also been able to make staffing changes quickly when needed.

Lesson 2: Other Factors Matter, Too

- **Multi-Classroom Leadership team size.** MCLs need time to master instructional leadership and management. Large teams led by inexperienced MCLs — for example, MCLs in schools just starting Opportunity Culture — have not done as well. Schools should keep team sizes small and matched to the skill level and experience of each MCL. Those who achieve high growth managing a smaller team of three to five educators can then lead a larger team of six to eight, ideally with the help of an expanded-impact teacher when team size goes over six. Schools should also avoid overloading an MCL with too many inexperienced teachers.
- **Multi-classroom leader support.** Initial MCL training is important, but so is ongoing leadership training, and updated training in instructional content and pedagogy, to help MCLs stay current and lead change in schools. Opportunity Culture schools tend to score high on measures of general pedagogy (93 percent). But the data show notable weakness in how most teachers were prepared to teach their subjects (reading, etc.).
- **Avoid duplicative roles.** When schools and districts have kept “instructional coaches” or “facilitators” alongside MCLs, teachers have been confused, and the diffused responsibility hampers student learning. It is best for qualified coaches to become MCLs.

Lesson 3: Principal Leadership is a Distinguisher

- **Principals need ongoing support to keep implementation strong.** Public Impact has found that implementation elements correlated with student growth are nearly all controlled by principals (aside from the district’s responsibilities of setting pay levels and monitoring principal effectiveness). However, few principals today have their own experience as MCLs, and turnover averages four years. Principals of Opportunity Culture schools need training and support to lead and maintain effective implementation in such elements as clarity about MCL roles; protecting MCLs’ scheduled time to lead; understanding why the MCL role is worth the pay supplement; and fostering a focus on collaborative instructional excellence.
- **Principals need to help MCLs lead and coach.** A positive staff culture and a culture of collaboration promote educator satisfaction and student growth. This starts at the top. If the principal leads and coaches a team of five to 10 MCLs, the MCLs in turn learn how to lead and coach teachers collaboratively using the best ideas and skills of everyone.

On the Horizon: Multi-School Leadership

Not yet implemented in an Opportunity Culture site, this important role extends the reach of great Opportunity Culture principals.

When a school has effective multi-classroom leaders reaching at least 85 percent of the students, that school could be led by a multi-school leader (MSL). Similar to the selection criteria for the MCL role, an MSL would have achieved better-than-expected results by leading a team of MCLs in an Opportunity Culture school. The high-functioning distributed leadership structure makes it possible for the MSL to lead more than one school in partnership with operations managers, assistant principals, and/or principal residents.

Lesson 4: District leadership is Essential for Widespread, Long-Term Results

- **Superintendent vision and communication are critical.** The superintendent needs to inspire top system leaders and to act in alignment with a shared vision for implementation. Low involvement of the superintendent, or a lack of willingness to help the district leaders make changes, over time reduces student learning outcomes.
- **Align district services to Opportunity Culture.** The offices of human resources, budget, data and accountability, and academics all play key roles to ensure the effectiveness of Opportunity Culture implementation. This team needs to monitor implementation over the long term to guard against slippage.
- **Create a dedicated Opportunity Culture lead for the district.** Having a district leader who is empowered and accountable for this cross-team work is the best way to ensure that operational leadership is in place.



Leading for Results and Scale: Opportunity Culture Directors

Some districts create an Opportunity Culture Director position. This person oversees key work strands including:

Ensure School Flexibility and Autonomy

Ensure that district policies allow schools to extend the reach of excellent teachers and reallocate existing dollars to pay for their plans.

Monitor and Provide Feedback

Discern the quality of implementation at each school, provide feedback to principals, and inform initiative growth and improvement.

Measure Program Outcomes

Ensure the collection and analysis of student outcomes, teacher perceptions, and other data to highlight success and plan for improvement.

Guide School Design

Recruit schools to join the Opportunity Culture initiative, support schools to make ambitious school design plans, and approve school design plans.

Recruit & Select Opportunity Culture Educators

Ensure the recruitment of a high-quality talent pool and the use of a rigorous selection process to fill roles with teachers who have demonstrated success in leading students to high-growth outcomes.

Train & Develop Opportunity Culture Educators

Plan to support Opportunity Culture principals and teachers in their roles to develop their leadership skills, collaborate across schools, and become experts in the district's instructional and academic priorities.

North Carolina District Examples

Below are links to three articles and collections of videos featuring Opportunity Culture implementation in Edgecombe County Public Schools, Guilford County Schools, and Vance County Schools. For additional articles and videos on these and other examples, visit www.opportunityculture.org.

Edgecombe County Public Schools

Edgecombe County Public Schools has been featured for its successful implementation of Opportunity Culture in many forums. In a feature by [Hechinger Report](#), Edgecombe is highlighted as a rural district using an innovative staffing model to attract and retain teachers in a region where recruitment is challenging. Visit <https://hechingerreport.org/using-teacher-leaders-to-improve-schools/>.

District Profile

Edgecombe County Public Schools is implementing Opportunity Culture district wide - all 13 schools have multi-classroom leaders in place. In 2017-18, the district began Opportunity Culture implementation in a feeder pattern of underperforming schools, then expanded to all remaining schools. Initial design of Opportunity Culture and professional learning for educators was funded by a three-year Advanced Teaching Roles grant.

Results

Meeting and exceeding student growth expectations. One middle school and one elementary school went from underperforming in the 2016-17 school year to meeting growth expectations in 2017-18. Even more impressive, North Edgecombe High School has now exceeded growth expectations three years in a row and entered the top 20 percent of schools in the state on that measure.

Successful recruitment of educators to a rural district. Edgecombe previously struggled with vacancies but have filled all vacancies quickly since Opportunity Culture was put into place.

Lessons Learned

Principals need ongoing support to keep implementation strong. District leaders encouraged principals to take risks in their Opportunity Culture designs in pursuit of what is best for students.

Multi-classroom leader support. District leaders hold meetings with all MCLs to collaborate and support each other. District leadership meetings on curriculum include a focus on supporting MCLs.

Superintendent leadership. Prior to beginning Opportunity Culture design the superintendent engaged the school board, held meetings with principals, and ensured that Opportunity Culture was deeply understood and perceived as integral to all district efforts. This early communication allowed Edgecombe's Opportunity Culture implementation to thrive despite superintendent transition, a testament to both leaders.

Vance County Schools

In 2019, Vance County Schools was nearing the end of the district's three-year Advanced Teaching Roles grant period. Public Impact visited to learn about Opportunity Culture implementation from district leaders and educators and created a compilation of short video clips and quotes from those interviews. Visit <https://www.opportunityculture.org/2019/01/25/voices-from-vance-how-opportunity-culture-is-working-for-one-n-c-district/>.

District Profile

Vance County Schools has implemented Opportunity Culture in 11 of its 13 schools. In 2017-18, Opportunity Culture implementation began in the district's three highest performing elementary schools with the goal of creating "model schools" for others within the district to observe and share information. This strategy proved effective – educators within and outside of the district often visit the elementary schools to learn what works for multi-classroom leaders, as well as other school operations. Initial design of Opportunity Culture and professional learning for educators was funded by a three-year Advanced Teaching Roles Grant.

Results

Stronger student achievement and staff culture. In a survey administered to school instructional staff, more than 80 percent state that Opportunity Culture has improved student achievement and staff culture.

Leverage multi-classroom leaders in recruitment. Vance has drawn new hires from other competitive districts, including teachers from Virginia.

Lessons Learned

Superintendent leadership.

Superintendent Anthony Jackson helped educators see Opportunity Culture as a strategy to make needed changes in teaching and learning. He gave principals and MCLs more flexibility and encouraged them to research and try innovative education solutions.

Multi-classroom leader support. District leaders hold "First Friday" meetings with MCLs to discuss their needs. Multi-classroom leaders also receive specialized training on curriculum and instructional strategies.

Guilford County Schools

When schools closed due to COVID-19, Guilford County Schools had to act quickly to support its more than 70,000 students. One need quickly identified and addressed was a library of instructional videos for teachers and students. The district leveraged multi-classroom leaders to create the instructional videos for K–8 English language arts, math, and science focused on key concepts to master before the school year ended. The videos not only served as instruction for students, but also as models for other educators in the district. To read more, visit <https://www.opportunityculture.org/2020/05/27/multi-classroom-leaders-provide-the-first-line-of-defense-in-guilford-county-n-c/>.

District Profile

Guilford County Schools. After implementing Opportunity Culture in her previous leadership of Syracuse, New York, Superintendent Sharon Contreras identified Opportunity Culture as a staffing model that could support underperforming schools in Guilford County Schools, which she joined in 2016. GCS initially implemented Opportunity Culture in nine schools and has expanded to 16 schools, with more than 50 multi-classroom leaders.

Results

Promising early results. During the first year of implementation, the district found that Opportunity Culture classrooms outperformed those without Opportunity Culture.

Educators value Opportunity Culture in their school. Survey results indicate that more than 80 percent of teachers in the district's Opportunity Culture schools see value in the work and want it to continue.

Lessons Learned

Multi-classroom leaders need intensive support. Multi-Classroom Leadership (MCL) is a demanding advanced role aimed at reaching more students with excellent instruction. In addition to regular check-ins and guidance from principals, Guilford County MCLs also receive one-on-one coaching support from Public Impact. MCLs receive feedback and support on facilitating productive and meaningful coaching conversations, using data to drive instruction, and building capacity in team teachers through team meetings.

Early recruitment and a rigorous selection process lead to strong teacher-leader candidates. The Guilford County Schools director of restart, alongside the communications and human resources departments, advertised Opportunity Culture positions through social media campaigns and recruitment fairs to build interest, resulting in a large pool of teacher-leader candidates. To identify strong candidates in the pool, the district reviewed applications for leadership experiences, previous success with students, and strong data analysis skills. These candidates were then interviewed using the behavioral event interview technique, and principals chose candidates who best fit their school.