

AT PETREE ELEMENTARY, SCHOOLWIDE OPPORTUNITY CULTURE ROLES UNDERPIN GROWTH

BY PUBLIC IMPACT

P rincipal Alicia Bailey came to Petree Elementary in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School District just days before Covid closed schools. But with Petree on North Carolina’s list of low-performing schools, Bailey had a mandate to turn the school around—and the Opportunity Culture model held exciting possibilities for fall 2020 implementation, despite the pandemic.

“We knew that we needed to push our students to where they needed to be, and we wanted them to rise to the occasion. We knew we could not do that without highly qualified teachers and teachers that could support that process, and so the Opportunity Culture model was appealing to us because it brought us highly qualified teachers, and then, it also allowed us to have those teachers...coach other teachers in the building,” said Bailey, who had to hire about 50 new staff members when she came to Petree.

Opportunity Culture roles also addressed a concern parents had. Teacher retention had been a serious issue for Petree, and a survey Bailey sent to parents when she arrived found that what they wanted most was highly qualified teachers.

“To have the opportunity to recruit teachers—master’s-level teachers, teachers that have National Board certification, teachers that just have a passion for doing the work—that was exciting to our community around us and to the kids and our staff,” she said.

In 2020–21, Petree began using Multi-Classroom Leader (MCL) roles for first, third, and fifth grades. “We chose those grade levels because they are so critical in elementary school,” Bailey said. “But then we saw how the model was really beneficial, because in those grade levels we saw tremendous growth. And so from there we decided to implement it on each grade level.”

Thus, in 2021–22, Petree went schoolwide with Opportunity Culture roles, with an MCL for each grade as well as advanced paraprofessionals known as reach associates to support each MCL teaching team. The school’s design team also added two expanded-impact teachers, who have larger student loads, and a science MCL who works with all grades; Petree is a STEM school.

Petree’s strategic use of those roles paid off, Bailey said, when the school got to celebrate exceeding the state’s student growth expectation and coming off the low-performing list.

Going schoolwide with Opportunity Culture roles created powerful teacher collaboration, made it possible for all students to get extensive small-group instruction, and began to create an educator pipeline, Petree educators said in interviews.

“Opportunity Culture has been a success at Petree,” Bailey said. “It has made a complete difference for our school: It’s provided us with highly qualified teachers, it supports our culture with teamwork, and it has made an impact in our data and our scores.”

BUILT ON THE PARTIAL-RELEASE MCL ROLE

At Petree, all but the science MCL are “partial release,” meaning they have their own classroom of record and teach for part of the day, with release time to co-teach, model, and coach their grade-level team teachers. Each partial-release MCL leads a team of either four team teachers or two team teachers plus an expanded-impact teacher.

“We decided to do the partial-release model because for us we found that there was more buy-in,” Bailey said. “The teachers had a different kind of respect, if you will, for the partial-release MCLs, because they knew that they were there with them; they’re the boots on the ground.”

Kindergarten MCL Tameka Rover-Brown agreed that being partial-release eases the relationship with her team teachers. “I have a classroom as well, so I’ve done that same teaching that you’ve

PETREE ELEMENTARY FACT FILE

- ★ In 2021-22, Petree enrolled 453 students; 82.9 percent of its students are economically disadvantaged, and its student body is 54.7 percent African-American, 38.6 percent Hispanic, and 4.4 percent white.
- ★ In 2019 (prior to Opportunity Culture implementation), the school met expected student learning growth; the next time the state reported growth, in 2022, the school exceeded growth expectations, and it came off the state’s list of low-performing schools.

Data retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/ipedsdatacenter/ipedsdatacenter.asp?ID=370150002451> and North Carolina School Report Cards at <https://ncreports.ondemand.sas.com/src/school?school=340490&year=2022>

done all day long, I've had the many challenges that you've had all day long," she said. "They know that I truly understand them."

Partial-release MCLs get release time from a reach associate, or RA, who is in charge when the MCL leaves the classroom to work with team teachers.

"The appealing part about the reach associate position is that those folks are treated just like teachers. They get a chance to attend all of the PD that the teachers attend, they attend [MCL team meetings] with teachers, they can take a class and teach the class just like the teacher can," Bailey said. "So when you walk into a classroom, you won't know who the teacher is and who the reach associate is because they can take those classes."

RA time is concentrated on providing crucial small-group tutoring. To make significant, immediate impact, Petree put into place SOAR time, so named because they are the Petree Eagles. This

80-minute block provides strategic small-group time in reading for all students, with a second 80-minute math block for third through fifth grades (with plans to add this block in 2023–24 for K–2 students). RAs in MCL classrooms and instructional (teaching) assistants in team teacher classrooms provide small-group tutoring and teaching during this time, along with MCLs and teachers.

The RA role, like other Opportunity Culture roles, helps with teacher retention and creating a teacher-leader pipeline, Bailey said. Several RAs, she noted, are now in school to become teachers.

PUTTING OPPORTUNITY CULTURE PLANS INTO ACTION

To implement their Opportunity Culture roles well, fifth-grade MCL Laketha Ebrahim-Blackwell said, Bailey and the MCLs began with looking at the school's goals, aligning the roles to the goals

A REACH ASSOCIATE'S TYPICAL DAY

All partial-release MCLs at Petree get the support of a reach associate, who mostly stays in the MCL's classroom throughout the day providing small-group tutoring and leading the class when the MCL leaves to work with the team. The MCL's team teachers similarly provide small-group rotations with the support of an instructional assistant, but instructional assistants, unlike RAs, are not expected to lead a classroom on their own.

RAs are "the next thing to having us standing in the classroom and so, if an MCL is out of the classroom for whatever reason, instruction doesn't stop, and that's the whole goal," said MCL Tameka Rover-Brown, who has a strong working relationship with RA Janie Martin. "We train them and we give them as much exposure to curriculum, to standards, to expectations, to data as we can."

On a typical day for Martin, kindergarten instruction begins with social studies or science, during which she assists in the classroom as Rover-Brown needs. When students leave for specials, Martin is able to join her teaching team's meetings. Having schedules that allow RAs to join their team's meetings ensures RAs receive the same lesson planning and student data analysis as the teachers.

Following specials, students begin 80 minutes of small-group reading rotations. While Rover-Brown works with one group of three or four children, Martin works with another group, while also watching over students working independently and checking their work as they finish activities. Lunch, recess, and more ELA time follow, then math whole-group instruction as needed and math small groups.

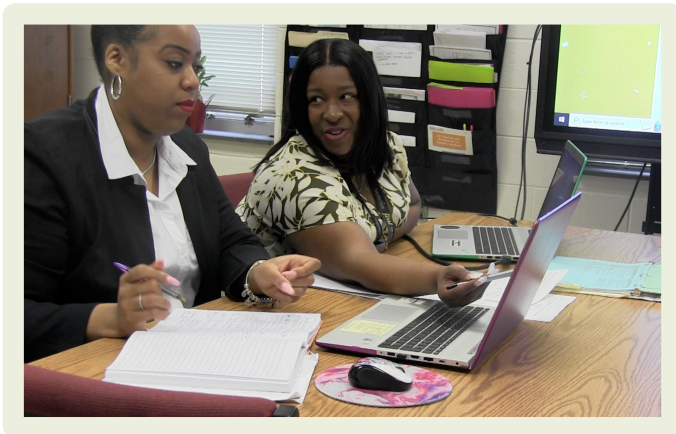
Rover-Brown and Martin appreciate how the school schedule allows RAs to attend team planning meetings, so they can feel thoroughly prepared when they lead the class on their own. Additionally, Petree MCLs have begun preparing slides for each day that further spell out the expected instruction and support the learning activity, in addition to the lesson plan. Creating those slides takes significant work, Rover-Brown noted, but sets the team up with a bank of slides that will just need tweaks in future years. When MCLs are out, having an RA also reduces the need for a substitute—valuable in a time of substitute shortages; for other classes, the slides provide further support to a substitute teacher.

Martin, who had a degree in education but went into another career and never became certified, loves the RA role.

"I might be working harder" than when she was an instructional assistant, she said, "but I don't feel it because I'm so joyful that the kids are doing better."



Reach Associate Janie Martin (foreground) and MCL Tameka Rover-Brown rotate students through small-group tutoring sessions



A typical day for MCL Laketha Ebrahim-Blackwell begins with coaching one of her team teachers.

and clearly defining them, then setting what should happen in MCL team meetings, such as how they analyzed and used data.

In addition to beginning to meet each week with Bailey as part of the school’s instructional team of leaders, the MCLs realized they needed to meet together weekly as an MCL team as well, to keep a level of consistency in the school. “It was just all hands on deck,” Ebrahim-Blackwell said of her fellow MCLs.

“We all left our meetings feeling empowered...now let’s go to our grade levels and begin to train them. How should we analyze the data, how should we respond to the data, what should the conversation sound like in [MCL team meetings], and how are we going to be the drivers of those conversations? So we kept those going, coming back to the table with one another on Mondays—my team is struggling with this, my team is seeing success with this.”

As they continued this cycle of meeting together, then training their teams, the MCLs also began to observe one another’s classrooms together—“OK, what do you see, how can you help kindergarten? Even though you are a fifth-grade MCL, what do you know that’s happening in that classroom that will seed what they need to do in the fifth-grade classroom?” So, constant conversation,” Ebrahim-Blackwell said.

Although MCLs lead their grade-level teams on all subjects, they focus on math, because the school also has a schoolwide literacy coach and the science MCL. Two regular team meetings focus first on reviewing content, then planning how to teach it.

Rover-Brown follows a typical path for leading and coaching her team teachers. She begins with unpacking each state standard students must master—especially important for beginning teachers, she said. The team begins by taking the ending assessment, to understand what students will need to know, and considering ways to teach it, knowing that the same type of instruction may not work for all teachers. Using data from an initial diagnostic assessment, they plan instruction geared to meet the needs of each child.

The coaching that Rover-Brown then provides to each team teacher comes in three parts: planning (including role-playing how she and the teacher will co-teach), then co-teaching, then debriefing how the lesson went. They review any student misconceptions and exit ticket data and adjust the instruction to follow.

Communicating that MCLs provide such intensive support and coaching was key at the beginning of Opportunity Culture implementation as well as any time new staff members arrive, Bailey said. “The first year we started, we had to really distinguish between an MCL and a grade-level chair, because that’s the model that most teachers are used to. They are used to that lead teacher being just the person that helps to plan the field trips, right?” she said. “We really had to distinguish that this teacher is...really a part of the instructional piece.”

TYPICAL CHALLENGES: SCHEDULING, ROLE CLARITY

Bailey identifies getting the schedule right for Opportunity Culture roles and funding the roles’ pay supplements within the school’s budget as two challenges she faces the most.

Ebrahim-Blackwell, who leads a team of four teachers and a reach associate, said one aspect of getting the schedule right was clearly communicating its importance. “We had this huge idea on paper...this is the schedule, this is going to be beautiful... and boom, we got to work and that did not happen. So we were challenged by how we were going to bring about a culture that understands that coaching is very important and nonnegotiable.”

The MCLs asked Bailey to help get staff buy-in, to understand that “when you miss this coaching session, this is the outcome

A TYPICAL PARTIAL-RELEASE MCL DAY

When Laketha Ebrahim-Blackwell gets to Petree, she:

- * Coaches a teacher and/or plans feedback sessions and team meetings, until students arrive. On Wednesdays, she huddles with the MCLs for grades three through five for a check-in and cross-curricular planning
- * Teaches her own class as a whole group
- * Pulls small groups in reading and math
- * After lunch, conducts observation and feedback sessions with teaching team members. During these times, her reach associate stays with her class and continues providing small-group instruction to the students
- * Post-dismissal, gets coaching from Bailey or the instructional assistant principal

that your students are missing,” Ebrahim-Blackwell said. “Once we got the staff to really see that the schedule could be non-negotiable in providing that planning time to really do the in-depth work that an MCL wants to do, we made huge strides.”

That intensity of the coaching teachers receive is what Petree needed to move off the low-performing list, Bailey said. And the coaching extends to everyone, she noted, with the area superintendent, Timisha Barnes-Jones, coaching Opportunity Culture principals as a group and individually.

Because Petree still has a schoolwide literacy coach who works with all teachers, as well as an instructional assistant principal, establishing role clarity was imperative. Schools often find that when they retain non-MCL coaches or facilitators, confusion about their roles follows. Petree works hard to avoid that, Bailey said, by being strategic about who does what and making sure everyone knows to “stay in your lane.”

The partial-release MCLs also appreciate the school’s full-release science MCL, who does not have a classroom of record. Having MCLs take accountability for the results of all students on their team is a key Opportunity Culture principle; science MCL Brad Rhew takes accountability for the results of fifth-grade science, as that is a tested year. But he tries to infuse science instruction throughout the day in all grades. He collaborates with the other MCLs, joins their team meetings to unpack state science standards and plan science instruction, and co-teaches and models science lessons.

“I’m also the MCL for the specialist team, so I work very closely with all of our specialist teachers—art, music, PE, technology—and one of the big things that I work with them on is how do we do a lot of integration into our specialist team. So, really, having our kids understand that a subject doesn’t stop when you walk out of a classroom; it’s all integrated together, because we know research shows the best way for students to learn is to see that integrated approach,” Rhew said. “Our students see that everybody’s here to help me learn; everybody is here to help me succeed.”



Petree Principal Alicia Bailey (left) receives regular coaching from Area Superintendent Timisha Barnes-Jones.



As a full-release MCL, Brad Rhew works to incorporate science instruction throughout the day for all grades.

That complete sense of teamwork—with special teachers now actively looking for ways to support state standards through their activities, and feeling a true part of the school’s student growth success—comes from having MCL roles to facilitate so much collaboration, Rhew said.

“I think that’s when we see some of that payoff,” he said, “when kids come back and they’re like, ‘oh yeah, in art we talked about this and now we’re looking at it here!’...It definitely builds that collegial respect between each other of, like, you see my subject as important as your subject.”

Rhew, a former eighth-grade science teacher, also values being able to lead vertically aligned science planning, ensuring that students build a strong science foundation year after year.

“DATA DRIVES EVERYTHING WE DO”

Petree sounds the message consistent in great Opportunity Culture schools: data, data, data.

“If you are teaching, then it should be in response to our data,” Bailey said. “Of course, we don’t want to take the fun out of things—we do some fun things with students!—but we focus every aspect of our instruction based upon our data.”

The data focus combined with MCL collaboration leads to better vertical alignment, Rover-Brown said, in which MCLs can identify anything students consistently fail to learn before moving to the next grade, and adjust instruction to fix it.

Because discussing their students’ data openly can leave teachers feeling vulnerable, Bailey also emphasizes the need to build trusting relationships.

“Every morning, I walk the building and I go to every classroom to say good morning to our teachers. And I expect [MCLs] to do the same thing...to touch base with their teammates: ‘Are you comfortable with what you are teaching today? How can I support you with what you are teaching?’”

Navigating the line between leading the team—spearheading its actions—and making decisions collaboratively proved a key to success for Rover-Brown.

“One of the biggest things for me was building relationships, that trust component, the buy-in from the team,” she said. “I was always very mindful when there were decisions made for kindergarten—we would all kind-of consult together. It was never that I just made a decision and took back to them that this is what we’re going to do, and they were very receptive, and I think they respected me for that understanding that, you know, this is always a team effort.”

Embedding that expectation of team effort helped make the school’s progress possible, teachers say.

“I’m absolutely just elated from the progress that we’ve made here at our school, Petree, as being a part of Opportunity Culture—the culture and the climate that we’ve created and sustained,” Rover-Brown said.

“I’m truly an advocate for this framework just because this work is overwhelming, and just thinking about my first year as a teacher, if I could come in and would have an MCL on my team, how much growth or the gains I could have made,” Ebrahim-Blackwell said. “This framework just sets you up for success, and as I believe that for students, I believe that for teachers and adults...so I truly advocate for Opportunity Culture.”

Acknowledgments

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