

CASEY JACKSON

RETURNING TO THE CLASSROOM TO LEAD



Casey Jackson always wanted to be an educator. From a young age she was a self-described “teacher’s pet,” jumping at opportunities to assist her teachers and classmates. She simply loved being in school every day, and knew that was how she wanted to spend her career.

But after graduating from Longwood University with a degree in elementary education and starting her career as a fourth grade teacher, she realized she wanted to have an even greater impact on students—to not just teach, but to lead. She took the clearest option available and began down the pathway to become an administrator. She earned the required graduate degree and certification and became an assistant principal, and then principal, in southern Virginia.

Jackson enjoyed the principal role, recognizing it allowed her to have an impact on more children than just the ones in her classrooms. But she ended up spending much of her time on budgeting, scheduling and on other challenges not directly related to instruction. “Classroom instruction was my favorite part of being an educator,” she said. “I want to get my hands dirty. But as a principal, no matter how hard I tried, so much of my work was focused on other things.”

Jackson’s story is a common one. Most school systems don’t have a clear career pathway for teachers who want to both lead beyond their classrooms and continue to teach.

So when nearby Vance County, North Carolina decided to implement [Opportunity Culture](#), a program designed to restructure schools to extend the reach of excellent teachers, principals and their teams, she was immediately

interested. Opportunity Culture is an initiative of [Public Impact](#), and in each of their schools the strongest teachers and administrators adopt new leadership roles that allow them to reach more students. The work is guided by five principles:

- ◆ Reach more students with excellent teachers and their teams.
- ◆ Pay teachers more for extending their reach.
- ◆ Fund increased salaries 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 looks slightly different in each building. First, school districts go through an extensive design process to both determine which schools should participate and set basic parameters about the number and types of teacher leader roles. Then each participating school’s “design team” decides what exactly they need for their school. The school’s administrators are responsible for hiring, but all teacher leaders must demonstrate high student growth. The new teacher leaders participate in extensive professional development over the summer that focuses on how to support other teachers—training that the district then supplements and reinforces throughout the school year on a regular basis.

The role that attracted Jackson was the Multi-Classroom Leader (MCL). MCLs lead a team of several teachers,



CASEY JACKSON’S PATHWAY TO TEACHER LEADERSHIP

- Started as Elementary School Teacher
- Became an Assistant Principal, and then Principal
- Became a Multi-Classroom Leader (MCL) as part of her district’s implementation of Opportunity Culture

OPPORTUNITY CULTURE BY THE NUMBERS

56,000+ students reached



28

school districts
participating



300+

schools
committed

1,800+

teachers with advanced roles
or on-the-job development

99% of MCLs want to keep Opportunity
Culture in their schools

providing guidance and frequent on-the-job coaching while continuing to teach, often by leading small-group instruction. MCLs are accountable for the results of all students in the team, creating a sense of shared purpose and partnership. This model has proven results: [a recent study](#) from the American Institutes for Research and the Brookings Institution found that students who were in classrooms led by MCLs showed sizeable academic gains: teachers who were in the 50th percentile of student performance in math and reading grew from the 75th-85th percentile in math and 66th-72nd percentile in reading.

For Jackson, this seemed like a perfect fit. She could spend her days focused on great classroom instruction while growing as an educator and a leader. "It was exactly what I wanted to do," she said. "It was my strength and my passion."

Last year was her first as an MCL, supporting four third grade teachers in both math and English Language Arts at Aycock Elementary School in Vance County. She is usually in classrooms, providing real-time feedback to teachers, working directly with groups of students and even co-teaching at times. She also builds long-term instructional plans and prepares for regular meetings with her team.

The work hasn't all been easy. When Jackson arrived at Aycock, colleagues warned that some of the teachers on her team were skeptical of Opportunity Culture, and so might not be receptive to coaching. So Jackson took an approach that is familiar to any good teacher: differentiation. She put in the time to build relationships, addressed concerns directly and worked collaboratively to set goals. Soon enough, the teachers were hooked. As Jackson puts it, "All teachers want to learn and grow. They just need someone

to teach them."

The progress under Jackson's leadership has been extraordinary. The students from the four classrooms are growing rapidly in both math and ELA, and the teachers are improving their practice every day, particularly in how they analyze student data to target and improve instruction. In 2018-19 – for the first time in years – Jackson's school met its growth goals.

Building strong relationships is the secret to her success, Jackson said. "Teacher leaders can get more out of teachers because there is a level of trust you can't get with administrators. Because teachers see me as a peer and partner instead of a boss, they are more comfortable thinking outside of the box and taking risks."

Going forward, Jackson is excited to see what else she can accomplish. She has received the [Vance Formation](#) award for Vance County, and has already been named an Opportunity Culture Fellow for the 2019-20 school year. This coming year she is expanding her reach even further by adding second grade teachers to her team.

The role has also reinvigorated her passion for her own learning—she is reading books about instruction and participating in professional development so she can be even a stronger leader and educator. But above all, she is thankful for the opportunity to lead and for the impact she can have on students.

"Every school system needs this. I've seen the demands at all levels," she said. "If we want students to grow more, we need to grow our teachers."



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