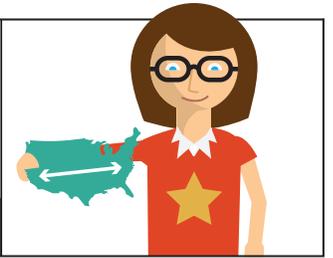


DAYS IN THE LIFE: THE WORK OF A SUCCESSFUL MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADER

AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE

A PROFILE OF OKEMA OWENS SIMPSON



When multi-classroom leaders describe their jobs to others, they hear the same question: How do you fit all that in? Multi-classroom leaders (MCLs) in Opportunity Culture schools sometimes sound like they do it all. But successful **MCLs keep a tight focus: leading excellent instruction.** In schools with strong results, principals protect MCLs’ time for helping their teams teach and for improving instruction, and they avoid heaping on additional tasks.

So when Okema Owens Simpson, the sixth-grade MCL for English language arts (ELA) at Ranson IB Middle School in Charlotte, N.C., plans her schedule for the coming week, she provides what her teachers need most: daily, on-the-job coaching; lesson planning; practice in delivering lessons; co-teaching or modeling a lesson; analysis of student learning data; and pulling out small student groups for intensive help. Although schedules and tasks vary somewhat from school to school and among grade levels, Simpson’s days illustrate the essentials of the MCL role done right—and how to fit them all in over several typical days.

In the 2017–18 school year—her 19th as an educator—Simpson led a team of three ELA teachers: Miraha Smith, a second-year Teach For America teacher; Kayla Wilmer, also in her second Teach For America year, who was named as Ranson’s “first-year teacher of the year” in 2016–17; and Avienna Simpson (no relation), a first-year, lateral-entry teacher. In addition, she coached Deadra Hall, the teacher for the AVID elective course. This coaching was more limited, but she aimed to hold a coaching cycle each week with Hall.

As their MCL, Okema Simpson took accountability for the learning of all 275 of her ELA teachers’ students.

Ranson, part of the Project L.I.F.T. zone within Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, was one of the first Opportunity Culture schools in the country. The high-poverty L.I.F.T. schools had been persistently struggling, but **after taking Opportunity Culture and the MCL model schoolwide in 2014–15, Ranson had the highest student growth among Title I district schools in the state** and was in the state’s top 1 percent overall for growth.

The principal at that time, Alison Harris Welcher, and the current principal, Erica Jordan-Thomas, both highlight the power of having MCLs schoolwide, forming an instructional team of leaders who rely on one another for support and collaboration.

As the school continues to refine and adjust the MCL role, it has focused heavily on lesson planning and live coaching. MCLs also use other strategies to guide and develop their team members and help their peers. This profile of Okema Simpson shows what a high-performing MCL’s days typically include, viewed through the lens of a school and MCL on the cutting edge of defining the art and science of instructional teacher leadership.

Note: Since this was published, independent research in 2018 indicated that multi-classroom leaders leading small teaching teams produce strong learning gains for students. See [here](#) for details.

DAY 1

Starting the Day Right: Connect and Set Expectations

Because of bus schedules, students arrive gradually at Ranson, giving MCLs the opportunity to greet each individual—an important chance to develop and maintain relationships with students, which many Ranson MCLs identify as a key to instructional success. Ranson has also identified this time and the transitions from class to class as critical observation and coaching opportunities for MCLs, especially in the first semester. With 50 percent of their teachers in their first four years of teaching, Ranson’s leaders saw that teachers were struggling to start class periods on track. Newer teachers often need help with this classroom management skill—how to start each class by both connecting with students personally and reminding them of the behavior and learning expectations.



Ms. Simpson talks with a student in the hallway before school starts.

TYPICAL MCL DUTIES

In a typical week, most MCLs divide their time among:

★ Coaching, which may include

- observing team teachers while they teach.
- meeting with teachers before and after the observation to discuss what the MCL saw and determine “action steps” to change instruction before the next observation.
- leading a teacher through a practice session delivering instruction—this may include live coaching in which the MCL uses a walkie-talkie to guide the teacher, who wears a headset, a practice known as Real-Time Teacher Coaching (see page 3).
- providing feedback after co-teaching.

★ Co-teaching: Sharing delivery of a lesson

- MCLs use this as needed for any team teacher, to demonstrate or assist with instruction or classroom management skills.
- MCLs may use co-teaching more heavily in the first months of the school year, especially with newer teachers.

★ Modeling: Teaching a lesson in front of a teacher

- MCLs may model-teach as needed for any team teacher, to demonstrate instruction or classroom management skills.
- MCLs may use modeling more heavily in the first months of the school year, especially with newer teachers.
- Teachers can observe a modeled lesson in one period, then deliver it themselves to more classes in later periods.

★ Planning: Preparing for lessons and teacher coaching

- Individual planning time may be used to make plans about how to coach or follow up with teachers, and to create or tweak lesson plans.

- Co-planning includes meeting with each teacher individually and team meetings at least weekly—preferably more often—to analyze data, discuss challenges, plan changes, practice lesson delivery, and address other concerns.

★ Analyzing data

- Some MCLs handle most of the analysis of student data for the team (especially for newer teachers).
- Other MCLs let team teachers analyze student data, and instead focus their help for teachers on changing instruction—whole-class and individual—in response to the data.

★ Teaching

- MCLs teach individual students and small groups, as needed, and may sometimes teach the whole class.
- Successful MCLs *limit* their own teaching time in favor of improving their team’s teaching skills.

★ Being coached

- MCLs receive regularly scheduled coaching on their team leadership and instructional skills from a principal or assistant principal.
- MCLs may also attend district-wide MCL training sessions or cohort meetings.

★ Collaborating with other MCLs

- In large schools, MCLs may have regular (preferably weekly) meetings with other MCLs in their subject or grade (in smaller schools, an MCL may cover an entire grade or subject).
- MCLs also meet regularly as a schoolwide “instructional leadership team” made up of all MCLs, assistant principals, and the principal.
- Informally, MCLs confer with one another throughout the week to share ideas and ask for help.

So, like other MCLs, Simpson **observes and coaches her team teachers** during daily student transition times—even using live coaching—to help them early in the year with these crucial but easily overlooked skills.

Observing and Coaching

A full coaching cycle at Ranson consists of a “baseline”—when an MCL observes a teacher to collect basic data on the topic or strategy of this cycle; a “pre-conference,” in which the MCL and teacher discuss what was seen in the baseline observation and

determine an action step, which prepares them for a live coaching session or observation; live coaching or observation; and the follow-up “post-conference” meeting. These cycles occur essentially every 7 days, although teachers may not need a full cycle every time. Additionally, teachers receive other observation and feedback that does not involve live coaching, including “post-checks” to ensure that teachers continue to use a strategy.

With students settled, Simpson heads first to Avienna Simpson’s classroom for a **follow-up observation**. After meeting with Avienna the week before, Okema Simpson wants to see her practice



Ms. Simpson and the sixth-grade math MCL, Jennifer Tyler, share an office, giving them time every day to collaborate informally.

the changes they planned, and to provide **live coaching** using a walkie-talkie.

Live coaching, using the Real-Time Teacher Coaching method from CT3, allows MCLs to provide instant feedback. Teachers listen to coaching through a headset from the MCL, who stands at the back of the room during lessons, allowing the teacher to adjust teaching immediately, according to the MCL's instructions.

Conferring with Colleagues

Returning to her office, Simpson and Jennifer Tyler, the MCL for sixth-grade math, and Sophia Crawford-Mapp, the schoolwide exceptional children MCL, confer about helping a struggling teacher keep her students engaged; these brief, informal collaborations occur throughout each day.

"What I've found in the role of an MCL is that I often need my colleagues to bounce ideas off of and so, one of the benefits of having a colleague in the room with me—we share the same office space—is I can do just that," Simpson says.

Teaching and Supporting

Then Simpson takes time to **lead a small group** of students, filming her teaching on her laptop to use later as a model for a teacher of how to do a "do-now" exercise as students settle in. MCLs at Ranson typically conduct small-group instruction for struggling students, but may also pull out students for advanced instruction or to focus on specific projects or concepts.

After the students return to their classrooms, Simpson crosses the hall to provide scheduled "**support time**" for Kayla Wilmer, in which she observes and pitches in to help whenever students need it. She films Wilmer's whole-class instruction on her cellphone.

"We video a lot," Simpson says. "I as a coach have to record my coaching conversations with my teachers, and when I go in for observations, I record what I see, so that I can watch that footage in order to really pinpoint the action step that needs to be addressed. Also, it's a way for other teachers to see what's happening and to

name the gap that we're going to discuss and create an action step around. Sometimes the teachers choose to record themselves, because they, too, see the benefit of watching and analyzing their own work and their own practice in order to get better."

From there, Simpson heads down the hall for **support time** with Miraha Smith, which includes doing a "post-check" on her do-now exercise to ensure that it is still being done well, and again employing a bit of real-time coaching.

Analyzing Student Data and Planning

Returning to her office, Simpson eats a late lunch while **planning lessons** and **planning her post-observation meeting** with Avienna Simpson. She watches the video of the morning's lesson, analyzes the data she gathered—such as how many students got the do-now answer right, and how engaged students were—and plans what action step to assign to the teacher, which will be implemented for the next five days, when they will assess its success. After Avienna joins her, they review those points, and Avienna practices delivering the instruction as Simpson proposes.

"There are three parts of my role that make the role valuable. The lesson planning, observations and being in the classroom, and then the data," Simpson says. "I didn't realize how much I love data and how much data truly should drive instruction until I stepped away from the classroom. I analyzed data when I was a classroom teacher, but it was something that I naturally did, and didn't really know that I was paying so much attention and responding so much to the data. In this role, it became clear to me that data was the heart of what I do.

"So I spend time, if not every day, every other day looking at their do-now and exit-ticket data. I design those questions, and I take a look at their assessments, I take a look at all their data, and we meet as a team to respond to the data."

Receiving Her Own Coaching

After helping to ensure that all students make it onto their buses home (providing more time to build relationships and work



Ms. Simpson receives her own weekly coaching, from Principal Erica Jordan-Thomas, to develop her skills as an MCL.

alongside her teachers), Simpson closes the day with **her own coaching conference**, meeting with Principal Jordan-Thomas for an hour. During the meeting, Jordan-Thomas reviews what she saw in the recordings Simpson made of her coaching conversations with her team teachers.

“She uses those videos, notices some gaps in my practice, and I leave with an action step on how to address and close those gaps,” Simpson says. The two also track Simpson’s progress on items she identified during a summer instructional leadership team retreat that she wants to focus on in her own development, and for which she asked Jordan-Thomas to hold her accountable.

DAY 2

Much of Simpson’s second day mirrors the first—it’s a full schedule of observations, coaching conversations, and planning.

Observing, Coaching, and Modeling

She begins with an **observation** of Wilmer’s do-now exercise, recording her observations on a rubric that all Ranson MCLs use. A similar **observation** follows of Smith’s aggressive monitoring strategy (an instructional strategy meant to notice and fix student misperceptions or learning mistakes in the moment), with a similar rubric. Simpson later transfers those rubrics to an online, schoolwide observation tracker that guides her coaching decisions and allows school leaders to gather data on how all teachers are doing on specific skills and strategies.

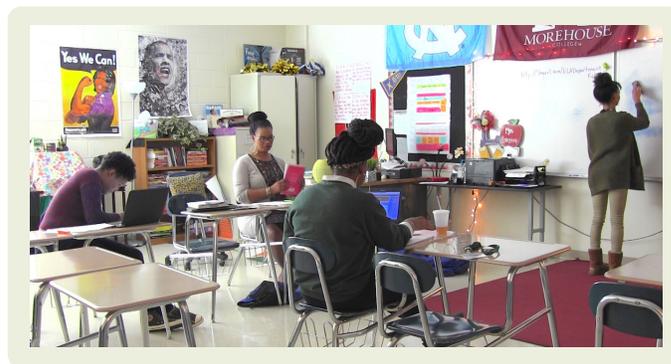
Simpson returns to her desk to immediately plan her **coaching conversation** with Smith, and they meet shortly afterward to review Simpson’s feedback and discuss what else Smith wants to develop in her instruction. The two return together to Smith’s next class, where Simpson **models** a lesson for her.

Lesson Planning and Team Meetings

Then it’s back to her desk for more planning time; Simpson sets aside at least an hour per day for **lesson planning**, something all Ranson MCLs do. They also get paid for summer planning time,



Ms. Simpson provides instant feedback to her teachers through live coaching, using a walkie-talkie and a headset to give instructions.



Twice a week, Ms. Simpson holds a planning meeting with her three team teachers, Miraha Smith, Avienna Simpson, and Kayla Willmer.

during which Simpson created the first eight weeks of lessons and their materials. Ensuring that teachers have strong lessons in advance is crucial in a school where many teachers are brand-new and learning to teach and lead classrooms.

She also **prepares for her team meeting**; twice a week, all three team teachers and Simpson hold a meeting focused either on data or instruction. The teachers join her for today’s **instructional meeting**, during which each practices delivering three different lessons. To learn tips for her own coaching, the seventh-grade ELA MCL also attends.

Creating strong bonds on and with her team are crucial to the success of all her leadership—both the individual coaching and these team meetings, Simpson says.

“One of my strengths as a classroom teacher was building relationships with students. We all know that if you have a strong relationship with your scholar, they trust you and they’ll be willing to do what it is that you ask of them. I found that that carries over in the role as an MCL, so I have to be intentional with the relationship that I build with the teachers, because if they don’t trust me to execute the lesson plan in the way in which I’ve asked them to, then they won’t. So I build those relationships intentionally. I see my team as, yes, educators, but also people. I understand it’s hard work, I value what they bring to the table, and they know that and they appreciate it. They’re always willing to try what it is I’m asking them to do.”

DAY 3

Collaborating to Lead Instruction Schoolwide

At the close of the week, all Ranson MCLs formally collaborate in their **instructional team of leaders (ILT)** meeting. This weekly, two-hour meeting is key to school success, says Jordan-Thomas, who leads the meeting with a tight, focused agenda. The ILT also includes assistant principals, who coach MCLs.

Jordan-Thomas determines the topic for each meeting’s professional development by reviewing schoolwide learning data and MCL coaching data. Topics have included clear and bite-size action steps;

TYPICAL SCHEDULE FOR OKEMA OWENS SIMPSON

TIME	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	
8-9:30	Transition: Simpson talks to students as they arrive; she uses this and all transition times and lunch duty to build relationships with all of her team's 275 students, and to observe and coach her teachers, including using live coaching through headsets, on routines and procedures.					
9:30	Hall baseline observation	A. Simpson do-now observation	A. Simpson's post-conference on do-now	Hall post-conference	Instructional Leadership Team meeting	
10:00	A. Simpson follow-up observation on aggressive monitoring (and Real-Time Coaching)	Wilmer aggressive monitoring observation	Hall pre-conference	Wilmer pre-conference		
10:30			Smith post-conference on aggressive monitoring	Support Smith		
10:45	Transition	Transition	Transition	Transition		
11:00	Lunch Duty	Script Wilmer's post-conference on aggressive monitoring	Lunch Duty	Lunch Duty		
11:30	Support A. Simpson	Wilmer's post-conference	Pull small group based on data analysis from Tuesday meeting	Observation tracker updating		
12:00	Support Wilmer	Smith aggressive monitoring observation (including Real-Time Coaching)	Wilmer baseline observation	As needed		Check in with all team teachers
12:30			Hall Real-Time Coaching	Support A. Simpson		Planning
1:00	Transition	Transition	Transition	Transition		Transition
1:10	Support Smith	As needed	As needed	As needed		Planning
1:30	Planning (Script A. Simpson's post-conference on aggressive monitoring)	Planning	Planning	Planning		
2:00	Planning	Planning	Planning	Planning		
2:30	Transition	Transition	Transition	Transition		
3:00	A. Simpson's post-conference	Teaching team meeting (data)	Grade-level meeting	Teaching team meeting (instruction)	Planning	
3:30						
4:00	Afternoon bus duty					
4:30	As needed	As needed	As needed	As needed	As needed	
5:00	Coaching conversation with Jordan-Thomas	As needed	As needed	As needed	As needed	
5:30		As needed	As needed	As needed	As needed	
Notes: "As needed" time during the school day is kept open for issues as they arise, and to handle smaller tasks such as responding to emails or making quick, immediately needed tweaks to lesson plans. Simpson is expected to stay on campus until 4:30; she typically stays until 5:30 catching up on tasks left over from the day.						

small-group intervention strategies; how to build a schedule that reflects school priorities; and how to address teacher mindsets.

After this meeting ends, Simpson blocks the rest of her day for intensive planning time. It is the one day of the week her teachers don't expect her to observe or support their classrooms, but she remains available to them if needed.

Leading While Teaching

For Simpson, as for many MCLs, her combination of duties throughout the week remains ideal for someone who wants to advance but stay in teaching. She went so far as to get a master's degree in education leadership, but quickly decided that becoming an administrator was not right for her. Instead, she now reaches many more students with excellent teaching, and prepares another generation of teachers to teach exceptionally well for the long term, despite the many pressures in education.

"The classroom is where I love to be. **I absolutely love teaching, I love students,** I love instruction, I love planning lessons, and as an assistant principal I wouldn't be able to do that. But I received a lot of feedback and advice from other teachers and administrators who saw my work and thought that I needed to step out and expand my impact. So, although the classroom was a safe space for me, I knew that I was at the point in my career where I needed to take a challenge and step out of my comfort zone to do something new. ...This job is my passion. It's what I do, it's what I've been called to do—I serve scholars."

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Watch: See Ms. Simpson in action in an accompanying [video](#).

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